

SAIL Curricular Project Submission Template

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Please email your final curricular project to Cara Pickett (cpickett@acm.edu).

Overview

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Course/Module/Activity Title: Revising ENGL 223: "American Transcendentalists"

Course Summary:

Please provide a short description of your course or module and the expected learning outcomes for students. Be sure to include essential key words or index terms to help users find resources using web-based searches.

Helping students to understand the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, to grasp his wide public appeal through the 19th century, and assess what we can learn from him today entails significant pedagogical challenges. To get anywhere with such goals in the setting of a single course, students need to be made effective readers of Emerson's notoriously difficult prose, and quickly. Teaching Emerson interdisciplinarily by emphasizing his life-long interest in science and scientific authority can help undergraduates to see beyond the old classroom clichés of nature-love, individualism, non-conformism, and American exceptionalism that some will bring with them into the course and that most will reinforce through cursory readings of his work. Encouraged to note and analyze the effects of scientific metaphors and allusion in his work, students gain a powerful key to his logic and so can more rapidly become better readers of his demanding prose.

One key here lies in Emerson's post-Enlightenment historical situation. In this course, students read of the vocational crisis of the young and not-yet-famous Emerson in the late-1820s, and use the facts of his crisis and its provisional solution in his becoming a public lecturer and Transcendentalist to approach the stylistic and idealist excesses of "Nature" (1836), his career-making Romantic manifesto. Another key is the notion of "correspondence," through which Romantics such as the American Transcendentalists posited a relationship between matter and mind, the material world and human interiority. Many major texts of the Transcendentalists may best be understood as sustained acts of

correspondence thinking. Attempts to enjoy or interpret *Walden* or *Nature* without a sense of this mode of thought—the one Thoreau and Emerson used in writing them—are likely to mislead. A final key is the distinction Emerson makes between the understanding and the Reason, both of which are operative in healthy minds but of which, the latter is far superior and even the thing that makes us human. In lecture, discussion, and small group work in class, students learn to track the arguments Emerson makes about materialist understanding and the idealist mode of the Reason he favors and to note and unpack his frequent mention of scientific heroes and innovations and their contributions to human knowing. When science-related footings such as these undergird the rest of the course’s structure, more students will come to grasp and appreciate Emerson’s and the other Transcendentalists’ Romantic thinking as what it was: an invitation to imagine the world we perceive as not just materially, inertly *there* but also acted upon in every perceptive action of the individual mind.

Course Context and Learning Goals

Context:

“American Transcendentalists” is a 200-level English course at Carleton College, without prerequisites, which I describe in the online course catalog as follows:

Attempts to discern the spirit of the nineteenth-century, Emerson says, come down to a "practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?" This interdisciplinary course will investigate the works of the American Transcendentalist movement in its restless discontent with the conventional, its eclectic search for better ways of thinking and living. We will engage major works of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Whitman and others alongside documents of the scientific, religious, and political changes that shaped their era and provoked their responses.

No prerequisites means that students’ levels of ability with difficult reading and thinking will vary widely, a price I willingly pay in order to buy the many benefits of a larger enrollment and a mixed constituency. Such tradeoffs are manageable in this case because this unusual course is in part a sustained investigation of an ethical challenge from “Self-Reliance” that in many respects sums up Emerson’s Transcendentalist project; namely, “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages.” Students come to the course in various states of preparation, but all can begin here, with the work of awakening to the mind’s involuntary actions and the inescapable role these actions play in the production and support of the individual.

What we read and discuss

After an overview on the first day, the course begins in search of some definitions of Transcendentalism with substantial consideration of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s early journals, then jumps ahead in time to analyze two works of their maturity (Emerson’s “The Transcendentalist” and Thoreau’s “Walking”). A three-week long dive into Emerson follows, with early vocational crisis, major addresses and essays of the early phase, ending with the crucial but poorly understood “Self-Reliance.” Next, we explore both *Walden* and Fuller’s *Woman in the 19th Century* as potential experiments in “self-reliance” launched from new, individual perspectives and starting points. Next: *influence*—on one hand, aesthetics and the responses of poets and artists; on the other, communal living experiments such as the

Fruitlands commune in works of Bronson and Louisa May Alcott. Then, works from the late Emerson, “Experience” and “Fate.” Transcendentalist politics is next, with Thoreau and Emerson on abolition and Fuller’s *Dispatches* from revolutionary Rome. We end our readings with late essays of Thoreau such as “Wild Apples” in which his prophetic view upon culture combines powerfully with the objectivities and authority of his work as a significant naturalist.

What students do

For keeping track of their “gleam[s] of light” in response to their reading and other experience, students keep a journal (checked for progress twice in the term); in the course’s more analytical work, they submit very brief reading responses (due every session at first, then relaxing to once a week), write two short analytical essays; individually research, write, and deliver a 7-minute context report. At the end of the course, to some extent combining the subjective and objective forms of work in the course, students formally propose, create, and report on a final longer essay or project.

My interdisciplinary curricular project

Interdisciplinary revisions made to the course taught in the fall of 2014 were focused on bringing students further into the task of gauging the role of science in Emerson’s thinking. This entailed new texts, new moves, and several new emphases. I reduced an emphasis in earlier iterations of the course upon 19th-century religious change, replacing it with the story of and texts related to Emerson’s vocational crisis, travels in Europe, scientific epiphany in Paris in 1833 (“I shall be a naturalist!”), the science backgrounds evident within *Nature* and the influence on that text of Emerson’s earliest public lectures on topics in natural history as exemplified by “Humanity of Science” (1836).

In remaining weeks on Emerson, I emphasized his critique of “empirical science” in *Nature* as a means to discerning the kinds of “sight” he favors. Then, we grounded our consideration of a handful of important addresses essays of his early phase in appreciation of their connections to science or the history of science. “Method of Nature” updates Heraclitus’ conception of perpetual flow and change. “Circles” and “Compensation” take as their starting points major figures of Euclidean geometry and principles from Newtonian physics. With these emphases, I was able to get students to realize that when Emerson invokes “nature,” he doesn’t mean trees and ponds—or not really. He means “reality” in much the same sense that Newton means it—the laws and foundational structures that govern all phenomena, including human moral life.

We read *Walden* too quickly, constantly bumping up against how Thoreau uses his own brand of empiricism as naturalist and surveyor to generate endlessly fruitful emanations of correspondence. A missed opportunity here to read more slowly and allow students to really read *Walden* for a change. He regards the pond; he emulates the pond. He chases the loon, trying to predict its course; failing, he yearns to capture for himself its splendidly evasive nature, the confidence of its laughter. Springtime thaws the world and unfolds him and his neighbors from within. *Walden* is about empiricism used as a springboard toward higher realities than the workaday achievements of advanced capitalism.

In the late phase of Emerson’s work (“Experience” and “Fate”), he courageously and voluntarily tests the success of his idealist project against the severe authority of experience,

including that of burgeoning scientific explanations: he suffers the ravages to human meaning of the geologists' uniformitarian world of deep time; he resists the "impudent knowingness" of physiognomy and phrenology; he concedes the authoritative revelations of statistics; he learns from "the traveling geologist"; he ventriloquizes so as to expose the self-serving and circular reasoning of 19th-century racial science. Conceding ground to such authoritative material explanations from contemporary scientific discourse, Emerson posits a "stupendous antagonism" within the human knower, who tracks but may also resist, who is implicated in but not quite comprehended by such material reasoning.

My revisions in this direction are a work in progress and will be on-going in future iterations of the course, but the initial results were very good. While in future I will be seeking better ways to enable students to use Transcendentalism's underlying connections and contentions with science to unpack its ideas and ideals on their own, in this round, relevant scientific aspects entered the course chiefly through me, by way of lecture and discussion questions at the points underlined above. That said, there was enthusiastic student interest in this material and palpable enthusiasm for the wonders of the Transcendentalists' works.

Moreover, several of the best final projects replicated the spirit of this debate running through the course. In this assignment students are asked to experiment with emulating Transcendentalist habits of reading, thinking, analysis, and creative response. Two very successful projects are of note: a neuroscience/English double major tested the viability of Emersonian idealism as expressed in *Nature* and "Experience" against the material emphases of current neuroscience models of mind; an undeclared future biology major investigated, from scientific perspective, the dangers and risks and possible usefulness to science of Transcendentalist "correspondence." These projects led their student creators to grapple deeply with Emerson's texts and to respond to and assess it with a relevant and generative response of their own.

Learning Goals:

These changes to the course were designed to help students to...

- 1) Understand the paradoxical nature of Transcendentalist writing and thinking in which multiple sources and discourses are taken as expressions of one truth;
- 2) Demonstrate proficiency in interpreting the Transcendentalists' overlapping vocabularies of matter and mind;
- 3) Enhance their abilities to read and analyze Transcendentalist prose;
- 4) Increase their competence in following the logic inherent to metaphors;
- 5) Cultivate an informed sensitivity to the losses and gains, the limits and opportunities, entailed in Emerson's demanding ways of thinking and writing.

Description and Teaching Materials

To make effective use of this approach, an instructor would probably need to be interested as I am not just in Emerson's ideas but in the contexts of his thinking, the idea of Romanticism as a legitimate critique of Enlightenment rationality, and especially his works' textuality, the effect of allusions and the appropriations that occur within what Emerson called "creative reading." For a start on Emerson's compositional methods and the roles played by reading and journaling in his work, see Richardson in Resources below. For what science contributed to

Emerson's sense of the real, see Richardson, Rossi, and Walls. For discerning Emerson's amateur devotion to science as a part of a wider international appreciation for "Romantic Science" that combined poetic and technical ways of thinking hard for some of us nowadays to imagine, see Richard Holmes. For a relevant primary source discussed by Holmes and deeply influential to Emerson, see John Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1831). The latter, which at one point inspired Emerson's sense of the authority of science, is a highly accessible and fascinating parallel text to have students read alongside Emerson's address, "The Humanity of Science" (1836). For one, Emerson seems to borrow lavishly from, without mentioning, it. Students will be very intrigued and quite willing to debate whether Emerson's "creative reading" could in other rooms and offices on campus be called "plagiarism."

Assessment and Resources

Assessment:

Finding room within this already crammed course to add an explicitly interdisciplinary component was a challenge that, fortunately, produced immediate payoff. Highly satisfied with the results of this first round, I'm eager to refine the attempt and improve upon it. Articulating an optimal set of learning goals and more effectively assessing student's success in meeting them will take another iteration or two. Anecdotally, I can say that launching this course from questions of epistemology implicit to the history of science served this group of students far more effectively than my old strategy of launching from questions of religious reform. Though the 10-week course really has too much material to cover, the successes of these interdisciplinary innovations have led me to envision ways to make students more responsible for the course's interdisciplinary aspects and challenges. As noted above, we read *Walden* in this round *much* too quickly, and in doing so let a great deal of potential learning, discovery, wonder, and debate slip through our fingers. Though I revere Margaret Fuller's project and find it both useful and politically responsible to have students grapple with such a difficult proto-feminist expression of Transcendentalism, I now believe this course might be better served to focus on Emerson and Thoreau only. That shift would produce more room for students to develop facility working up the interdisciplinary connections of the course themselves.

While the learning goals articulated above structured my moves in the course, I did not use a rubric or other explicit means of assessment to determine whether students had met them. If I were teaching the course again starting tomorrow, I would use for assessing the final exercise a rubric something like the one that follows here below – which has been informed by and liberally borrows from rubrics of Jacobs, Mansilla et al, the Colorado College SAIL-Florence curricular plan, and the following, brief overview of assessment design:

<http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/teachingandlearningresources/coursedesign/assessment/content/RubricPrimer.pdf>.

ENGL 223: Rubric for Final Exercise

Peter Balaam / Carleton College

Objectives	0–12 Points	13–16 Points	17–18 Points	19–20 Points	Score /Notes
Demonstrates understanding of Transcendentalist (T'ist) text as grounded in idea of the oneness of all phenomena	<i>Little to no evident comprehension of the effects of the T'ist commitment to unity on meaning in the text responded to</i>	<i>Evident but partial conception of the role of unity and its effects on text responded to</i>	<i>Generally accurate & informed sense of the role of unity and its effects on text responded to</i>	<i>Constructive, illuminating perceptions of the role of unity and its effects on the text responded to</i>	
Demonstrates proficiency in recognizing “correspondence,” overlapping vocabularies for “matter, mind, and morals”	<i>Fails to register the connections that structure the T'ist text</i>	<i>Evidently registers certain connections that structure the T'ist text, but overlooks salient effects, risks, payoffs</i>	<i>Produces well evidenced perceptions of the major connections that structure the T'ist text, noting certain of their effects, risks, payoffs</i>	<i>Produces illuminating, authoritative perceptions of connections that structure the T'ist text, making the most of effects, risks, payoffs</i>	
Reads T'ist prose perceptively and effectively.	<i>Unable to identify interrelated elements of text that produce its meanings in context; fails to launch an analysis capable of generating insight or knowledge</i>	<i>Able to identify certain interrelated elements of text that produce its meanings in context; analysis generates very basic insight or knowledge</i>	<i>Adept at identifying interrelated elements of text that produce its meanings in context; analysis generates well-evidenced insights</i>	<i>Skillfully reveals and persuasively assesses the value of the text's meanings in context</i>	

<p>Shows competence in combining receptiveness through reading with responsiveness through critical thinking and/or creativity as a means of doing innovative intellectual work</p>	<p><i>Connections between ideas of reading and those of response are non-existent or unpersuasive. In relation of the two parts, work feels disjointed or arbitrary (subjective)</i></p>	<p><i>Connections between reading and response are plausible but not obviously productive. In relation of the two parts, work feels unfinished or unrealized</i></p>	<p><i>Connections between reading and response are plausible, engaged, and clearly productive. In relation of the two parts, work is evidently finished and complete</i></p>	<p><i>Connections between reading and response are fascinating, relevant and innovative. In relation of the two parts, work is serious, forceful, illuminating</i></p>	
<p>Communicates a sensitivity to the ambiguity of T'ist ideals in their appeal & their limits amidst practical biases, materialist views, and received wisdom</p>	<p><i>Work offers polarized and/or unearned conclusions, positive or negative. Offers little/no appreciation of alternative points of view</i></p>	<p><i>Work reveals conclusions positive or negative alongside unintegrated considerations of alternative points of view</i></p>	<p><i>Work enhances the power of its conclusions through acknowledgment of various points of view. Able to accept ambiguity as well as to choose and defend a position.</i></p>	<p><i>Work enhances the power of its conclusions through deliberation on differing points of view. Reasons through historical, political, cultural, or temporal context or conditions that complicate our reception of T'ist ideals, yet takes & persuasively advances its own position</i></p>	

Resources:

- Boix Mansilla, V., Dawes Duraisingh, E., Wolfe, C.R., & Haynes, C. (2009). "Targeted Assessment Rubric: An Empirically Grounded Rubric for Interdisciplinary Writing." *Journal of Higher Education* 80 (3) 334–353.
<http://www.units.miamioh.edu/aisorg/PUBS/AssessingIDS/TargetedAssessmentRubric.pdf>
- Herschel, John. *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy*. Chicago: U of C Press, 1987.
- Holmes, Richard. *Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*. New York: Pantheon, 2008.
- Jacobs, Heidi Hayes. "Interdisciplinary Learning Rubric" 2000.
http://sites.coloradocollege.edu/sail/wp-content/blogs.dir/330/files/2014/03/Interdisciplinary-learning-rubric_HJacobs.pdf
- Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley, CA. U of CA Press, 1995.
- Rossi, William. "Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science." *Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Joel Myerson, ed. New York: Oxford U P, 2000. 101–50.
"Rubric Primer."
<http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/teachingandlearningresources/coursedesign/assessment/content/RubricPrimer.pdf>
- Siddoway, C., Ashley, S., Thakur, S. "Interdisciplinary Inquiry Assessment of Course Learning Objectives." 2014.
https://mail.carleton.edu/service/home/~/?auth=co&loc=en_US&id=442380&part=3
- Walls, Laura Dassow. *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U P, 2003.