

Dear Marilyn,

As you know, Comparative Literature is built on collaborations with faculty in all eight language and literature departments and in Women's and Gender Studies, African Studies, Afro-American Studies and Jewish Studies. Their faculty members (including joint appointees from Classics, EAL, and Italian) teach courses in the Comp Lit program, and we send Comp Lit majors to their courses in language and literature. We also cross-list their courses when they have a comparative focus. Most lang/lit departments and the four programs allow their majors to count one or two CLT courses toward their requirements, and our full-time faculty--Mule and I--teach courses cross-listed in these departments and programs. Our curriculum is based on courses shared with these departments and programs, shared mentoring of honors theses, and shared majors, some of whom double-major in CLT and a language/literature department or an interdisciplinary program. Structurally, we've always existed through reciprocal relationships with other departments and programs.

One instance of the kind of streamlining you want to see is our recent redefinition of CLT 300, a course in literary theory required of Comp Lit majors, which has almost exactly the same syllabus as ENG 285. In a discussion with Ambreen Hai, who teaches ENG 285, we resolved that CLT should continue teaching this course but solve the problem of its overstuffed syllabus by recommending Ambreen's other courses as a follow-up to CLT 300, so our students can study feminist and post-colonial theory in greater depth in the range of courses she teaches with this focus. This arrangement eliminates one course and links several in a way that adds value to them all. ENG will cross-list our course, and in years when no CLT faculty member is available to teach it, members of the English department who are interested in theory will take it on, following a syllabus partly fixed and partly shaped according to their particular expertise.

As a program, we have discussed several kinds of courses designed to be useful to our contributing departments, though these are at a very tentative stage. One idea is a two- or four-credit course on the vocabulary of literary study, including illustrative texts from many literatures, which could be linked to 2-credit satellite courses in Spanish, for example, or French, in which students analyze some of these texts in the original language. (It will be important to ensure that faculty receive a full two-course credit for teaching these satellite courses and a full course credit for teaching one twice.) Another idea is a course on reading signs--verbal, visual, aural--which could serve as a basis for majors in subjects as diverse as language/literature, film studies, social and physical sciences, and cultural studies in general, all fields that employ signs and their conscious or unconscious effects on their users-- "beginner's semiotics," as a member of our board puts it. The point of such introductory courses would be to help our contributing departments move more quickly in their specialized courses, freed from the necessity of starting from zero with students who know very little about literature or the material and rhetorical aspects of cultural signs.

We agree with the English department in their recent statement that no department or program in language and literature should plan on territorial imperialism toward other ones. But collaboration on the basis of clearly defined intellectual goals is an appealing undertaking, one we in Comp Lit look forward to continuing to think about with faculty in related disciplines and areas of study.

Ann Jones, for the Comparative Literature Board
December 7, 2009