



Analyzing Austen: Creating Connections Across Disciplines

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Abstract

- An important aspect of a Liberal Arts education is developing the ability to understand and apply information in new and unexpected ways. This was a motivating factor in the creation of "Connections" courses—upper-level courses that are designed to help students integrate two seemingly disparate disciplines.
- One such course was "Analyzing Austen": a 300-level course that used an assortment of Psychological concepts as a lens through which to explore the works of Jane Austen, focusing on the ways in which Austen's works illustrate psychological and relational concepts
- Using a co-taught, cross-disciplinary approach, this course challenged students to consider their own psychological development and relationships, as well as demonstrating the ways in which an understanding of one discipline facilitates and enhances the understanding and appreciation of the other.
- Designed to be accessible for students from diverse academic backgrounds, this course also aimed to help students develop critical reading, writing, and thinking skills through application and synthesis of diverse material and personal reflection.



Sample Integration Assignments

Austen's Ecological System

"Create a model of what you think Jane Austen's Ecological System would have looked like. Use the biographical information shared in class, as well as making inferences from what you know of her works (and society at the time). You must include all five of Bronfenbrenner's systems, in theoretically consistent ways."

Identity Development in *Northanger Abbey*

"In your assigned chapter, select an event or experience that shows Catherine's growth and self-awareness (or lack thereof!). Connect the example from your chapter with Erikson and Marcia's theories on Identity development."

Family (Dis)Function: The Elliots

"In this unit, we discussed the functions of family: the ways in which a family is expected to take care of its members. To what extent do you think the Elliots can be considered to be functional and dysfunctional as a family unit? Which function(s) do you feel they best fulfill, and with which do you feel they struggle or fail?"

Romantic Relationships in *Pride & Prejudice*

"Focus on one of the novel's couples (or could-have-been couples) as you prepare for class. Be prepared to discuss any proposals, what kind of marriage you feel they are likely to have, who "made the better match" (Exchange Theory), attraction and Filter Theory, likely power dynamics of the pair, and ultimate odds for marital satisfaction (Gottmann). Please refer back to last week's lecture for theories and ideas about power, signs of distressed/happy marriages, etc."

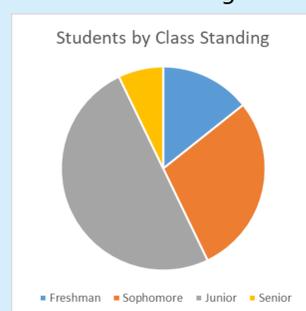
Friends and Significant Others in *Emma*

"In a brief reflection, consider: From the novel, who would you choose for a friend? Who would you date? Who would you marry? Placing yourself in the 1810s, consider the social, cultural, and economic factors that might affect your choice, such as your (or your parents') professions, your financial situation (would your parents be able to provide a large dowry?), social skills (are you able to observe rules of etiquette?), and abilities (can you play the piano?). As part of your reflection, explain your choices, considering Austen's characters' and your own personality traits and demeanors."

Course Information

- Course met three times a week, for approximately 15 weeks
- Co-taught by a Psychology professor and an English professor
 - Instruction rotated: one class focusing on Psychology, one on English, and one (co-taught) emphasizing the integration of material
- Students varied in both discipline and class standing

English	3
Communications	2
Nursing	2
Psychology	2
Education	1
Business	1
Theatre	1
History	1
Christian Studies	1



Course Goals

- Students will demonstrate a foundational knowledge of psychological and sociological make up and behaviors of individuals and groups
 - Students will use literature and psychological theory as lenses to analyze their own behaviors, relationships, and personal traits.
- Students will be able to use knowledge, skills and experiences gained...to complete advanced projects at the upper level.
 - Students will be able to synthesize areas of knowledge and approaches between English and Behavioral Sciences
- Students will investigate examples of major cultural, social, political, and religious influences as a way of understanding the formation of contemporary social structures.
 - Students will be able to critique social conventions of the early 1800s in contrast to modern-day American society.

Assessment Tools

Discussion Board Posts

- Students will contribute to on-line discussions about a range of topics related to course material.

Written Reflections

- Students will write a number of short essays responding to a prompt designed to facilitate the integration of course material and readings.

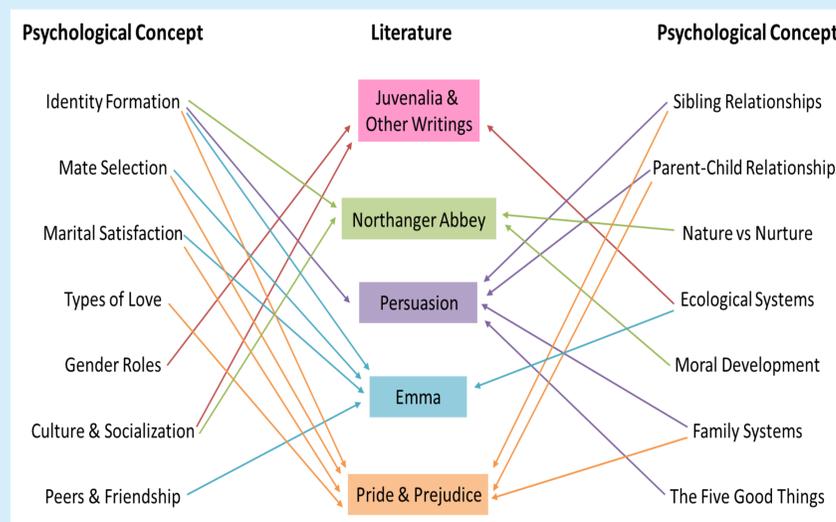
Presentation

- With a partner, deliver a 10-15 minute presentation that explores an aspect of life and culture in Jane Austen's time.

In-class Activities

- We will engage in a variety of integrative activities throughout the semester, including discussions, small group activities, short quizzes, cultural experiences, etc.

Alignment of Materials



Tips for Success

Have a clear structure in mind

- Make the goals of the class clear
- Calendar can provide structure: students like knowing what to expect

Don't take anything for granted

- You may have very different expectations and frames of reference for terms like essay, exam, paper, etc. (So will your students!)
- Your usual rubrics and assessments may require revisions
- Students may have very different academic backgrounds—plan on "over-explaining" compared to a typical upper-level class

Don't expect to save time (at least not at first)

- At least some material will be new to you—we both sat in on every class
- Big assignments ended up being graded by both of us
- Meet frequently to discuss projects, grading, activities, issues, etc.