

Who and What To Include:  
Studies in the Pedagogy of the Literature Survey

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The survey course is a relatively distinctive feature of curricula in English (they're also a mainstay of History). Unlike many disciplines' 101 courses, a survey does not cover the complete subject matter that falls within the discipline's scope, nor is it an exhaustive introduction to skills and methods. It thus presents distinctive challenges and opportunities. Tackling one large portion of historically-organized disciplinary knowledge, a given literature survey cannot be taught by just anyone in an English department (an Americanist cannot competently teach a British literature survey), yet it also exceeds any one person's expertise (no one specializes in all of British literature after 1700). To teach one is always to be both returning to the basics and stretching oneself. For students, similarly, the scope of one survey can be narrow enough to offer a first taste of mastery yet broad enough to reveal multiple avenues of potential upper-level study. Because surveys are designed to track change over time, they can tell stories—of how the United States approached the Civil War, for instance, or how Britain became “modern”—and responsible professors, careful not to impose a pat narrative, can engage students in the meaning-making enterprises of literary history.

While the intellectual benefits surveys can confer are significant, there are numerous challenges students face in achieving them, ranging from practical matters of access—surveys are most often taught using anthologies that are among the most expensive titles on the humanities textbook market—to larger problems of diversity and privilege in the academy. It so happens that the curricular gateway for undergraduates is also, for members of the profession, the site of some of our most significant debates over disciplinary knowledge. Battles throughout the past forty years to diversify the literary canon have been fought nowhere more fiercely than on the field of survey courses, and an author's or text's inclusion on survey syllabi is one of the better proxies we have for canonical status.<sup>1</sup> As in many disciplines' introductory courses, the imperative of “coverage” can seem like a zero-sum game—an especially high-stakes one when the question appears to be, say, whether Mark Twain must be cut to make room for Toni Morrison.

When students enroll in a literature survey, they are encountering what appears to be a stable and authoritative body of knowledge. How, or whether, they see themselves reflected therein can

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<sup>1</sup> A recent forum on canonicity in a major journal of American literary studies took as its springboard “A Survey of Survey Courses”—a contributor's statistical analysis of the representation of authors on 120 syllabi from surveys around the country. See Maurice S. Lee, et al., “Forum: The End of the End of the Canon?” in *J19: the Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 4.1 (Spring 2016): 125-179.

powerfully affect their openness to learning it. The pedagogy of survey courses is therefore a peculiarly complicated matter. These are often students' first, and possibly their only, courses in the humanities. From the ostensibly neutral standpoint of learning science as well as from the politically charged standpoint of canons' diversity and representativeness, surveys have a lot of opportunities to go wrong. As the editors of a recent book on survey pedagogy put it, "we see increasingly from the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education that courses which operate primarily on a coverage model—skating over the surface of large bodies of knowledge—don't produce much long-term learning in students."<sup>2</sup> We believe that literature surveys, despite indeed having to "cover" a lot of material, can be, for many of the reasons cited above, effective and even exciting venues for student learning. But they must be pedagogically careful, creative, and inclusive.

Our group consists of members of the English department who recently have taught, or soon will be teaching, one of our six survey courses, which comprise three two-semester sequences: Introduction to British Literature (English 110 and 111); Introduction to American Literature (English 104 and 105); and Introduction to African American Literature (English 116 and 117). We propose to devote the 2018-19 year to a methodical inquiry into our survey pedagogy, both as individual colleagues and as, together, the staff of a pillar of our department's curriculum. Our plans are, first, to deepen our theoretical understanding of the survey by recovering the history of our own local curriculum through research in the College Archives (possibly employing a student); and by meeting to read and discuss the recently published *Teaching the Literature Survey Course: New Strategies for College Faculty*, ed. Gwynn Dujardin, James M. Lang, and John A. Staunton (West Virginia Univ. Press, 2018). Second, and most important, we will form a pedagogical collaborative meeting to discuss our existing practices; brainstorming innovations we're interested in making; and formulating solutions to problems we have experienced.

One focus will be issues of equity and accessibility in course materials and delivery. Long wedded to anthologies, survey courses now must contend with major changes in media and publishing, including students' use of digital devices and the rise of pay-walled "learning materials" provided by publishing conglomerates. Our group includes professors who currently teach from an anthology and who do not, as well as a few members (Bergren and Hager) who intend to make a switch next year and one member (Wyss) who is an anthology editor. Together we intend to systematically evaluate the options for balancing pedagogical priorities with affordability for students.

Our largest goal, however, is to advance our own thinking about ways to balance the survey's foundational quality (in our discipline and in our major) with our commitment to an inclusive pedagogy—in other words, how best to exploit the *discipline* of a canon for developing students' habits of mind while teaching students how to contest and remake such canons according to their own agendas. We plan to assemble a portfolio of assignments, lesson plans, and syllabus features that exemplify such approaches. Our aim is that, to an even greater extent than they already do, our department's survey courses will enroll large and diverse groups of Trinity students in their first years at the college and demonstrate to them the power of literary studies to bridge divides and foster human understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Jaschik, "Teaching the Literature Survey Course," *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 January 2018 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/01/03/co-editors-discuss-new-book-teaching-literature-survey-course>).