Engaging the Non-Major with Early American Literature

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As educators, our goal is always to engage and instruct students. We want them to leave our courses with a new skill set, new perspectives, and a new appreciation for our subject matter. However, engaging the non-English major in literature courses can present unique challenges. While they are often high-achieving, motivated members of our academic communities, these non-major students may nonetheless enter our classrooms with little interest in literature and even less confidence that a literary study course will benefit them now or in their future careers. And connecting non-majors with early American literature, specifically, can be an even more daunting task when the experiences, writing styles, and perspectives of colonial writers are so far removed from the lives of modern students.

Yet, beyond even our conventional objectives as instructors, the current contested place of the humanities in our society should make us want to discover the best practices for engaging these future alumni of our universities. My two goals for non-majors in literature courses are simple: 1) teach them the skills that come from reading and analyzing literature and 2) help them develop a sincere appreciation and respect for literary study. So when they get their first job, they use the skills of analysis, writing, informed dialogue, and oral communication that I taught them. And when they send their children to college, they don’t refuse to pay for a major in English.
My approach to engaging non-English majors with early American literature can be summed up in three words: **context**, **competencies**, and **comfort**.

**Context: historical, personal**

First, context. As we know, many students today are unfamiliar with even the basics of colonial American history and culture. Thus, providing them with some **historical background** about the time period and the writer is obviously crucial to their engagement with the texts. This material can be provided outside the classroom in the form of assigned reading or even a short paragraph of historical context linked electronically to an assignment if the longer introductions within an anthology seem off-putting. Within the classroom, it can take the form of media clips, maps, images, etc. One more extensive option for providing historical context that I have found helpful is to show one full-length film at the start of the semester that presents the life of an average colonist. For example, I have used *American Experience: A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (1997) in my Early American Women Writers course, and have been surprised at how effectively the film offers a central visual template of colonial life that I end up referring to often throughout the semester. A full-length narrative film gives students a good visual grounding in the time period of the colonists.

I have found that for present-day students, **personal** context is just as important as **historical** context. Thus, I focus less on literary and historical time periods and present each text as the written record of that individual author’s **personal experiences**. In fact, SEA Executive Coordinator Patrick Erben suggests this same approach to engage students with early American research projects in his “Letter” in the Fall 2015 SEA newsletter (Vol. 27, Issue 2). This approach can be enhanced by using class discussion questions that ask students to consider each
individual’s unique story and by including non-traditional writings on the syllabus which offer experiences that modern students may identify with. For example, in my classes, I have used John and Margaret Winthrop’s love letters, Sarah Edwards’ testimony of her ecstatic religious experiences, and even a 1792 valedictory speech of a graduate of the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia to offer unique ways to connect with students through potentially similar life experiences.

**Competencies: skills, discovery**

Second, non-major students want to feel that they are receiving a real return on their time and effort. Thus, I am careful to explicitly identify throughout the semester the skills and competencies they should expect to grow in through a humanities course. Even a pedagogical technique as simple as identifying the required **skills** on an assignment sheet helps non-majors recognize what they are learning. For example, my archival assignment sheet notes at the top of the page that the skills focus is “analysis, close reading, written communication,” while my research paper assignment identifies “research, analysis, and argumentation” as important skills. Seeing these skill requirements printed on the assignment sheet makes students more aware of the actual proficiencies they are learning in a literary study course. In addition, it clarifies my expectations for an assignment.

One competency that students seem to value is the training to **discover** or engage with something new; basically, assignments that allow students to go beyond the textbook. I’m sure many of you use archival assignments to introduce students to original materials. One archival assignment that I use is an analysis of a captivity narrative. Students are free to choose whichever narrative they like from the approximately 150 captivity narratives in the Evans 1
database, and they analyze features such as the strengths and weaknesses of the author and the effectiveness of the narrative. Two important aspects of this assignment for non-majors is that I ask the students to analyze the narrative simply as readers, and I do not make the paper thesis-driven. This approach seems to make the students more relaxed, and they appear to appreciate both working with original texts and also having the freedom to choose the narrative they analyze.

**Comfort: required, support system, atmosphere**

After context and competencies, I use comfort to engage non-majors with early American literature. I have found that perhaps the most important choice I can make as an educator is the atmosphere I create in the classroom, especially for non-major students. Students who enter our courses are often nervous about being in a literary study class. They have not studied literature in many years, they may not have written a thesis-driven research paper in just as long, and they frequently have not been expected to share ideas and opinions in a class discussion setting. I find that several choices help me create an environment where everyone feels comfortable and relaxed about learning.

First, I always directly acknowledge to the students that I understand that they are in a course that is **required** and that they may not be excited about, but, as mentioned above, I clearly identify the skills they should expect to take away from a literary study course. I am quite specific in explaining how the ability to analyze, argue, communicate, and understand other perspectives are hallmarks of literary study and are skills they should expect to benefit from in their own disciplines. Second, I include a strong **support system** for these students to handle the assignments of the class: a librarian visit to the classroom to show online literary research
techniques, a posted Power Point slide show explaining the main aspects of MLA documentation, an electronic Info Guide that includes links to literature databases and writing tools, and sample papers from previous semesters as well as my grading rubrics on the course website.

Third, I try to make the class **atmosphere** fun, relaxed, and comfortable. Sometimes I give discussion questions ahead of time to allow for thought, and I always allow students to “pass” on a question when I call on them. I also use in-class personal reflection writing assignments that are graded solely on content and not writing style or correctness for those students who favor a more informal, personal writing approach. Class discussions after students have written a short reflection on a topic are always easier for students, and I often find out through these assignments that my “worst” writers are actually some of my more interesting thinkers. Lastly, I use humor. A lot of humor.

One student from my spring Early American Women Writers class commented on the course evaluations that I “engage the class in a way that is not intimidating because the class feels like a conversation.” I am working toward all students feeling this way about being in an early American literature class.

Overall, non-English majors bring interesting and different perspectives to the study of written texts, so I use **context, competencies, and comfort** as my watchwords when attempting to engage these students with early American literature. I believe the benefits can be mutual and significant.