The Literature of Work: Developing a Thematic Unit on Work

David B. Raymond

This essay outlines a plan for developing a thematic unit on work to better engage career and technical students in the study of literature. Included in the essay are strategies for course structure, pedagogy, and writing assignments.

It is remarkable that there is little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting a living; how to make getting a living not merely honest and honorable, but altogether inviting and glorious; for if getting a living is not so, then living is not.

Henry David Thoreau, “Life without Principle”

One of the most difficult tasks for two-year college English professors is finding a theme that engages our students. The big questions of life such as love, death, family, war and peace, individual versus society, and so on, are often beyond the maturity and life experience of traditional-age college students. Then there is the problem of utilitarian mindsets of many of our technical students. Most students, and a number of technical faculty members as well, wish they could just learn their trade and go to work without the nuisance of the general education core taking up time that could be better spent on their major. This is especially true of literature, which seems, to the uninitiated, to be far removed from the world of work. One of the best ways to overcome students’ resistance is to meet them on the contested ground of the “real world” of work. If work is the preoccupation of our students, then why not bridge the gap between the liberal arts and the useful arts by adding a thematic section to our courses that focuses on work? What better way to make literature and the academic study of literature matter?

To do so we must not be misled by Thoreau’s notion that there is “little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting a living.” Contrary to his lament, much has been written about the subject, including some insightful work by Thoreau himself. However, we need more than a list of poems, stories, and essays about work to create an effective unit about work. If we are to meet students on the contested ground of the “real world” of work, we will need to deepen our understanding of the role of work in the human condition from the perspective of both the individual and society, to examine work from various philosophical...
perspectives, and to develop a list of readings that are rooted in the theme of work. Only then will we be able to persuade our students of the value and relevance of literature to their lives.

**Integrating the Theme of Work into a Literature Course**

The inspiration for a work-based theme originated with the movement to strengthen support for the humanities in community colleges that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Eisenberg; Eisenberg and Gollattscheck, *Future*; Eisenberg and Gollattscheck, *Improving*; Yarrington). Convinced that the humanities had drifted away from the practical concerns of everyday life, leaders from community college campuses across the nation tried to restore faith in the humanities as a vital component of a college education. Myron A. Marty expressed this concern best when he claimed that an education was incomplete if it did not help students “find and make sense out of relationships between their life, work, and jobs” (58). Through a series of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the support of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, a number of projects were launched to strengthen support for the humanities on community college campuses. The goal of these projects was to rekindle interest in and support for the humanities as a vital part of general education.

Many of the projects, especially the project at Kirkwood Community College, stressed the humanities as a source of insight into the role of work in the human condition (Sessions and Wortman). This led to the creation of a number of interdisciplinary humanities courses on work based on readings from philosophy, history, literature, and anthropology. When I developed a course on my campus, it was well received by both technical students and faculty. Over time, it became clear that work was a suitable theme for both literature and composition classes. Gradually, I dropped the readings from other disciplines and converted my course into a literature-based offering. The result is a class that accomplishes many of the same learning objectives of a traditional literature class but does so using only essays, poems, short stories, and plays that address the concerns of work.

My strategy for making work the thematic basis for a literature course was shaped by John Schilb’s proposal for integrating literary theory into an introduction to literature course. Schilb argues that literary theory can be effectively introduced into an introductory literature course if the professor uses a number of theoretical perspectives (“text,” “reader,” “author,” and “history”) with a minimum amount of “theory talk.” His method applies theory to a carefully selected number of texts arranged in logical progression with writing assignments that are grounded more on student reflection than traditional academic writing assignments. Within this structure, there is ample room to challenge students to consider why we read literature, as does Mark Edmundson in his book *Why Read?* Like Schilb, Edmundson cautions against too much reliance on the work of theory in our classes, for it can easily devolve into mere novelty or cynical negation. Instead, he urges us to read with the “hope that [the texts] will tell us something we do not know about the
world or give us an entirely fresh way to apprehend experience. We need to learn not simply to read books, but to allow ourselves to be read by them” (46). The most important questions we can ask of a work of literature are “Can you live it? Can you put it into action?” (56).

Devising a list of readings that can be arranged in a logical progression, as Schilb suggests, and that can be “lived,” as Edmundson requires, is perhaps the most crucial point in the development of a thematic unit. A course or unit on work will succeed or fail on the quality of the reading list; therefore “selecting works that stimulate inquiry” is a vital first step. Pieces of literature that have work as a central theme work much better than ones with work as a minor theme. For example, Robert Frost’s poem “The Death of the Hired Hand” examines the relationship between a farmer and his hired hand, but the issues of work are secondary to the larger themes of family (“Home is the place where, when you go there, / They have to take you in”), human relationships, and death. By contrast, Frost’s narrative poem “The Code” is a story within a story about the rural work ethic and the sense of dignity and worth that comes to those whose ethic of work is ingrained in their very being. Both tales describe rural farm workers who take offense at the aspersion cast at their commitment to “the code” (“The hand that knows his business won’t be told / To do work better or faster—those two things”) and go to great lengths to prove the accuser wrong. It is literature like this that can make a personal connection with our students and open the door for the critical study of literature. The first time I used “The Code,” a young man who had been disengaged for most of the semester participated in the class discussion, came forward after class, and talked enthusiastically about the poem. The son of a dairy farmer, his life had been read by the poem, for Frost articulated the rural work ethic that the young man lived. Once captivated, the young man was open to learning about the how’s and why’s of the poem. Over the years, I have accumulated a list of readings that I have found effective for drawing students into literature who would normally resist reading as a useless academic exercise (see Appendix).

A good reading list requires good reading. Like Edmundson, I begin with what the text has to say about the theme of work, and then I shift to the more technical aspects of how and why it conveys its message. I have found that most technical students will rebel when bombarded with literary jargon and techniques. Instead, I let the message of the text open students up to the tools of close reading. Theme first, elements second. Students who are engaged with a text because of the theme of work can be enticed to use the tools of literary analysis to extract more meaning from the reading.

Next, I turn to the author. As part of a biographical sketch of the author, I try to draw attention to the work that the author did to make a living. Scholars tend
to focus on the author’s literary life and work, giving short shrift to the ways that authors earn their daily bread. Was the author a literary recluse with little contact with the “real world” of work, or did he or she have significant work experience? How does the text reflect the author’s work experience and values? Questions such as these lead to an interpretation of the work that the author “would approve and be gratified by,” as Edmundson argues (53). Those who have been engaged in the daily grind of work write the most insightful pieces of literature about work. Franklin’s advice on the “way to wealth” stems from his work as a printer and his overweening desire to get rich; Thoreau’s musings on making a life as well as a living are rooted in his own vocational struggle to find work that was fulfilling and meaningful (teacher, pencil maker, handyman, and surveyor); and Frost’s “town bred farmer’s” sagacity is derived from his failed attempts to farm in support of his poetry. All have something meaningful to say because their insights are derived from their real-world work experiences. By contrast, writers who are not intimately acquainted with work have little to contribute to the conversation. Walt Whitman’s life of leisure and indolence left him an outside observer of work with little appreciation for the significance of work in the life of the individual or the social importance of work. His poem “I Hear America Singing” is a beautiful portrait of people observed, happily doing their work, but that is all it is: an observation. Having never mastered a craft outside of poetry, he can offer no insight into the conditions that make work joyful, nor explain why his workers are singing; he can only tell us they are happy at their work.

Finally, placing text and author in historical context helps students better discern the meaning of texts and the sociocultural conditions that helped shape the author’s thoughts on work. For example, students often read the racism and oppression in the poems of Langston Hughes (“Let America Be America Again”) or Richard Wright (“I Have Seen Black Hands”) as the direct result of slavery, but both men lived and wrote in the era of Jim Crow segregation, and life in Jim Crow America is vastly different from life under slavery in pre–Civil War America. Likewise, the essential message of “Useful Work versus Useless Toil” is lost if students do not understand the social and economic issues William Morris was confronting when he wrote his essay. Morris develops his vision of good work based on three “hopes”: hope of product, hope of pleasure, and hope of rest. For work to be good, one must produce something useful, under conditions that are pleasurable for the worker, and undertaken for a reasonable amount of time. Work without hope becomes a drudgery, causing workers to toil “to live, that [they] may live to toil.” The key to understanding William Morris’s vision of good work is the troubling work conditions for vast numbers of men and women in the mills and factories of late nineteenth-century England. This historical context helps our students understand why he advocated a plan of radical transformation of society that would require everyone to work and produce “useful” things without living off the labor of others.
Writing to Think Philosophically about Work

Allowing one’s self to be “read by the text” is best accomplished through writing assignments that require students to respond to the challenges laid down by the text. Having engaged in a critical reading of texts through analysis of the author, text, and historical context, students can begin to integrate what they have learned into their lives. To do so, students need to grapple with the basic philosophical question surrounding work. What is the purpose of work? Is it simply a means to an end or is there something innately satisfying in the act of work itself? Is all work good? If not, what makes work good or bad? How should I work? Is there a right and wrong way to do one’s work?

To answer these questions, students need to understand the basic assumptions found in all questions about work. Some view work in terms of the benefits we receive for the act of work: money, power, and status. A good example of this materialistic philosophy of work is Ben Franklin’s essay “The Way to Wealth.” If you want to be wealthy, you need to work hard and often to make as much money as possible and then you must use wisely the money you have earned. This timeless advice on money and work speaks to the deep-seated materialism of American culture, and it will be the default position for many students. Despite its popularity, the materialist’s view neglects the act of work undertaken to gain those rewards and the pleasure or misery it can bring. Similarly, Franklin’s outlook offers little guidance for the right relations with employees, consumers, and family and gives no consideration to the moral dimensions of work.

Others look to the rewards derived from the act of work: pleasure from exercising one’s skills and abilities, satisfaction from a job well done, a sense of accomplishment for providing goods or services that enhance the lives of others, and so on. In his essay “Life without Principle” Henry David Thoreau warns the reader that “[i]f the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself” (634). According to Thoreau, “The aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, to get ‘a good job’, but to perform well a certain work” (635). Every task has an ideal or right way to do it that yields the best quality for the consumer and the greatest pleasure for the producer. The key, Thoreau believed, is to “get your living by loving” (636), for those who love their work will do it right and do it well. If we must work, then we must do so in a manner that is pleasurable, agreeable, and moral.

Exposure to these basic philosophies of work lays the groundwork for writing assignments that apply philosophy to literature. One of the most effective types of writing assignments is one that asks students to apply these basic philosophies of work to a poem, short story, or play. For example, students can be asked to square Franklin’s vision of good work with the alienated and pathetic scrivener found in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” or the suicidal characters in Edward Arlington Robinson’s poem “Richard Cory” or Arthur Miller’s play Death of a Salesman. Or they can be asked to explain how Franklin’s vision of work contrasts with that of the old shoemaker in John Galsworthy’s story “Quality” or the village
blacksmith in the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem by the same name. Likewise, William Morris’s definition of good work can also be used to think critically about the conditions of child labor found in Jack London’s “The Apostate.” Finally, I encourage students to use one literary work to assess another. Is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s village blacksmith an example of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideal worker outlined in “Man the Reformer”?  

Assignments such as these provide students with an opportunity to display their mastery of the material, to demonstrate their ability to apply a set of values to works of literature, and to become more aware of their own worldview and its application to the problems and dilemmas of our everyday existence. For those willing to dedicate time to personal reflection, a paper on the student’s personal philosophy of work, duly informed by the philosophical ideals of Franklin, Thoreau, and Morris, can be a meaningful exercise for students and a fulfillment of Edmundson’s desire that we allow ourselves to be read by the texts we study. By the end of their study, most students should be more aware of the significance of work, have a greater appreciation for the academic study of literature, and have a better sense of the value of reading literature in general. As one student playfully wrote in his course evaluation, “just because a person works, doesn’t mean they understand work.”

**Conclusion**

A well-executed, thematic unit on work provides students with something of greater value than credits on a transcript. It gives them, in the words of Robert Frost in his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes,” a “momentary stay against the confusion” (440). Understanding the role of work in our lives is vital to the pursuit of happiness, for if “getting a living” is not “altogether inviting and glorious,” as Henry David Thoreau reminds us, “then living is not.” If we can use the study of literature to help our students make sense of the role of work in their lives, help them make a life as well as a living, then we truly will have bridged the gap between the “liberal arts” and the “useful arts.”

**APPENDIX: SELECTED READINGS ON THE THEME OF WORK**

**Essays**

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer”; “American Scholar”; “Farming”
- Ben Franklin, “Advice to a Young Tradesman”; “The Way to Wealth”
- Philip Levine, “Jobbed”
- William Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil”
- John Ruskin, “The Roots of Honour”
- Don Sharp, “Under the Hood”
- E. F. Schumacher, “Buddhist Economics” from *Buddhist Economics*
- Henry David Thoreau, “Life without Principle”; “Economy” from *Walden*
- Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”
Fiction

Raymond Carver, “Elephant”
John Galsworthy, “Quality”
Hamlin Garland, “Under the Lion’s Paw”
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Making a Change”
Franz Kafka, “A Country Doctor”; “Metamorphosis”
Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener”
Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman
Tillie Olsen, “I Stand Here Ironing”
Leo Tolstoy, “Where Love Is, God Is”
Mary Freeman Wilkins, “Louisa”
William Carlos Williams, “The Use of Force”

Poetry

Bertolt Brecht, “A Worker Reads History”
Stephen Crane, “The Trees in the Garden Rained Flowers”
Jim Daniels, “My Father Worked Late”
Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son”; “Necessity”; “Share-Croppers”; “Florida Road Workers”; “Let America Be America Again”
Fenton Johnson, “The Daily Grind”
Philip Levine, “Buying and Selling”; “What Work Is”; “You Can Have It”
Edwin Markham, “The Man with a Hoe”; “The Day and the Work”
Peter Oresick, “My Father”
Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use”; “The Market Economy”
Edward Arlington Robinson, “Richard Cory”
Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Song to the Men of England”
Walt Whitman, “I Hear America Singing”; “Song of Joys”; “Song of Occupations”
Richard Wright, “I Have Seen Black Hands”

Works Cited

Eisenberg, Diane U. Advancing Humanities Studies at Community, Technical, and

Raymond / The Literature of Work: Developing a Thematic Unit on Work 55


David B. Raymond, chair of the Arts and Sciences Department at Northern Maine Community College, has taught humanities courses at the community college level for over twenty-five years.