

Memo: *End Report*

From: Victoria Ramirez



To: Marjukka, Ollilainen, Mike Vaughn

Date: March 4, 2009

Subject: End Report on **Hemingway Collaborative Grant, Sp 2008**, awarded Victoria Ramirez and William Pollett for designing and teaching a new course, Engl 3350 Song Lyrics.

Background: Musician, Education Ph D candidate, and composition teacher William Pollett teamed with Victoria Ramirez, Associate Professor of English, to design and teach a pilot course in the English Department's Creative Writing Program, Engl 3350, a Song Lyrics genre course. A 2007 Hemingway Collaborative grant funded Pollett's participation in this project, making it possible.

Course Description: Pollett and Ramirez envisioned a course that begins with the history of humans and song, focusing more narrowly on song in America. Following this, the instructors selected several major thematic categories arising out of the universal need of humans to express feeling in song that they communicate to others, in the context of our shared national experience as Americans. Types of songs covered in class:

- * lullabies/children's songs
- * work songs, esp. those arising from slavery and prison experience
- * martial/patriotic music (including both war & anti-war songs)
- * folk songs, both traditional and contemporary forms
- * protest songs
- * love songs, in all their many forms

In addition to these different types of songs, which the instructors covered in readings taken from over a dozen sources (for example, George Steiner, Peter Seeger, Joe Jackson, C.M. Bowra, and Robert Jourdain), students were tasked to create a song centered on a different theme each week, including love, war, death, rebirth, and so on.

The course was also roughly divided into broad thematic categories over the semester:

* rhythm (weeks 2-5): students took part in rhythm workshops, and explored professional and student written songs in terms of rhythm, stress, beat, pauses, and rhyme scheme.

* melody (weeks 6-9): students learned how specific musical tones (example, minor and 7th chords) produced a certain mood in listeners. Also discussed were melodic motifs and their musically contrasting choruses and bridges, which add complexity and rhythmic interest to student compositions

* harmony (weeks 10-13): here students explored and exploited ideas of tonal complementarity when composing songs with multiple singers, vocal counterpoint, and harmonies in both major (country and folk) and minor (bluegrass and blues) keys.

Each week students submitted an assigned song for comment by the instructors, and revised these at home and during in-class lyrics workshops, selecting their best revisions to submit for a grade. In addition to three papers centered on the broad ideas of communication, composition, and revision, students were tasked to submit a final project which could be spoken (as a rap or

performed lyric), played and sung onto a cd, or performed live in the end-of-class public performance before family and friends scheduled for the end of the semester.

Course Evaluation at the Final Point: This new course offering was an unmitigated success with students and the instructors, ensuring that it would be offered regularly in the future at the undergrad level. Additionally, Ramirez will revise and tailor the course for the MA Program in English. One factor contributing to the course's positive reception was that most of the students evinced great musical interest, some had musical training, and all were willing to go beyond shyness to sing or speak lyrics within small groups. Pollett's dynamism, his deep command of musical genres, and his familiarity with rock and folks songs, wedded to Ramirez's long experience in teaching creative writing modes to students, produced a course that was both lively and rigorous for students hungry to couple their musical interests with their writing ones.

Ways to Enhance This Collaborative Course :

- * Student evals praised the course generally, but several students specifically called for more class time devoted to lyrics writing workshops.
- * Arrange for and fund digital recording of in-class performance for a WSU podcast, and an accompanying blog.
- * Arrange for and fund dissemination of songs on a public site such as You Tube, where each member of the class would have posted one of the assigned class songs.
- * Arrange for and fund a semi-professional taping of songs and student interviews for a class DVD and songbook that is a compilation of the students' songs.
- * Fund a student aid to manage all the electronic media and posting for this class.