Exploring fiction and poetry through indexing

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An account of how collaborative indexing may be used in the study of literature, as a way of encouraging students to take a fresh approach to the texts they are analyzing. Mainly concentrating on the compilation of indexes to the poems of Emily Dickinson, the article includes comments from the students themselves and the author's assessment of the usefulness of the approach as a teaching tool.

A few years ago, inspired by the usefulness and audacity of online indexes by Suzanne Morine (for *The catcher in the rye*) and Lisa Mirabile (for *The English patient*), I began to think about the process of indexing works of fiction. Since then, I have indexed two short novels (John Gardner's *Grendel* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The great Gatsby*) and have guided an Advanced Placement literature class through the indexing of Tim O'Brien's *The things they carried*.[1] This last project had grown from my desire to explore the broader possibilities of indexing as a teaching tool.

The potential of indexing as a class project had been tempting me ever since the *Grendel* job. I knew how that experience had altered and enriched my reading of Gardner's work. The process required a special kind of close reading – one that could not rest on merely superficial understandings but demanded a recursive flow, the constant back and forth of careful reading and re-reading. I also recognized that, for all the apparent drudgery, it was an evocative and quirky process. What I indexed depended on what I saw and understood. Could it succeed as a group process?

Indexing *The things they carried*, Tim O'Brien's fiction of the Vietnam War, proved to be a good collaborative venture for the right group of students – which I was lucky to have. These were bright, highly motivated students, eager to take up an unusual challenge. They organized themselves into five committees for characters, culture, language, themes and things. Their work was then collated by a central committee. Within a few weeks of the end of the school year, I was able to edit and prepare the complete index for the internet. This involved creating hypertext links – both internally at the standard cross-reference nodes and externally to other relevant websites found by students. The more elaborate array of annotations that I was able to use in the *Grendel* index – and had envisioned for *The things they carried* – had to be set aside due to time constraints.

The Advanced Placement students seemed generally pleased with both their working process and the outcome. The indexing had required them to take a closer look at a number of textual features that we had not previously considered. Questions were raised about the number of game references, relating to a 'war as game' metaphor. The extensive listing at 'body parts, elements' reminded us that the most basic design of war is to injure or destroy the human body.

Indexing the poems of Emily Dickinson

This project with *The things they carried* showed me that collaborative indexing could work, and that success pushed me to consider other classroom uses for indexing. What if the generally acknowledged primary function of an index (to help a reader locate information quickly) were set aside? Could not the act of indexing serve other ends? And so, this past school year, I developed an indexing project for my sophomore (grade 10) classes that would involve poems by Emily Dickinson.

Before learning of the indexing assignment, each group assembled an anthology of about 20 poems. Students tended to choose works that were either very brief or easily understood on a first reading. The groups were then told to construct an index to the themes, objects and events of these poems. I provided a sample index, but each group had to determine its own working process.

In the midst of the project, I wrote in my online journal:

> I've been trying to think of an index as a different kind of tool . . . an alternate form of expression . . . that might be used and useful in ways that indexes traditionally have not been used and useful. What if an index were not merely a quick locator? What if it were a process, a method . . . a harvest of understandings . . . something one might examine to see how closely, carefully, accurately a reader has read and understood . . . because an indexer is really just a reader . . . who is noting and listing, grouping and connecting the important things . . .
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> What are the important things in this fistful of poems by Emily Dickinson? This should be an expansive process rather than a reductive one. We are not trying to boil the poems down to one homogeneous gray goo called 'the theme' or 'the moral' or 'the lesson' or 'the meaning.' The indexing of poems (from this perspective) should not be standard but idiosyncratic.

This project differed from the novel indexing in some important ways. Since time was a factor, students worked with a very limited number of poems of their own choosing. This, in turn, did not allow me to 'sell' the assignment to the students (as I had to the A. P. class) on the grounds that this was valuable 'real-world' work that other people would find useful. Their group index of these particular poems could be of no practical use to anyone. And so I had to convince students that while the final product was not practical, the process of production might be very beneficial. They would have to read the poems closely to identify key terms and themes, and they would have to organize themselves effectively within their group to produce a successful outcome. I

introduced the work by calling it an experiment, something I'd been wanting to try for a long time. 'No other students in the world are doing what we are going to do,' I said. And I told them that I didn't know how it was going to work out but that, if they gave it their best effort, we were all sure to learn something valuable.

Student reactions

How did it go? One student was impressed by the complexity of the task.

> I thought that indexing Emily Dickinson's poems was difficult. There are many different ways to interpret her poems and that would make a difference on what we thought was an important object or theme. If we were the ones making the index, then it is more of our ideas. When we worked in the group we got more ideas on what to index, but there are still things that we would have missed. There would be something that we did not think to put in the index that someone else would look under, and then not find it. When doing the indexing, you have to try and view the poem from other peoples perspective which I think is difficult.

Not trusting in the accuracy or validity of their own reading, some students stepped gingerly toward the work, while others fended off potential failure with a negative attitude from the start – or simply did not see the point.

> why must we go through the drugery of yet another meaningless project that simply is there to add to the already overloaded amount of meaningless work we must complete? there's no point at all to this indexing. all we're doing is just writing down things in a meaningless catogorization. there's no point to it. how will this help us to aspire to our goals in life? [*sic*]

Comments such as this provoked me to no end of soul searching. Every day held the possibility that students would rise up and simply refuse to continue the work. One student called the project 'busy work' and reflected the judgment of many others by adding: 'I don't really find it is increasing my understanding of E. D.' And yet, to their credit and my relief, they carried on.

From start to finish, the project took about two weeks. During this period I would allow much (but not all) class time to be used for group work. From a desire to communicate with group members while away from school and over weekends, some asked if they could post their work-in-progress on the class internet message board, which they did.

The indexes

Here is a brief sample from one index, excluding the poem numbers:

Solitude
   of self
   of soul (*see also* Soul)
Soul
   as aware of an afterlife
   as being exclusive (*see also* Solitude, Personification)

   being perched
   being played by God (*see also* Music, God, Epiphany)
   drinking exhilaration (*see also* Joy)
   forging of
   liberty of (*see also* Liberty)
Storm imagery
   gale
   lightning
   thunder
Success
   counted
   in circuit
Summer
   a blessing
   as intoxicating (*see also* Intoxication)
Sun
   affordability of
   happenings before sunrise (*see* Dew)
   in summer (*see also* Summer)

I did not worry too much that some aspects of the form were not standard. This group (as most) managed to be consistent in form, while not adhering strictly to the form I had shown them. It can be seen that indexing requires students to recognize, organize and interrelate key words and essential themes from the poems. The subentries and cross-references given here show that these students understood both the function of an index and (more rather than less of) the content of the poems.

> As our index grows, i am starting to see how this helps you recognize patterns and similarities in Dickinson's writings. Also, like others, I feel a bit of accomplishment on completing this difficult task of going through poem after poem.

Evaluation

What are the outcomes of this business? I doubt that I will repeat the exercise in the same form. It took too much time, which might have been used to explore Dickinson's poems in a more student-friendly manner. I pushed student goodwill to the limit with this project. On the whole, they found it difficult, tedious and pointless. And yet, to look at the final products and read many (but not most) student comments, the project was not an unqualified disaster. It is clear to me that most students did read and think more carefully about some Dickinson poems, and they were able to work together to organize and assemble their findings into that exotic literary sub-genre known as The Index.

Note

1. Links to these online indexes are available through `http://www.brtom.org/ind.html`.

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