

The Department of English: An Education in *Imaginative Reasoning*

We, the faculty of the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, believe that one of the greatest strengths of our department is that in all areas of our curriculum—literary and film studies, creative writing, composition and rhetoric, and the digital humanities—we help students develop their capacities in *imaginative reasoning* so that in their lives as citizens of the world and members of their local communities they can discern connections and synthesize across seemingly incommensurable ideas or beliefs. *Imaginative reasoning* is the ability to use the imagination to think hypothetically about the world in all its diversity—the past, present, and future, the local and the global. Such an ability, we believe, enables all of us to engage critically with social and political phenomena because it allows us to re-envision what is possible and to dream up audacious solutions to seemingly insoluble problems, solutions that might at first seem implausible but, once dreamt up—once *imagined*—suddenly seem possible. These moments of imaginative insight compel us to ask: Why are such solutions deemed impossible or implausible to begin with? Who says so and for what reasons? What prevents us from dreaming of alternatives, of imagining other paths, in the first place?

Imaginative reasoning, then, is the tool that enables us to create a rupture in the seemingly smooth flow of daily information by helping us to re-frame *how* we look at the world—at ourselves and others, as well as at institutional structures and social, economic, and political constraints. These structures and constraints have histories, are outcomes of past and ongoing political and social struggles, and they ultimately constitute the conditions of possibility for our own social actions and how we think of others and ourselves. Precisely because these structures and constraints are not a matter of our own choosing—they exist independent of our individual wills—they can seem unchangeable. However, *imaginative reasoning* as a practice fosters our capacity to think otherwise, to speculate about how things could be, to envision how social and private life might look if imagined alternatives were realized. By educating students in multiple literacies, we offer them the intellectual skills they need to intervene actively in political, civic, and cultural affairs in their communities. This literacy work—fostered through analyzing literature and moving images, the creative and rhetorical production of texts, and the critically-informed development of digital environments—involves imagining political, civic, and cultural futures that might better serve the entire body politic; it also requires deeply investigating the diverse cultural traditions that have led to and influenced the current cultural scene.

We believe that nurturing the capacity for *imaginative reasoning* is particularly important *today*. At a time when the logic of the global marketplace impresses upon us the sense that only the here and now—the *present*—matters, we hold that we must equip our students with the tools they need to respond to this pervasive hyper-presentism: what tools do they need to feel more empowered in their daily lives as they face the demands foisted on us all by the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism and globalization? One key demand—perpetually called for in contemporary business discourse to which today's universities feel compelled to respond—is the need to innovate. We agree that the ability to innovate is important and should be valued; however, as teachers and scholars in the

humanities, we are skeptical of an idea of innovation predicated on planned obsolescence. Because we are concerned about the ecological and human costs of this brand of innovation, we instead affirm a model of innovation grounded in a critical engagement with tradition and predicated on a logic of creative reinvestigation and repetition. In our classrooms and in our research and creative activity, we re-visit, re-read, re-write, re-think, re-see, re-frame, re-investigate, re-interpret, and re-create the past(s) through encountering texts, moving images, and media practices of diverse cultural traditions in order to understand and act upon the present in new ways for a better future to come. Rather than rely on an ideology of innovation that is, at its core, predicated on disposability, utility, and commercial profitability, we offer a model of innovation grounded not only in an intensive creative engagement with and care for the multiple and diverse traditions from which we have emerged and of which we remain part but also in creative, critical, and rhetorical participation in present- and future-oriented literate actions.

Studying literary, film, rhetorical, cultural, and media history; theorizing these histories and the changes writing, reading, and viewing practices have undergone over the centuries; asking questions about present creative activities and their ways of entering such longstanding conversations—all such activities ultimately train our students in what we, as an English Department, see as the most central and valuable skill we have to offer. However, we also believe *imaginative reasoning* is valuable in its own right. Helping our students to develop the ability to engage in imaginative reasoning is thus central to our core mission.

Imaginative reasoning counters the mere utilitarian with a sense of play, excitement, and possibility. The study of the traditions of literature and cinema around the world, of how we *produce*, but also distribute and receive, texts, and of how we can tell our own stories while learning about those of others all hone the agility of the imagination. An agile imagination is crucial for our individual and collective abilities to engage the world through reason—we need both reason and imagination to envision the world we want to live in and then take action, based on a well-developed sense of ethics and social justice, to make that vision a reality. *Imaginative reasoning* allows us to speculate, to see and re-see our human and non-human environment in its diversity and flux; it allows us to anticipate and imagine the consequences of our actions before we act; it gives us cause to pause—to slow down—precisely so that we can imagine how our actions might impact others, whether humans, animals, or plants, whether we see them as similar to ourselves or perceive them as “others.”

In this sense, then, *imaginative reasoning* feeds into and supports a number of core values our department affirms, including

- pursuing social justice
- affirming diversity
- engaging with a broad array of real and imagined communities based on empathetic understanding
- fostering a sense of belonging
- instilling a desire for civic engagement

Imaginative reasoning, both as a value and as a skill one can acquire, develop, and share with others, is fundamentally *transitive* rather than intransitive because it connects us to others, leads us to look and work across boundaries, including, importantly, the boundary of our own selves and most immediate communities.

Indeed, at a time when so many of us must be mobile, often against our wills and without a clear sense of why we are being made to move, we need to pose with renewed vigor the question of *community*, to rethink what communities are and actively forge communities both with those who are close to us and those who, at first sight, seem removed from our daily experiences. We think that the education in *imaginative reasoning* our department offers empowers students to ask questions particularly pertinent to this state of neoliberal affairs: What would it be like to live elsewhere and interact with those with whom we seem to have little in common? Or, conversely, what would it be like to share affirmatively our own communal spaces with strangers from diverse parts of the world who come to us?

As the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we are especially committed to posing such questions that cut to the core of ongoing conversations about the state of the Humanities in the twenty-first century because we are keenly aware of our specific place within a university on the Great Plains with a historic land grant mission. Indeed, we affirm the specificity of our locality—of *our place*, as well as the specificity of *other* places—as crucial for inquiry across our curriculum and for the research and creative activities many of us pursue. At the same time, we recognize that the lives of students today—not just in metropolises but also here in Nebraska—are ceaselessly confronted with the impact of *global* forces. Students need to become more globally aware and better equipped to navigate nimbly a broader and more rapidly shifting world than their grandparents, if not their parents, could dream of; but they also can find it difficult to get their “local” voices heard. We thus seek to guide our students in the process of bringing their “local” voices (the specificity of their social locations) to bear on the global context (the “world”).

Contrary to many misperceptions about the Great Plains, the “world” is not just “out there”—elsewhere; it is in fact right here in Lincoln, Nebraska, a community in which students in the local public schools speak more than sixty languages and where global migration has left an indelible mark on the city, the state, and the region. This globalization of local communities is ripe with potential—and *imaginative reasoning* is precisely that skill and capacity that allows us, collectively and individually, to partake in the important civic process of realizing this culturally rich potential. As the Department of English at UNL, we are committed to educating our students in this art of *imaginative reasoning* so that they can become well-informed and caring actors in an increasingly diverse environment.