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356. Teaching with the OED

Friday, 9 January, 3:30–4:45 p.m., 111, VCC West

Program arranged by the Discussion Group on Lexicography

Presiding: Lisa Berglund, Buffalo State Coll., State Univ. of New York

Speakers: Kate Levin, Barnard Coll.; Elizabeth Dyrud Lyman, Southern Illinois Univ., Edwardsville; J. Lawrence Mitchell, Texas A&M Univ., College Station; Rachel Norman, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; David Silva, Univ. of Texas, Arlington; Laurel Stvan, Univ. of Texas, Arlington; Tara Williams, Oregon State Univ.

For abstracts, visit commons.mla.org.

Session Description:

Strategies for using the *Oxford English Dictionary* in literature, creative writing, linguistics, and history of the English language courses.

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Subject:

Linguistics – General

Keywords:

lexicography, teaching, linguistics, etymology

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02/24/14

“Great Things of Small...We Can Create”: Using the *OED* to Teach *Paradise Lost*

I use the *OED* in my First-Year Seminar to initiate a close reading essay about Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. On the first day, I direct my students in a collective close reading exercise of the poem’s first lines to model the kind of work that I expect in their essays. Each student is assigned a line, and we figure out individually and together what the lines mean. I start the exercise with the *OED*’s multiple definitions of “Of,” the poem’s first word, to demonstrate not only why this seemingly insignificant word matters, but also how each small piece potentially creates the poem’s greater significance. I then ask my students to pick a word from the poem and use the *OED* to write a paragraph that describes how and why their word matters at that moment in the poem. I remind them to look up the word’s etymology to see if it contains any potential Greek or Latin puns, and also to make sure that they focus only on the definitions of their word that existed before and during Milton’s time.

My students are generally experienced in writing thematic literary analysis. However, this method generally requires an outside-in approach to a text, in which a writer constructs an argument and uses that text mostly as decoration on the surface of the argument. My *OED* assignment serves as a useful catalyst for the close reading essay because it asks students, often for the first time, to work from the inside-out. It thus helps them to understand and start to enact the kind of close scrutiny that Milton’s poem demands of its readers.

ELIZ. LYMAN: 3/15/2014

MLA Session: "Teaching With the OED: A Roundtable"

GRAVITY

I recently began using the OED in a new undergraduate playwriting course. Two years ago I moved from a university with a student population possessing (on the whole) sophisticated and expansive vocabularies, to a university with a student population possessing (on the whole) more limited vocabularies and a less multi-dimensional understanding of the uses and interpretive possibilities of individual words. I have tried a variety of techniques for sparking student interest in words: I use and define new words in class and online on a weekly basis; I created an anonymous online response form for students to report words from lectures, readings, or assignments that are unfamiliar; and I require students in introductory and advanced academic courses to do an OED search, and to write a short paper on how their word functions in a play or scene. Nothing I have tried so far, however, has been as successful as a simple assignment I used this spring in my playwriting class in which I asked students to read the OED entry for "gravity," watch the new movie *Gravity*, listen to three recent songs on gravity (Sara Bareilles, John Mayer, and the musical *Wicked*), and write a scenario for a play that used "gravity" in as many literal and metaphoric senses as possible (the assignment is below).

The scenarios were more interesting than they would have been without the OED entry, and more importantly, reading the entry opened the eyes of my students – none of whom knew that "gravity" had meanings (such as "solemnity") beyond that of a purely physical force. A focus of my roundtable contribution would be ways in which students used this new knowledge and found ways to incorporate multiple ideas of "gravity" into their work.

Because the CFP for this session uses the phrase "negotiating OED Online," I will mention with some regret that rather than leaving my students to look up the definitions themselves, I went to the trouble of locating, printing, scanning, and posting the three OED definitions myself. I draw attention to this unfortunate fact because it is pedagogically relevant. I would never have done this work for students at my previous university, and am struggling mightily with the fact that unless I schedule an entire class session to teach students how to look up information online (something I do in academic courses, but not in playwriting), a majority of students arrive unprepared without having located the material. I would be interested in hearing the experiences of others.

ELIZ. LYMAN: "GRAVITY" ASSIGNMENT

Links and additional details online

GRAVITY! THE INFINITE PROLIFERATION OF IDEAS: USING METAPHOR TO ACTIVATE AUDIENCE IMAGINATION

This week for Friday we take a break from scripts and write our first scenarios. A "scenario" is a detailed summary of a script that is broken down by scenes and includes settings, characters, major actions, etc. There is an OED definition and an example of a "scenario" inside this folder. Imagine for the purposes of this exercise that you are writing a full-length script. Every playwright should be able to write a story in detailed narrative form as well as in dialogue. It helps to clarify structure, and it is required by many funding and productions agencies.

Our scenarios will focus on the notion of "gravity" in its literal and metaphorical meanings -- explore the OED definitions in this folder to their fullest. Inside this folder you will also find a sampling of recent creative works that do the same. How might *you* use "gravity" in your creative work? You can be as obvious or as subtle in your scenario as you like.

"Metaphor" (also in OED definitions) is one of the great tools of the playwright. By using one thing (simple, material, fixed) to suggest another (complex, immaterial, proliferating), you activate audience (and actor, designer) imagination and -- in a sense -- enlist their imaginations to do some of the work for you. Once audience members begins to think metaphorically about a story you present, they make connections with their own experiences and take your writing to places you might never have thought to go.

OED Definitions

Metaphor

Scenario

Gravity

Gravity Movie

Watch the film: Alfonso Cuaron with Jonas Cuaron, starring Sandra Bullock & George Clooney

Youtube interviews: be sure to watch the first clip in which they talk about metaphor, and the clip in which they experiment with gravity

Gravity Songs

Sara Bareilles

Wicked:

John Mayer

“The OED in HEL.”

Lawrence Mitchell will talk about using the OED in

History of the Language courses, with particular reference to 18th-century slang terms

(many of them first recorded in Francis Grose's *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 1785), reduplicative forms (willy-nilly), and interjections (pew, wow).

Rachel Norman
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A high-tech dictionary in the classroom:
Getting students excited about etymology

Every spring, students in Dr. Connie Eble's undergraduate History of the English Language course at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill write a 1250 – 1500 word essay on etymology. The students are given a page-long description of the assignment and instructed to “present in clear, coherent, interesting prose the accurate histories of a group of English words.” As a Graduate Research Consultant for the course, I work with the students to help them understand how the tools available in the Oxford English Dictionary Online allow them to mine the English language in ways that were impossible even a few years ago. To launch the assignment, I lead a lesson on negotiating the OED online, paying special attention to the Timeline, Sources, and Historical Thesaurus tools. We then ask them to demonstrate their facility with the dictionary by selecting a group of words and exploring them via their etymologies while crafting a compelling historical argument for their examination as a group. We have received papers on a wide variety of topics, including a paper detailing the reasons why the English language borrowed its ballet terms from French, a paper discussing the theater terms John Dryden contributed to the English language, and a paper arguing that the etymologies of the names of instruments used in Blue Grass music demonstrate its international, rather than regional, nature. This semester we revised the course to participate in the University's “Arts at the Core” initiative, and linked the course to a specific performance of the Handel oratorio “Theodora.” As a result, this year's assignment asked students to discuss terms associated with the performing arts in the 18th century – a task so specific it could not have been completed without the OED. This presentation will include the history of this assignment and how it has been transformed over the years, as well as offer a few examples of very creative and well-written essays submitted in response to the prompt.

Engaged Etymologies: Active Learning in the Teaching of Word Formation and Etymology

We motivate a chronology of tasks for an introductory linguistics unit on word-formation and etymology, tracking the assignment's evolution from a fact-focused exercise where students played a passive role, to a set of student-focused activities that demand engagement and higher-order thinking skills. The module suits linguistics classes, but also history of English, semantics, dialectology, or sociolinguistics.

The lesson evolved across several semesters from Reading and Lecture to an iteration encompassing Reading, Riddle Solving, Quiz, and Lecture. The newest version illustrates three advantages for instruction and assessment. First, it emphasized the pedagogical point that the value of knowledge lies in its use: students accessed online *OED* information not for its own sake, but to enable them to relate new information to a larger issue. Students made inductive conclusions from data they themselves tracked down, rather than simply looking for "the answer" in a definition. While earlier versions addressed higher-order levels of Bloom's Cognitive Domain, the new sequence also tapped into Bloom's Affective Domain; students assign value to their efforts (by deciding words to investigate) and integrate knowledge into organizational schemas on their own terms. In preparing free-choice items to present, students reported that they rarely selected the first words they looked up, but searched for lexical items they felt represented good examples to show the instructor. Thus as a third advantage, students assume the role of teacher, emphasizing how multiple modes of acquiring knowledge exist: by teaching the teacher, one learns.

An additional meta-lesson connects dictionaries to collaborative media types students know. The *OED* has always been a proto wiki: over time, hundreds of people have contributed citations, so the known timeline for words is always changing. Besides gaining firsthand research experience as investigators sorting word clues, students reframed their original impression of dictionaries as staid resources compiled by others.

The OED as Object, Entertainment, and Dictionary in the Literature Classroom

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When teaching medieval and early modern texts, I regularly ask my students to use historical dictionaries in order to examine the language closely. I find that students approach these tasks more eagerly and more productively when the OED has been integrated into the course from the outset. This paper lays out the strategy by which I build student interest in and expertise with the OED, approaching it as—to repurpose that familiar acronym—object, entertainment, and dictionary.

On the first day of class, we consider the OED as a material object. We look at how much the twenty-volume print version weighs (137.72 pounds), how much it would cost to buy on Amazon (\$1232.59 right now), and how many pages the longest entry covers (more than twenty five). These numbers help students conceive of the amount of information the OED contains in concrete terms. I open subsequent classes with a “fun fact,” drawing on the OED as a source of entertainment that literature majors find particularly appealing. Which word came first, *hellzapoppin'* or *bootylicious*? Is “steadfast, firm, constant” an obsolete definition for *sad* or *sober*? Framing these “fun facts” as questions allows students to see the OED as a resource for investigating etymologies and evolving denotations. But I also want students to keep in mind that it is a dictionary constructed by people making decisions based on necessarily incomplete information. To that end, we explore the online OED’s archival materials as well as its current call for submissions. When we finally turn to an assignment that asks students to trace the history of a word or to analyze the language of a premodern text, they do so with a comprehensive understanding of the nature, potential, and limitations of the OED—and with a sense of anticipation about what they might discover.