

Draft: Not for Publication

Teaching the Classroom 3

Interdisciplinarity in Teaching Literature and the Humanities

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PPT.1 TITLE

Borges' Blue Tigers in the Lit Classroom

Good morning, all. Maayong buntag natong tanan.

After dodging the invitation to deliver the keynote paper in the past two teaching lit conferences, Dr. John Iremil Teodoro finally lured me with this year's theme, which had informed my teaching praxis in De La Salle University: *Interdisciplinarity in Teaching Literature and the Humanities*. I am glad to note that in the main, this conference offers parallel sessions on courses under the "Literature Across the Professions" track of the Commission on Higher Education's new guidelines on the AB Literature Program. Dr. Teodoro also asked that I highlight in this presentation the work I've done so far in Literature & Medicine, and Literature & Ecology.

The first thing I'd like to say then is that we are all very lucky to have come to this conference on teaching, which will try to show the many ways we can catch a glimpse of the magical blue tigers in the lit classroom, which Jorge Luis Borges had written about, and might now be lurking in the shadows of the labyrinthine library of human knowledge, or written in the book of sands. I'd even say that you're luckier than I was in 1984, when I began as a lit teacher in this university under Dr. Isagani R. Cruz, who was then serving as Department of English Language and Literature chairperson. It was the time where on one hand, linguistics scholar and DLSU President Brother Andrew

Gonzalez steered the English language teachers to teach E.S.P. or “English for Special Purposes,” while on the other, Dr. Cruz challenged literature teachers to think of interdisciplinary ways we could teach lit courses specifically designed for students who would become the future engineers, scientists, social scientists, business and industry leaders of the country.

When Dr. Cruz assigned me to the “Literature and Technology” course with two sections composed of Engineering and Science students, he encouraged me to bring to the fore my old love for Physics, Mathematics, Music, and Philosophy, among other ways of preparing to teach the course. Thus, I set out to read up and prepare myself for the exploration of possible learning spaces, clearings which could be created with my students, where the language of literary thinking could dialogue with the language of technological and scientific thinking. I sensed that the boon of the dialogic process would be the discovery of new spaces of understanding a literary work and valuing literature.

I literally felt that while my chairperson was throwing me out into a deep uncharted *mar incognita*, I was also being given the basics, not only on how to survive teaching the course, but also on how to enjoy the marathon swim with young men and women who were more adept than I was in their own disciplinal waters in technology and the sciences. What I remember about that foundational teaching experience were the selections my students and I enjoyed, among these the story “*The Seventh Voyage*” by Polish medical doctor Stanislaw Lem, which explored the philosophical problem of

time and the nature of human intelligence and memory through the speculative treatment of space and space technology; and British poet Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home," with its use of a defamiliarizing eye to see anew many of the things we earthlings have become blind to. The syllabus I designed also included novels for the final term paper namely, Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World*, on genetic manipulation in a totalitarian state, and Ray Bradbury's paean to human memory in *Fahrenheit 451* where all books were summarily burned, and only the texts that a small group of dissidents loved and clandestinely learned by heart survived the torch. Needless to say, I was hooked from then on with the interdisciplinarity of teaching literature.

A cursory review of the literature courses I prepared myself to teach through research on and collaborative thinking with other disciplines include the mid-90s team-taught undergraduate political science majors' course called "Literature and Politics," upon the request of Dr. Socorro Reyes, then chair of the Political Science Department. Another was a literature major's elective course called "Ekphrasis: Poetry and the Visual Arts" in 2006. A reprise of this course was designed a year later as a master of fine arts elective course in creative writing.

The practice of interdisciplinary teaching always begins with research that leads to the production of new knowledge or new creative work. In my own research & creative work, this interdisciplinarity is most perceptible in book-length biographies, namely *A Life Shaped by Music: Andrea O. Veneracion and the Philippine Madrigal*

Singers (1999), which enabled me to revisit and revel in the tradition of renaissance music and its grafting onto the field of Philippine choral music, and *Ani: The Life and Art of Hermogena Borja Lungay, Boholano Artist* (2006), which led me into the history of the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts as well as the gender politics in art making and the dominance of the Manila-centric art market. I have also done interdisciplinary research for my professorial chair lectures: “*Articulations of the Sacred in Three Boholano Poets*,” happily brought me in dialogue with the field of cultural anthropology; “*The Ludic Pleasures of Eating Words*,” with the constructs of feminine pleasure and the female body in popular culture, particularly in women’s magazines; and “*The Art of Poetry and Healing*,” which replicated the “art as transformative absorption” framework of poet Denise Levertov’s talking to (and with) medical doctors.

The so-called “interdisciplinary turn” became an academic buzz word in the mid 80s together with “feminist studies” and “cultural studies” among others. This turn changed our ways of apprehending the world or our thinking about it. While the term “interdisciplinary” presupposes the way universities have categorized human learning into strict disciplinal boundaries, the “interdisciplinary turn” opened up such specialized fields into new ways of thinking about the multiple, complex textual, intertextual and contextual rhizomic connections in the physical world and the world of ideas, in the pursuit of understanding something that is bigger than one discipline alone could explain. In the mid-90s for instance, teaching the undergraduate elective course “Women in Literature,” demanded interdisciplinary critical approaches stemming from

the “linguistic turn” in the humanities wrought by thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and the poststructuralist feminisms of Trinh Minh Ha, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Gayatri Spivak, and Julia Kristeva, among others. In the classroom, texts and its multi-layered inter texts and contexts had to be accounted for in the critical reading and material production of texts and other texts.

PPT. 2 TEXT In the second decade of the 21st century, William Condee’s “*The Interdisciplinary Turn in the Arts and Humanities*” (<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1171320>) published in 2016 in *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies* (24:12-29) says that: “...the arts and humanities are in the midst of an interdisciplinary turn. This turn is a reaction to two problems: the transformation of universities in the twenty-first century and the challenges posed by postmodernism. The interdisciplinary turn...is toward critical thinking in teaching and learning and toward critical interdisciplinarity in humanistic inquiry. Exposing the problems and highlighting the opportunities can help scholars, artists, and educators ***consciously apply these approaches and intentionally plan for interdisciplinarity, with the goals of fostering student learning and advancing scholarship.*** By understanding what is happening in this turn, scholars and educators in the arts and humanities can better lead interdisciplinarity into the future.” (Bold italics, mine)

And as we like to say it in DLSU: that future is now. Interdisciplinarity has had more than 30 years of exploration and prototypical application in literary and

humanities research and teaching. Later in this conference, resource sharers will bring the fruits of their initial interdisciplinary work to the table to offer methods and modules, approaches and methodologies that have been found effective in teaching the lit classroom. This will allow all of us to take a look into the foreseeable future in a university or college where the practice of interdisciplinarity will render the concept of disciplinary boundaries obsolete. In such an academic environment, teaching literature would truly be a great adventure of the mind. Interdisciplinarity would not be pursued as an academic strategy of territorializing other fields, but it would become a productive intellectual collaboration for the production of new knowledge in ways perhaps never tried or imagined before.

And there are nascent signs of this way of thinking in the lit classroom, like the marine literature course taught by Dr. Alice Tan-Gonzalez in the UP Visayas Iloilo and Miag-ao campuses designed for students in the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. Nurturing this way of thinking is very important to all of us in Literature; Borges himself posited that all forms of human knowledge are *ficciones*, stories and their almost-infinite variations of how we self-reflexively imagine and ask ourselves who we are, why we are here, and how we ought to live. In this life-learning endeavor, there is no unbreachable divide between the disciplines, since all the humanities and sciences equally offer us stories that illumine our way through these basic questions, and deepen, enrich and expand our lives by constantly asking them of ourselves and other life-forms on this planet, in this multiverse.

PPT.3 SUBTITLE

Pathography and Narrative Medicine

Let me now focus more sharply on pathography and narrative medicine. My research into the junctures of Literature and Medicine—elsewhere known as the Medical Humanities Program—began in 2008 for a professorial chair lecture given in response to a felt need to return to the Arts and the Humanities, expressed by doctors of the Makati Medical Hospital who are members of the Philippine Medical Association. It brought home my interest in the possibilities of teaching how to read and write narratives and other forms of literature on the human experience of illnesses of the body wrought by diseases, written by doctors as well as by patients, their family members, and other caregivers. My most recent readings continue to feed my intellectual curiosity on pathography's main proponent in the professional practice of narrative medicine.

The postmodern issue of agency, of power and choice with regards to the treatment of one's physical body, is what makes me believe that teaching pathography is at the cutting edge of the 21st century. This, and the fact that everyone— not just the senior citizens among us— is interested in the discourse of physical illness, its treatment by modern medicine, and the possible recovery, or death of the sick person. Those who had been seriously ill and had paid intense attention to the changes in one's body and one's drastically changed life routine during illness would have developed a different set of eyes for reading or writing a story on that particular health crises and its resolution. Moreover, through pathography, the reader's or the writer's deeper insights into life and death, illness and wellness, would perhaps more strongly suggest not a binary tension

between these terms of being, but a dynamic yin-yang dance that can be brought to light for others to reflect upon.

In such a reading and writing course, I imagine a lit teacher would study with her students not only the Hippocratic Code that all modern medical doctors are sworn to follow in the alleviation of pain and the cure of patients, but also the writings of contemporary Filipino doctors who have critically examined their medical practice and reflected on the actual delivery of medical services, even as professional practices and protocols have changed through time in a steadily corporatized hospital environment. Other items in the must-study list would be the stories of Filipino authors like Susan S. Lara in *Letting Go*, which are among the earliest examples of pathography in Philippine short fiction, and the creative nonfiction narratives of Filipino doctors in the anthology edited by Dr. Joti A. Tabula called *From the Eyes of a Healer*. These narratives or medical anecdotes were written by Filipino doctors and medical interns while serving the Philippine General Hospital, the teaching hospital of the University of the Philippines. These stories could be critically read for their literary merits as part of the Philippine tradition of the literature of witness and protest, as all of the doctors see, while caring for their indigent patients, the socio-economic structures that underpin the poverty of the people they attend to, who patiently and courageously suffer their medical ailments and their critical and constant lack of resources. Corollary to reading these stories, students could read for themselves the text of RA#11223 or the UHC, the universal health care law of the country, which was signed last February 20, 2019, to

critique the gaps in its purported comprehensive coverage, and even help policy makers who are crafting the law's implementing rules and regulations.

I imagine the design of such a course would also include in its reading list such excellent pathographies like *When Breath Becomes Air*, a meditative reflection and blow by blow account by neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi as he went through his battle with cancer; *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by naturalist Terry Tempest Williams on the history of nuclear bomb testing and the ecology of the Salt Lakes in Utah, vis a vis the history of breast cancer among the females in her family; *The Father* by Sharon Olds, who wrote poems on her father's battle with cancer up to his death; *Paula* by Isabel Allende about the terminal illness & death of her daughter; *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a memoir by Joan Didion on the death of her husband; *Cutting for Stone*, a novel by Abraham Verghese, and the creative nonfiction essays and narratives of neurologist Oliver Sacks, Richard Selzser, Atul Gawande, and many other doctors, patients, and caregivers who write.

Lit teachers accessing the pedagogy of pathography for art and humanities students to teach them how to read and write about physical illness is perhaps normative, but it is radically inspiring to hear of lit teachers teaching medical students, interns and doctors how to read literature in order to hear the stories of pain from their patients. There are medical doctors themselves accessing & teaching critical reading strategies in literature to medical students and health care professionals. Among them is Dr. Ruth Charon, who is at the forefront of narrative medicine. She is the quintessential

interdisciplinary teacher of doctors & medical professionals. She says in her fascinating book, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*:

“I have developed a drill of sorts for reading texts in which the reader examines five aspects of the narrative text—frame, form, time, plot, and desire—which I would like to share with other teachers of literature to health care professionals. It is not, of course, a coincidence that some of these aspects of the narrative text echo what I called the narrative features of medicine—temporality, singularity, causality/ contingency, intersubjectivity, and ethicality. The reading drill mobilizes consideration of these features during the examination of an individual narrative text, crystallizing the abstract ideas...through the reader’s experience of each particular text. In the same way in which a medical student is trained to look at film quality, bones, mediastinum, heart, and lungs, readers can be reminded to consider explicitly each of these five textual aspects. When this drill becomes reflexive, the reader will not overlook important elements of the narrative.”

In her book’s Part III titled “Developing Narrative Competence,” she posits that medical students and practicing doctors can benefit from learning how to close-read like literature students and teachers. On this important skill for doctors, she says:

“Close reading’ is the kind of reading taught in graduate programs in literature in which the reader, as a matter of habit, pays attention not only to the words and the plot but to all aspects of the literary apparatus of a text. A phrase introduced by the New

Critics in the 1940s, close reading began its career as a brash response to earlier forms of literary scholarship dominated by bibliographic or biographical interests. The New Critics (including, for example, I. A. Richards, William Empson, T. S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, and Kenneth Burke) espoused close attention to the text itself and all the ambiguity, irony, paradox, and “tone” contained within the words themselves.

PPT. 4 Text. Criticism since then has taken many turns away from the strong commitment to the text itself to frame those texts historically, politically, semiotically, economically, in terms of gender or sexuality or colonial status, ***and yet subsequent critics cannot but ground their critique in their own close readings of texts.***” (Bold italics, mine)

It is my hope that in the prototype Pathography course I will be facilitating this first term of AY 2019-2020, I will have students who are just as passionately curious as I am about how reading theoretical discourses on physical suffering—say from cognitive scientist Elaine Scarry work on *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of a World*, and public intellectual Susan Sontag discourse on *Illness as Metaphor and AIDs and its Metaphors*—and writing about physical illness can sharpen our will to live with a deeper understanding of our mortal nature, and strengthen our will to practice compassion for others who are just as finite as we are.

PPT. 5 SUBTITLE

Literature in the Anthropocene

Let me now shift focus on Literature and Ecology. In the last two years of my directorship of the Iyas Lasalle National Writers’ Workshop from 2017-2018, the

Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center and the University of St. La Salle, Bacolod, aligned with De La Salle Philippines' advocacy for the conservation of the environment by proactively giving 12-15 writing fellowships to young writers who have awakened to the urgencies of the Anthropocene in the postmodern world, and are conscious that the planet's deteriorating life systems are hurtling fast into annihilation. The advocacy was sparked by the Institute of Climate and Sustainable Cities (ICSC) which had published in 2016 the first literary anthology on Climate Change entitled *Agam: Filipino Narratives of Uncertainty in Climate Change*. This interdisciplinary conversation between creative writers and earth and environmental scientists continues to engage me until now, and among the new interdisciplinary courses I would want to prepare for to teach is "Literature in the Anthropocene."

The course design would begin with the classic creative nonfiction work of Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, which had revolutionized our consciousness of the environment and given us the term "ecology." And the course would end with the recent speculative historical novel called *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* by scientists Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway about the 6th extinction. Midway through the term would be the study of Martin Prechtel's work, *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic: The Parallel Lives of People as Seeds: Keeping the Seeds Alive* and the works of Guatemalan K'iche Maya poet Humberto Ak'abal. In this triangulated design, the historical, the mythical, and the speculative, would offer thematic strands with which human and more-than-human narratives of life on planet earth can be re-imagined and creatively restored.

A rich source of materials for students to study would be the book, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017) edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, which explores the ghosts and monsters of the anthropocene. The anthology involves the work of many intellectuals in the humanities, the arts, and the sciences.

PPT. 6 MUSIC SCORE. Indicative of this interdisciplinary mix is the way the book begins the ghosts portion with John Cage's composition called *Fontana Mix* in 1958 where, instead of using a sequence of notes, Cage offers musicians "a finite system of elements that can be layered into infinite compositions." The anthology editors use it as a metaphorical evocation of the indeterminacy of the postmodern age. They note that "hand-drawn on sheets of paper and clear acetate, Cage's wandering curved lines, randomly placed dots, rectangular grid, and single straight line all intersect when layered, becoming musical scores of indeterminacy." The editors in their introduction point to the need for interdisciplinary collaboration for the work we urgently need to do:

"We do not think the work is simple. It requires moving beyond the disciplinary prejudices into which each scholar is trained, to instead take a generous view of what varied knowledge practices might offer. In this spirit, we begin with a literary essay that offers a fine description necessary to pay attention to ruins, but later move on to a scientific report on the very long history of human-caused extinctions and an anthropological guide on how to read landscape history in the shapes of trees. These and much more open up the curiosity about life on earth that we will need, to limit the

destruction we call Anthropocene and protect the Holocene entanglements that we need to survive.”

In this conference, I look forward to learning with you more about these “musical scores of indeterminacy” when we will sit in the master classes and the plenary sessions, the last of which is the roundtable discussion on “Literature and the Industry.” In the roundtable forum we will hear resource sharers Red Constantino of the Institute of Climate and Sustainable Cities, poet-musician-filmmaker Ida del Mundo, and ecocritical humanities Ph.D. candidate Rina “Rain” Garcia Chua talk about “Literature and the Industry.” Rina Chua finished her MFA degree in DLSU focusing on environmental writing, and is now a doctoral student in the University of British Columbia, doing her dissertation under Greg Garrard, one of the leading ecocritics of North America. As many of you may recall, Rain Garcia Chua was the editor of the first Philippine eco-poetry anthology called *Sustaining the Archipelago* (2017), which upped the ante of ecocritical reading and writing from the familiar pastoral countryside representations to the postmodern contested land and seascapes of the Philippine archipelago.

When we made the crucial decision in 2017 for the Iyas La Salle National Writers’ Workshop to advocate for writing the environment, I turned to Rain for help in preparing to read critically the poems, stories, and plays that would be submitted to the workshop. Among the Ecocriticism books she generously shared with me and the teaching panel of writers, in order to buffer our research and knowledge horizon were: Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*; Elizabeth Ammons’s *How*

Literature Will Save the Planet; Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*; Graham Huggan and Hellen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Criticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*; Bruno Latour's *Politics and Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*; Ursula K. Heise's *Sense of Place, and Sense of Planet*; Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* and *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*; Timothy Clark's *Ecology on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*; Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*; and Thomas Hallock, et al's *Early Modern Ecostudies: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare*.

It was a lot of reading for the workshop teaching panel good for two years, aside from the manuscripts of the 15 fellows each year, but none of us complained. In fact, we all welcomed the chance of keeping ourselves abreast with the discourse of the times, in order for us to be able to actively participate in the evolving conversation, not so much on how to save the planet, but on how to think of human and more-than-human survival in a home that human greed had fouled up so fast in historically unprecedented speed, almost to the point of no return.

PPT. 7 SUBTITLE

Interdisciplinarity in the 21st Century

In sum, what I am excited about when we look into the practice of interdisciplinarity in teaching Literature is primarily the prospect of showing to ourselves and our students that whatever boundaries we may have mistakenly set up in learning how to read a literary piece or how to produce one, are not absolute in opacity,

but have always been porous and permeable. Perhaps, when we successfully breach these walls for ourselves through interdisciplinary research and collaborative teaching and learning, we may finally glimpse the tyger and look into its brightly burning eye.

Ah, now we remember William Blake!

PPT. 8 BLAKE'S TEXT. Do you know that he is considered the first interdisciplinary visual artist who showed us “The Tyger.” I am sure many of us have taught Blake’s poem. However, who among us have inspired our students how to sing “Tyger, tyger, burning bright/ in the forests of the night/what immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” without teaching them also how to read the text of the artist’s visual language? If we had never even thought of it before, and just stuck with teaching the literary text believing it is enough, then I believe the visual culture of the 21st century would have already lost us. We have to remember that our students in the 21st century are visual culture adepts— as most of them are in this postmodern age— and they would have already outdistanced us in navigating their world.

On the flip side of this losing proposition, imagine what it would be like if your interdisciplinary research and knowledge would enable you to propose vis-a-vis the poem a question that an evolutionary scientist could raise in terms of specie loss and survival, to inspire your students to discuss their insights on the urgencies of the series of thirteen questions in Blake’s poem, written in the late Romantic age when the Industrial Revolution of the British Empire already had a headway of half a century and

had colonized many parts of the world, it called itself “the empire where the sun never sets”!

Allow me to call to mind the poem and its interrogative ironic tone:

PPT. 9 VISUAL TEXT OF POEM

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Our research into the reality that by the end of the 21st century, earth would have lost 50% of its natural species would make the conversation in the classroom sober and timely. I am sure we can imagine how anachronistic it would be to continue teaching the beauty and fearful symmetry of the tyger as an artistic representation of what

Chesterton and Borges calls the “terrible elegance” of the natural world, as if it were a concealment of the historical decimation and ghosting of animal species by humans? Bengali novelist Amitav Ghosh calls the postmodern era of the Anthropocene as the time of *The Great Derangement*, where modes of art and literature are still drawn to conceal rather than make people see the inconvenient truth of the precarity of human and more-than-human survival. It would be the interdisciplinary lit teacher who would be a counterforce against the concealments and deceptions of all kinds of master narratives that tend to mislead human perception and sequester into poor little warrens of the mind our capacity to break boundaries and understand our intimate relationships with our world better.

Let us all go forth, then, to our lit classrooms and constantly remind ourselves of the open fields of learning outside of walls or boundaries. And let us always assert that freedom to explore the complex, multi-layered fields of learning in our lit courses, inspiring our students to explore even deeper and farther as they grow into independent readers and lovers of literature.

PPT 10: TEXT

Thank you for listening.

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