

Ghost-Writing Dickens' Final Novel

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An Application for the Newell Innovative Teaching Award

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In my Spring, 2011 section of Eng 337: The Novel, I devised a group project that, to my knowledge, has not been attempted in a literature classroom, a project that I had hoped would help bring together the disparate interests of writers and critics. Though the project is not yet complete, I am very happy with the way that it is unfolding. It seems likely to exceed my expectations.

A. The Drood Project

The prolific Victorian novelist, Charles Dickens, died unexpectedly while in the middle of his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The unfinished novel continues to fascinate readers. Several writers have attempted to finish the novel, and critics have weighed in with surmises about the identity of the perpetrator of the apparent murder in the story.

The task I set up for the class was to have the class, working in groups of five, finish the novel. I set the project up in stages, starting with group discussion, then set up the group assignments with a specific set of tasks and objectives to accomplish on their way to finishing the novel.

Preliminary Discussions:

As a class, we read the novel to its premature conclusion and discussed the possible ways in which the novel could be finished. The novel leaves off with the disappearance of Edwin Drood under suspicious circumstances. It appears as if he was murdered, and there are several characters with motives to do so. Our discussions included plot considerations, character motivation and development, and historical context. Often our discussions focused on the details that writers care about: what would motivate a character to act in a particular way? How might the evidence to solve the crime be revealed

plausibly within the story? What would the narrator know? Sometimes the conversation focused on thematic elements that literary critics pick up on: What contextual clues would explain Drood's reticence to marry Rosa? What thematic function does the existence of the opium den in the novel serve? What Victorian anxieties about empire are implied by the presence of two characters from Ceylon and another who speaks making his fortune in Egypt?

The Group Assignments:

Students formed their own groups, with roles of managing editor, editorial assistant, and writers being assigned within each group. I wanted both to find roles that students of different abilities and temperaments could play and to find work that students could do that would complement, rather than repeat, the work of their fellow group members. I also wanted to find work that could be evaluated both for individual and for collective achievements, since one of the frequent concerns of students in group projects is the fear that someone else's poor work might affect their grade. Groups were given several tasks to accomplish:

- Individual historical research assignments
- An initial working outline for how the story would conclude
- A rough draft of the completed story
- The final draft of the story
- An individual self-assessment/reflection at the conclusion of the project.

B. What is Distinctive About the Proposal:

What is perhaps the most innovative part of the assignment is that it fuses together the often disparate worlds of creative writing and literary criticism. Creative writing classes generally work toward completely original productions, so this attempt to complete a work left unfinished by a great author represents an unusual way of approaching the writing task. For one thing, it relieves some of the pressure of having to come up with an original plot for a short story and instead allows students to work out

imaginative options from a set of givens that a writer has left them with. Second, by working in groups devoted to a common task, students have the opportunity to write in a genuine community that is working together toward the same objective. My purpose is not to transform fiction writing from an individual to a group experience, but I am curious to see if the benefits we associate with group learning and experiential learning will also help students discover something fresh about creative writing.

From the perspective of literary criticism, this assignment gives students an experiential, insider's perspective on how a story is constructed. The predominant methods of literary pedagogy involve reading, lecture, discussion, and the production of critical essays. This project approaches the ends of literary criticism—to know and understand the work in its historical context—by actually producing the text that we are reading and discovering. The final reflective piece will also include some prompts that will help students to focus on some of the questions that literary criticism often raises.

C. My Assessment of the Success of the Project

Since the project is still in process, I must be tentative with these comments. I am pleased that students self-selected into groups that seem to be working well. In each group, students with leadership and organizational skills have volunteered for the editorial tasks, and these students have done a terrific job of keeping the groups on task. I am also impressed with the students' imaginative plot devices thus far. Students have drawn on their historical research to help them create plausible plot resolutions. Students have responded well to the feedback I have offered them. There's a level of excitement that I hear when groups take the first ten minutes of class to talk about what they are doing with the projects. Group members are very involved in discussions, and it seems as if they are also enjoying the task.

I am, of course, curious about the outcomes of this project. Will the completed stories be aesthetically satisfying as well as logically compelling? Will the self-reflective piece show the level of critical judgment that I'm hoping for? Will a group-written product prove to be successful or incoherent? Is the amount of work appropriate or too heavy for a three-hour course?

One reservation that I have had is how to assess the quality of the work. I worry about the fairness of giving all group members a shared grade. To alleviate this concern, I have included some individual assignments as well as some which will receive a group grade. I suspect that the grades for this project are likely to be fairly high, but I can live with that outcome.

Appendix A: Assignment Bulletin

English 337: The Novel The “Mystery of Edwin Drood” Project

- 3/7 Explain project; preliminary sign ups
- 3/9 Exam on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*
- 3/11 Groups fully formed and roles assigned
Research objectives assigned (each group member)
- 3/14 Finish reading E.D. (In-class work: begin task of plotting out the remainder of the story)
- 3/16 continue in-class work of plotting out the remainder of the story
- 3/18 Turn in research
Turn in outline
- 3/21 – 3/25 Spring Break**
- M 4/18 first draft due
- April 29 class dedicated to Drood Project
- May 2 class dedicated to Drood Project (Scholarship Symposium is 5/3)

Group Roles:

Researchers (everyone)
Managing Editor (one person—the project manager)
Editorial Assistant (one person)
Writers (3 members, each one charged with writing one chapter)

The managing editor and editorial assistant will do more of their work late in the process, but they can and should be involved in some of the initial drafting, too. One option could be to have these two members co-write a shorter chapter—maybe the denouement.

Individual Assignments:

The Research Assignment (20 points):

Short (2-3 page) investigations into some aspect of Victorian history or culture.
Each group member writes one up

Final Reflective Assignment (50 points):

This will take the place of the second critical essay on the syllabus
Everyone will write one of these; further details will be forthcoming as the project unfolds

Personal Log of Work Done (20 points):

Keep rough track of the time you are putting into this project. This will be a rough approximation of your time investment, and it’s primarily to ensure that everyone is contributing

Group Work:

Outline of the Chapters (25 points)

Rough Draft of the Concluding Chapters (25 points)—feedback on this draft

Revised Draft (60 points)