

14 November 1991

TO: LITT/LANG Faculty

FROM: Ken Tompkins

SUBJECT: An Approach to Approaches

I blithely said at a recent meeting that I would send around some ideas on solving our problems with Approaches. Had I gone home right then I could have written a few pages; some days later, however, I am less assured. Let me take a stab at it.

As I see it, we are all generally in agreement about the skills that both the *Introduction to Literature* (hereafter Lit) and *Approaches to Literature* (hereafter Aps) should be teaching. In case there is disagreement, let me review them. The Lit course should teach the three major genres; in addition, it should teach some historical continuity. A typical Lit course (like the typical anthology in it) looks at poetry, drama and short fiction. Generally, it starts at the beginning (Greeks when appropriate) and moves to modern times. These goals can still be met in a thematically organized course. We also agreed to include considerable writing and cross-cultural materials when we felt comfortable. I consider these to be rather modest and attainable goals.

One of the aspects of all this that we seem to disagree on is whether one has to "teach" the skills of how to analyze literature or whether those skills are somehow osmotically absorbed by doing it. Clearly I am in the former group -- that these skills have to be taught.

Now, ideally all of this would be taken care of in the Lit course and we then could move on to the real business of teaching literature. As you know, I have my doubts that this can/should be done in the Lit course. From my perspective it is too disparate and too full already to add more goals. I am open to contrary arguments.

Assuming all of this to be true, we need a second course (Aps) to handle the other skills that we want students to have. What are those skills? Not in rank order, they are: close reading, building literary hypotheses, marshalling evidence and finding things in the library. In addition to these skills, the program seems to want some exposure to modern critical methods.

Notice that in the Lit course the literature is the material of the course in that we want to teach the literature as a thing in itself. In the Aps course we want to teach techniques to be applied to literature; teaching the literature itself is, at present, secondary.

So far, then, we seem to have something like the following goals for students in these two courses:

to understand the fundamental forms that literary expressions have taken in western history.

to recognize the historical continuity of form, style, literary

qualities and ideas in western history

to understand the basic critical approaches to literature taken in the last century

to develop writing skills

to develop close reading skills

to develop argumentative skills

to develop research skills

What we need to do, I suggest, is to re-organize these goals into new courses as introductory experiences into the major.

Because I consider close reading as almost the fundamental literary skill, I think we should teach this in the Lit course. Because poetry is the easiest to demonstrate this skill with, I suggest that poetry be one of the genres we teach in Lit. The other genre that would be taught in Lit would be the drama. It is easier, for me at least, to develop a sense of historical continuity of forms and ideas in the drama than it is in either poetry or fiction. The writing assignments in this hypothetical Lit course would be generally literary -- on setting, characterization and plot structure. This emphasis would allow for discussion of terminologies and definitions.

The Aps course would consider everything that the Lit course did not cover. The subject matter of the Aps course would be fiction and the essay (note that we have not "officially" asked for coverage of the essay in a very long time -- maybe never). Treating the essay would also allow those of us so inclined to deal with contemporary issues. We would also cover critical ideas in this course.

The skills goals in Aps would build on the analytical skills introduced in the Lit course (i.e., close reading among others). There would be more writing about analyzing literature or applying a particular critical perspective than in the Lit course. There would also be library exercises on doing basic research.

This is in part a re-shuffling of the material of the two course; in part it is a shift in emphasis. One of the virtues of the re-design is that all of us could teach these courses whereas now only two of us teach the Aps course.

These should be taken as early in a student's career here as possible. Thus, they should be made prerequisites for the other sophomore courses. Transfer students would have to take them in their first year here.

Disadvantages? I'm sure there are some; I'm sure some of you will point them out. One would be that, where as now non-LITT majors get exposed to all three genres in the present Lit course, under this plan they would only get exposed to two. Solution? have special sections for LITT majors?

Let's continue this discussion. We might ask our consultant to address this specifically.