In last spring’s issue of the English Department Newsletter, Dean Jane Earley described the English department’s response to the budget and enrollment problems the university faced 40 years ago, when the department lost half of its faculty: “We didn’t just wring our hands in despair. We tried to appeal to student and community interests by offering short, special topics courses on current events or some trend in popular culture. In an effort to hold on to our junior faculty, some senior faculty gave up their salary for a quarter each to produce a year’s salary for several junior faculty. We made sacrifices.”

The university is facing the possibility of serious budget and enrollment problems once again. State officers are forecasting, in the next three or four years, both a sharp decline in the state budget and a sharp decline in the number of students graduating from Minnesota high schools. The English department is making plans now to respond to that situation.

The decline in the number of students graduating from high school is a national phenomenon, so that there will be increased competition among colleges and universities for these students. In contrast, the U.S. Department Education predicts an increase of about 20 percent in the number of people 25 and older enrolling in college by 2017. Consequently the department is placing an increasing emphasis on graduate education, especially online programs.

The Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) track offers an MA degree and a graduate certificate. TESL is also completing an online MA program and developing a proposal for an Intensive English Language Institute. The institute would serve the University’s international students and would provide training for teachers of English as a Foreign Language.

The Technical Communication track is already heavily invested in online graduate education, with both an MA and a Graduate Certificate available online. Many of its online students are international, and faculty are considering recruiting specifically in India and China.

The Literature and English Studies track regularly offers graduate courses in literature online and is discussing the creation of online graduate certificates in teaching writing and teaching literature. These certificates would help meet the professional development needs of high school and community college teachers.

The English education track already offers a successful online licensure program in middle school English language arts and is in the process of creating an online 5-12 English education program. Both programs will help practicing teachers who want to add another teaching license.

For the last two years, the Creative Writing track has been a sponsor of the national conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. The resulting publicity has led to applications for the MFA program from students in 27 states.

There is a contemporary cliche that it is wrong to let a crisis go to waste. While that statement makes light of the harm that crises cause, the English department will, in some ways, be stronger as a result of the crisis that it is about to face.
ENHANCING INTERACTIVITY ONLINE

With the support of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) IT Initiative funding, Karen Lybeck, Linda Jacoby, and graduate assistants Dana Bruhn and Solen Feyissa have been exploring the potential uses of the 3D-online world of Second Life for teacher education courses, both online and face-to-face (f2f).

The pre- and in-service teachers who take these courses are often asked to teach lessons or give presentations with their peers acting as the target audience. They often have difficulty performing these tasks, either because they have difficulty taking on their assigned identities (particularly in f2f courses), or because of the lack of physical interaction in the online environments. Lybeck and Jacoby wanted to explore whether the use of virtual reality could address these problems.

This year, they began using the existing Second Life MnSCU campus to pilot virtual role-playing experiences with TESL students. When the students log-in to Second Life, they step into the roles assigned to them for that day, either as the teacher/presenter or as non-native speakers of English in an English as a Second Language classroom. This experience offers them the opportunity to become active participants in, rather than passive consumers of, learning. For the students, logging in to a virtual classroom and slipping into their new roles of teacher or ESL student allows them to distance themselves from their actual identity of classmate or college student.

The first step in the process of this virtual reality experiment was to create the students’ avatars and design a classroom for the students to use. The goal of these two tasks was to create a setting into which the students could enter with minimal difficulty, yet visualize themselves in a real-world context. The goal was to develop an intuitive and simple introduction to the technological element of the experience in order to allow students to focus on the task at hand: to practice delivering a lesson plan or presentation to a virtual class.

Once the preparation of the student avatars and classroom was complete, they began to focus on preparing the students to use the program. This process involved tutorial sessions within Second Life in order to learn three basic skills:

1. Communicating with the class as a whole and other students individually,
2. Controlling their avatar and navigating the classroom, and
3. Using objects in the virtual classroom needed for the roles of both student and teacher.

Once students mastered these abilities, they prepared to step into the virtual reality classroom in the roles they were assigned for a given class session. The majority of the students quickly mastered these three skills and eagerly moved on to trying out this new venue in which to develop their aptitude as presenters.

Currently the group is beginning its second pilot session in Second Life. As they proceed, they are collecting student opinions and observations in the form of questionnaires and interviews, which they hope will lead to some conclusions about whether students see using Second Life as enhancing their peer-teaching experiences.
Why Study Literature?

By John Banschbach

This is not an idle question. As Catherine Parker, a former president of the Modern Language Association, notes, “as teachers of the humanities, we are being asked yet again—by parents, legislators, journalists, the public—to defend what we do.” And The Chronicle of Higher Education’s coverage of the last MLA convention concludes with the same concern: “One could argue that the real story of MLA 2009 was a quiet but urgent one: how literary scholars justify what they do nowadays. It was a standing-room-only crowd of senior scholars, midcareer professors, and graduate students at a panel called ‘Why Teach Literature Anyway?’ Simple title, tough question—and one that none of the panelists really knew how to answer.”

The Chronicle’s skepticism notwithstanding, the question is not a new one, nor are answers lacking. There are old responses to it, going back at least as far as Sir Philip Sidney’s An Apology for Poetry (1595), and there are new responses as well. I would like to cite three of the newer ones, beginning with the most abstract.

Gregory Jusdanis describes his new book, Fiction Agonistes, as a partial contribution to a contemporary defense of literature. He argues that, first of all, literature is enjoyable because of the imaginary worlds it creates and because of its play with language and form, and that we have a need for this kind of experience. But literature, because it is imaginative, can also give us a new perspective on the world we live in: “from its fictional universe, we are able to gaze back at the actual one, criticize it, see alternatives, or seek to transform it.” Literature lets us both imagine and experience “alternative possibilities of human relationships and political institutions.”

Catherine Parker emphasizes the contemporary importance of one of these uses of literature. She calls attention to the nation’s need for “culturally sensitive citizens” who are able to understand other cultures and to work productively with individuals from other cultures. Literature can help to meet this need, because it provides students the experience of being in the mind of another person and the opportunity to “empathize with someone unlike themselves and to imagine themselves in situations unlike their own.”

Others explain the ways that literature can give us insight into our own lives and even transform them. Stephen Greenblatt describes a poetry evening at the White House, where President Clinton said that his first serious experience with poetry was in junior high, having to memorize a speech from Shakespeare. Greenblatt asked Clinton if he still remembered the speech, and Clinton recited it without hesitation. The speech was the soliloquy where Macbeth tries to understand his own “vaulting ambition” (1.7.1-28), and Clinton remarked that this assignment was perhaps not the most promising way to begin a career in politics.

In the introduction to Circles on the Water, Marge Piercy explains that readers need to make literature part of their lives because it can define and even elevate our personal experience. She hopes that readers “will find poems that speak to and for them, will say them to each other and put them up on the bathroom wall and remember bits and pieces of them in stressful or quiet moments . . . to find ourselves spoken for in art gives dignity to our pain, our anger, our lust, our losses.”

Literature offers us a way of understanding our lives, ourselves, and others that no other discipline offers us. For me, at least, that answer to the question is more than satisfactory.
Ron Barron was an undergraduate at Minnesota State College intending to pursue a double major in math and chemistry—until he met Professor Roy Meyer.

“I was in the first composition course that Roy taught at Minnesota State Mankato,” Barron remembers. “He was very demanding, but he put a great deal of emphasis on what you were doing right. Roy always wondered what you accomplished by just bleeding all over someone’s paper.

“Roy was the one who convinced me I should give the English major a shot. And I never regretted it.”

Barron graduated with a BA in English Education in 1962 and went on to teach at Richfield High School for 38 years until his retirement in 2000. Along the way, he also completed a master’s in English at Minnesota State Mankato. Roy Meyer served as his thesis advisor.

“When Roy retired, I wrote him a letter telling him what a big difference he made in my life,” Barron says.

Barron served as president of the Minnesota Council of English from 1990 to 1991 and was local arrangements chair for the NCTE Convention in Minneapolis in 1995. As his teaching career progressed, he found himself with a deepening interest in Minnesota writers, which he traces back to another professor from his Mankato years, Robert Wright. That interest inspired Barron to write A Guide to Minnesota Writers (1987, revised and expanded in 1993), which won a Minnesota Book Award. He has in his home a collection of more than 1,300 volumes by Minnesota writers, at least half of them signed.

Barron called on his scholarship on regional writing in teaching a unit on Minnesota authors in his 11th grade English course.

“Students would often get really wrapped up in this reading,” Barron recalls. “One student found that her mother had gone to a school Jon Hassler had taught in.”

The mother thought she’d had a teacher who might have been a model for Hassler’s character, the staid and prim Agatha McGee, and wrote Hassler a letter asking if that were true. Hassler took the time to reply: the woman had been one model for McGee, he wrote. And thus students learned how novelists took inspiration from real life…and sometimes did not.

The Minnesota Historical Society has expressed interest in acquiring Barron’s papers related to his two Minnesota Writers volumes. The files hold interviews and correspondence with the writers included. The gem of that collection may be a letter from outdoor writer and Forest Service firefighter Peter Leschak, written when the author was battling the great Yellowstone fire of 1988. The pages of the letter, torn from a legal pad, are still redolent of wood smoke.

Why are there so many good writers in Minnesota?

“Because there are good small presses and grant agencies here,” Barron speculates. “But also because Minnesotans buy a lot of books. And they actually read them.”

Barron thought highly enough of his Mankato experience that he encouraged his daughter Kari to attend Minnesota State Mankato, where she also became an English major and served as editor of The Reporter. “I received a very strong professional background in Mankato,” Barron concludes. “I can’t think of any faculty members who weren’t quality instructors. They took their job seriously and were really interested in working with students. It was a fantastic experience.”

The lifelong educator has advice for those going into the profession.

“Expect it to be a difficult job,” Barron says. “Be prepared for the fact that there will be a range of accomplishment by your students. They may be reluctant at the time to tell you that you make a difference in their lives. But you do make a difference, and that’s what makes teaching worthwhile. I can’t think of any other profession where you can have such a profound effect on individuals.”
ALUMNI

Cindy Baasen (MA Literature, 2006) is an adjunct teacher for the English Department and teaches online for Rasmussen College and New Mexico State University.

Jessica Benjamin (MFA Creative Writing, 2008) is a grant writer at New Leaders for New Schools in New York City.

Kris Bigalk (MFA Creative Writing, 2009) received a Minnesota State Arts Board Artists Initiative Grant for 2010-2011. This year she has been Poet in Residence at the Banfill-Locke Center for the Arts in Fridley.

David Chapman (MA Technical Communication, 2008) proposed a chapter that has been accepted for inclusion in Designing Web-Based Applications for 21st Century Writing Classrooms, edited by Drs. George Pullman and Baotong Gu.

Jenny Yang Cropp (MFA Creative Writing, 2008) published a chapbook of poems, Hanging the Moon, with RockSaw Press.

Allison Crowley (BA Creative Writing, 2009) is serving in the Peace Corps in Zambia.

Ande Davis (MFA Creative Writing, 2009) has been accepted into the doctoral program in creative writing at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Ahmet Dursan (MA TESL, 2009) has been accepted into doctoral programs at Columbia University Teachers College, Purdue, and Iowa State.

Kaitlyn Flynn (BFA Creative Writing, 2008) is living in New York City where she is an assistant literary agent for the talent agency International Creative Management.

Richard Greelis (MFA Creative Writing 2003) has published his memoir CopBook with Beaver’s Pond Press.

Nick Healy (MFA Creative Writing, 2005) won the 2009 Tamarack Award sponsored by Minnesota Monthly. His winning short story was published in the November 2009 issue.

Catherine Hooper (MFA Creative Writing, MA Technical Communications, 2009) is now a grant writer at Catholic Charities of Kansas City–St. Joseph. She is also Director of Operations at The Writer’s Place Midwest Center for the Literary Arts.

Bernice Johnson (MA, Creative Writing, 1994) has spent the past several winters volunteering to teach English in Thailand to Shan refugees who have escaped Burma. Information on her nonprofit foundation is at www.ShanRefugeeSchools.org. Donations are tax deductible. Her new book is The Shan: Refugees without a Camp (Trinity Matrix Press).

Bronson Lemer (MFA Creative Writing, 2008) is finishing his second year teaching English in China for Fort Hays State University.

Veronika Maliborska (MA TESL, 2010) has been accepted into a doctoral program and awarded a teaching assistantship at Purdue.

Kelly Meyer (MA Literature, 2009) has been accepted into the doctoral program at Idaho State University with a teaching assistantship.

Trisha Speed Shaskan (MFA Creative Writing, 2007) won a $25,000 McKnight Fellowship for Writers, Loft Award in Children’s Literature/Older Children in spring 2009.

Verena Theile (MA Literature, 2001) is Assistant Professor of English at North Dakota State University, where she teaches early modern literature and cultural studies, world literature, and literary theory. She co-edited a collection of essays on Afro-Caribbean and African American Women’s Literature, Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).
News

Faculty

Candace Black published the book Casa Marina (RopeWalk Press) and was also published in Sugar House Review, Jelly Bucket, Midwest Mix, and Turtle Quarterly. Black gave readings at the Loft Literary Center and the Good Thunder Reading Series and was awarded the Thomas A. Wilhelmus Award by RopeWalk Press.

Jennifer Veltsos attended the 74th annual Association of Business Communication national conference in Norfolk, Va., and presented her paper titled “The Intersection of Visual Rhetoric and Business Communication: Corporate Visual Identity.” She also presented at the 13th annual Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference in Louisville, Ky.


Don Larsson participated in an HLC Team accreditation visit to a campus that was revising some selected graduate programs after many years, served as a consultant to the University of Central Arkansas for its reaccreditation self-study, and served on a mock team visit for reaccreditation at Bemidji State University. Larsson also presented at the Collaboration for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning conference in Bloomington, Minn. In addition to his duties as Faculty Association President here, he is also currently Vice President of the State IFO and was elected to the office of IFO President, to begin during summer 2010.

Bill Dyer directed the Valley Writing Workshop and edited the Minnesota English Journal for the sixth and final time, contributing an editorial and a piece on teaching Macbeth.

Gretchen Perbx presented “Developing Collaborative Authorship in Organizational Wikis: A New Role for Technical Communicators and a New Approach to Teaching Wikis” at the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) conference in Louisville, Ky. She also presented “Understanding End Users’ Experiences in System Implementations through the Concept of Identification” at the Rhetoric Society of America conference in Minneapolis.

Richard Robbins published two books of poems in 2009-2010, Radioactive City (Bellday Books), for which he won the Bellday Poetry Prize, and Other Americas (Blueroad Press). He gave readings in Minnesota and South Dakota. He continues to serve on the national board of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs.

Matthew Sewell’s articles “Singin’ in the Rain” and “An American in Paris” are forthcoming in Movies in American History: An Encyclopedia. He also gave a presentation at the Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture Conference (University of Louisville) called “‘Until They Got the Ballast Right’: Angels in America and the Affirmation of the Apocalypse.”


Dick Terrill published a collection of poems, Almost Dark, from the University of Tampa Press. He also has new poems appearing in Water~Stone Review, Black Clock, and Tampa Review. He will be teaching this summer for the Chautauqua Writers’ Center in New York, the University of Wisconsin Extension, and the Antioch MFA Program in Los Angeles.

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Kirsti Cole presented at two national conferences this year, attended a social justice research symposium, a week-long research intensive workshop on activist rhetoric and modernism and was invited to speak at the University of Minnesota’s Modern Rhetoric Symposium. She led the Feminist Workshop at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Professor Cole has also been selected to chair the 2011 International Conference on Feminisms and Rhetorics, which will be held at Minnesota State Mankato October 12-15, 2011.

Don Larsson participated in an HLC Team accreditation visit to a campus that was revising some selected graduate programs after many years, served as a consultant to the University of Central Arkansas for its reaccreditation self-study, and served on a mock team visit for reaccreditation at Bemidji State University. Larsson also presented at the Collaboration for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning conference in Bloomington, Minn. In addition to his duties as Faculty Association President here, he is also currently Vice President of the State IFO and was elected to the office of IFO President, to begin during summer 2010.

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The Department of English would also like to welcome two new faculty members—Jennifer Veltsos (Technical Communication) and Geoff Herbach (Creative Writing).
**New English Graduate Student Association**

English graduate students Paula Schevers and Dana Bruhn created a new Graduate Scholars in English Association (GSEA) as a way for graduate students to meet, exchange information and ideas, and assist in professional development opportunities. The association has already developed mini-workshops on submitting to conferences and giving conference presentations, and held a mock panel for graduate students to rehearse conference presentations. Membership in the organization is informal and open to all English department graduate students. To find out more about what the GSEA has to offer, check out their blog at http://mnsugsea.wordpress.com or email them at mnsu.gsea@gmail.com.
Ronald Gower was a professor in the department from 1965 to 1998. He was chair of the department from 1982 to 1988.