

The Introduction, Development, Implementation, Evolution of a “Unifying Literary Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham*” with an Initial Qualitative Analysis

Abstract

Initially, this report will provide the definition, history, development, pedagogical and theoretical origins, and evolution of using *Green Eggs & Ham*, by Dr. Seuss to improve literacy and introduce literary concepts such as active reading, literary theory, critical thinking, and pluralism to first- and second-year college students. Secondly, this report will introduce and discuss specific student works completed in different iterations of the ENC 1102 curriculum during its development. Finally, the qualitative assessment of student works will be discussed, as well as how future assessment can be developed to be more readily studied, while plans to meet such criteria will be introduced.

Keywords: literature, literary theory, literary criticism, Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs & Ham*, gonzo

Introduction

The “Unifying Literary Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham*” is a pedagogical tool designed to teach the accessibility of literary theory, thusly encouraging students to approach texts from multiple perspectives while encouraging reader engagement, critical thinking, and pluralism. Given the vagueness of the narrative elements in Geisel’s original text, comparative connections to other texts can easily be made. In retrospect, the decision to use *Green Eggs & Ham* by Dr. Seuss as an introduction to literary theory seems as elementary as the children’s book itself.

The “Unifying Literary Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham*” began in 2005 as “Gonzo Literary Criticism, where defining characteristics of Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism are appropriated and redefined to be applied as tools of literary criticism (Rader 2005). In its initial application, the experimental work revealed a method of applying literary criticism that would come to shape “Unifying Literary Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham*” and its pedagogy. The act of altering a text in order to express a critical reading of the text was integral in the reader forming a relationship with a text. It may be interesting to note, the “Unifying Literary Theory of *Green Eggs and Ham*” and its pedagogy did not actually start with *Green Eggs & Ham* by Dr. Seuss, but with a reaction to reading assignments from ENC 1102 students.

History of Methods

Recognizing Demographic and Academic Challenges

Teaching at a state college presents its own demographic challenges. Teaching literature at a state college in Lake and Sumter counties presents even more unique challenges. Even with 88-90% of the population from the two rural counties having a high school education or higher, the communities are not necessarily academically motivated, and college is seen as merely a steppingstone to gainful employment (DADS 2010, October 5). Coupled with STEM programs that often begin the second or third year of high school, teaching ENC 1102 often requires the inclusion of pedagogical and curricular material typically covered in high school English classes.

With a student population who is underexposed to literature, and as a generation who is less inclined to read, the challenge of getting students to read a short story, let alone a novel or a criticism on a text. Validating student reading is easy with text-centric quizzes and the simple move of providing in-class reading time, but these logistic adaptations do not address the larger motivational question “Why don’t students like reading?”

Classroom discussion and one-on-one investigation with ENC 1101 and 1102 students, especially those still in high school, led to the surprising discovery of a recurring theme in their literature exposure and education. Through no fault of their own, students were being alienated from literature because any academic discussion of a short story, poem, or book was centered on authorial intent. Repeatedly, students would recount and share stories of every educational conversation about literature that began with the question, “What is the author trying to say?” This oversimplification of the purposes of literature discourages debate and discussion by automatically presupposing two important factors: 1) The author’s intent is clearly stated in all literature, and 2) There is a right and wrong answer. It is these bad habits of literary discussion that appears to have led most ENC 1102 students to antagonistic attitudes toward reading. They were being forced into an antithetical quantitative relationship with literature.

Qualitative Decision

Recognizing a need to shift away from the current ENC 1102 curriculum where exposure to different literary genres and an often-illogical number of texts to read seemed more important than helping students form relationships with texts. Tests, assignments, and essays seemed to focus on the more elementary narrative elements (character, setting, and plot) and intent on discovering whether a story had been read to completion rather than understanding. It had become apparent that students were not forming relationships with assigned readings because they had not been taught how, nor challenged to, read beyond those most basic narrative elements and the author’s intent. The realization of a pedagogical move from quantitative to qualitative evaluation motivated early assignment creation. It should be noted; this decision to approach assessment from a more qualitative perspective is not to the exclusion of recognized quantitative assessment methods.

Instructional Designer Katarina Chmlova defines Qualitative Methods of Evaluation as, “Show[ing...] HOW [students] can apply, synthesize, evaluate, and design what [they have] learned” (2016, February 10). The first attempt to apply a more qualitative approach to evaluating a student’s relationship with literature began with a semester’s final project.

Early Assignments and Student Work

Initially, ENC 1102 students were presented with an optional creative choice for their Final Project. Because of Gordon Rule and SLO standards, students were still required to complete an MLA cited and formatted essay opining on a text they had been exposed to in class. While not yet written into the syllabi, these early classes were exposed to archetypal, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural literary criticism.

Taking cues from Chmolova's research, the first attempts to qualitatively assess students' understanding were an optional choice. Students had to produce a 500-750 word, MLA cited and formatted essay explaining how their creative project expressed their critical interpretation of a text. Initially, students were not limited to literary texts or texts covered in class. Suggestions for creative projects included: alternate scenarios, creative projects, case studies, artifacts, personal experiences, comparisons, visual texts, portfolios, direct observation, role play, or simulations.

During the first semesters of the creative option, a minority of students chose the more qualitative medium. As expected, one or two students tried to take the opportunity to do less work, but the majority of student submissions in that first year were surprisingly well thought out and creative. One student reflected on her favorite series of novels. As a fan of *The Flowers in the Attic* books, she made a mock journal that was "found" in the titular attic after series' end (See Appendix 6.5.B.1). The student's understanding of the narrative elements in their creative effort is apparent. Their ability to assemble an anthology of different poems from poets who reflected the characters displays amazing insight. Arguably, an understanding of the text the student's work is centered on is required, but the depth of understanding displayed by this early attempt was undeniable.

Another student chose to interpret two stories from an author, Ursula K. LeGuin, who they had been introduced to during the semester. Again, the level of creativity is undeniable, but to the unfamiliar eye, are either of the artistic interpretations understood on their own?



"The Wife's Story"



"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

This assignment was accompanied by a critical essay defending the student's psychoanalytic interpretation of LeGuin's "The Wife's Story" in the painting. Unfortunately, the second submission could not affect the student's grade, but the inclusion of the second painting shows the student was not only forming relationships with assigned texts but was also seeking out more stories to read.

The early submissions were encouraging, but they also pointed out the glaring shortcomings in current ENC 1102 syllabi and pedagogy being applied in the classroom and to grading. More specific literary concepts were going to be introduced, and less arbitrary grading standards were needed for more creative submissions. Fortunately, the introduction of a Learning Management System (LMS) would facilitate these needed changes.

The second generation of ENC 1102 classes saw the introduction of specific literary theories preceded by an explanation as well as literary terms and devices. The total number of readings was decreased but organized so that reading assignments were grouped by a literary theory that was introduced and best applied to the reading assignments in the corresponding section of the LMS. The sections of the LMS were organized by literary theories introduced in the class: Reader Response, Archetypal, Gender, Psychoanalytic, and Marxist (socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural).

Even with increased structure and curricular focus on literary theory, the final creative project was still left as an option for students. Not surprisingly, given the new LMS structure and organization of assigned readings, student understanding of more esoteric narrative elements (like theme and conflict) became more self-evident. In this latest iteration, students were limited to interpreting texts they had been exposed to during the semester.

Certainly, even to the less familiar reader, this creative interpretation of *Fight Club* is an evident character interpretation through psychoanalytic and sociocultural lenses.



Fight Club

Artistic color decisions in the above painting are driven by the student's understanding of archetypal meanings behind color. Post-modern characteristics reflect an understanding of the story's structure as well as its symbolic and narrative elements. Arguably, student work of this depth and creativity is an exhibition of the synthesis of understanding literary theory into a new medium.

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for ENC 1102 had compartmentalized the introduction of literary theories with only recurring passing reference to their lack of mutual exclusivity. There needed to be a recurring element to the LMS that would exemplify the plurality and diversity of literary criticism.

Current Methodology

With a need for a unifying theme recognized, renewed attention was given to the LMS and curriculum while remaining true to established SLOs and pedagogical criteria. The utility of Dr. Seuss in an ENC 1102 course seemed natural, given the children's author's ubiquity in literacy education. The decision to use *Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss* as the unifying element would have an indomitable effect on the class's structure.

The Unifying Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss*

The idea *Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss* can be argued as an allegory for any narrative ever written may seem absurd, but it was a literary opinion expressed in the earliest student interpretation of Seuss's story via Foster's view of literary connectivity. When introducing the "Unifying Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss*," students are first exposed to the story just as text and without the familiar accompanying illustrations.

This textual introduction affords the opportunity to introduce the concept of "death of the author" to students, especially as Geisel's original intent is revealed. Similarly, because most students have already been exposed to the text and formed an opinion on its meaning, the learning of more esoteric literary theory is experienced less as the learning of a new and difficult concept and more like a revelation of knowledge already held by the student. These epiphanies are assisted by answering the question, "Why *Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss*?" Borrowing from the tenets of Schilb and Clifford's *Arguing About Literature* (2014), students are simultaneously introduced to the concepts of thesis, claims, and citation as the utility of Geisel's text is explained in detail.

The realization of the utility of Geisel's text led to research and discussion with instructors and librarians to select which literary theories would be most accessible to an ENC 1102 class. Since, especially after embracing "death of the author" poetics, all literary criticism is essentially Reader Response criticism, that critical lens was selected as the introductory critical theory of the curriculum. The discussion of narrative elements as symbols or metaphors is also an elementary step in literary criticism and comparative literary theory. As a result, Archetypal criticism was added to the class's structure. The next two theories were chosen because of their accessibility to students. Without realizing, most students were already practicing Psychoanalytic criticism on characters and personalities in popular culture. With some guidance, "armchair psychiatry" can become a literary application of Psychoanalytic criticism. Perhaps not surprisingly, the application of Freudian terminology to the narrative elements of Seuss's text came easily to many students who had an introduction to psychology at any level. In this era of #MeToo and new understandings of the LGBTQ community, the inclusion of Gender criticism seemed almost mandatory. Finally, Marxist Critical Theory was selected because of its synthesis of Sociopolitical, Socioeconomic, and Sociocultural criticisms. Introduced as the final literary theory, the intent is to expose students to conflicting ideas and theories that may not be mutually exclusive.

Having selected the theoretical pedagogy for the course, "The Unifying Theory of *Green Eggs & Ham*" was developed as the pedagogical foundation for the ENC 1102 LMS. Attention was then turned to content (narratives, critical texts, and ancillary educational information). The LMS was

divided into sections by critical theory, and narratives were selected by their utility for the literary theory being introduced or ancillary educational information they provided on a narrative or theory. With a uniformity and common theme brought to the LMS, a similar uniformity was developed for the Creative Final Project.

Instead of being allowed to apply their creative literary to the text of their choosing, students were required to demonstrate their understanding of a theory they had been exposed to in class, or one they had synthesized themselves through the application of a unique literary to the children's book *Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss*. With this curricular decision, the relative arbitrariness of the Qualitative Assessment became less of an issue for the instructor and the students. Surprisingly, the level of creativity of student submissions did not suffer even under the more restrained guidelines of the new assignment. As seen in the sampled work, students used the simplicity of the guiding text (*Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss*) to afford themselves greater complexity in the ideas they chose to illustrate. Student criticism evolved past character and plot analysis into the realms of comparative discussion and thematic debates, as illustrated in the samples given.



Sociocultural Criticism



Psychoanalytical
Criticism



Sociopolitical Criticism

Since requiring students to apply their creative criticisms to the same text did not seem to stifle student creativity, the decision was made to further improve assessment by making the creative assignment mandatory for all students, requiring them to apply a literary theory to the same text (*Green Eggs & Ham by Dr. Seuss*), provide an MLA cited and formatted essay presenting their theory through either a provided, editable, PowerPoint presentation, or an original hardcopy of the text. Students choosing to produce a hard copy must make their only textbook purchase for the class to complete the assignment. All other texts are provided through open-source textbooks or directly from authors' websites.

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