Introduction to the Project

For my capstone project, I wanted to create something that showcases the skills that I have developed in my Literature and Scientific and Technical Communication (STC) courses. To do this, I have created a series of interactive guided notes for several pieces of literature— *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Frankenstein*— that my former high school English instructor is teaching next Fall. This also required me to do some research in pedagogy which is a new field for me. To guide my research, I came up with the following questions:

- What pedagogical practices can high school/ College Credit Plus teachers use to get students interested medieval and Regency literature?

- How might interactive classroom technologies generate new knowledge for and heighten the engagement of students in those courses?

While these units can be used by anyone who is teaching these works of literature, they have been created to specifically fit the needs of College Credit Plus English students at Russia High School. I asked my teacher what her students typically struggle with when reading and responding to these texts, what improvements she would like to see, and the important ideas and themes she likes to teach with each text. The structure and questions of each unit are based off these answers.

Why Did I Choose These Texts?

I picked *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Frankenstein* to work with from the texts my high school English teacher plans to teach next year because they are texts

Introduction to the Project

that

students are typically reluctant to engage with. Due to the age of these texts, there
is a language barrier that students often have a difficult time understanding—this can
make students intimidated and unwilling to critically engage with them. These are works
that I personally enjoy and find rewarding to engage with—that is why I want to provide
ways for students to better understand and even gain interest in these works of
literature.

What Makes Up the Project?

My project is divided into three units for the three major pieces of literature I am
creating reading guides for: *Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales,* and *Frankenstein*. Each
unit consists of one to three reading guides and accompanying answer guides. For each
reading guide, I include relevant pieces of historical context, character and vocabulary
lists, and reading and discussion questions. Some of the documents also include
translation activities, YouTube videos that read texts like *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury
Tales* in their original languages, and links to outside resources for further learning.
When selecting these supplemental resources, I tried to search for academic, yet
easily understandable, articles and videos that further explain the topics that I consider.
The goal is for my brief descriptions to pique students' interest enough that they are
compelled to click on the links provided and use them in larger essay assignments. In
doing so, I try to model a process of intellectual curiosity that students will hopefully
emulate in the future. I steered away from websites that students look to for easy
answers, like SparkNotes or Schmoop, and I avoided websites that had dense blocks of
text and vernacular that might intimidate students. Instead, I looked to websites like
Encyclopedia Britannica and blogs published by accredited universities that give

Emma Vallandingham, Honors Project 2019-2020

Introduction to the Project

The answer guides are designed to help students respond to the reading and

professional and accessible insights into the deeper-thinking topics I would like students
to engage with.

discussion questions at the end of each section if they are stuck. For each question, I

provide students with a sample answer, an answer hint, or an answer tip. Sample

answers work exactly as you might expect: I show students how I would answer the

question provided. Answer hints, which are often given as an embedded link in the

document that students hover over to see, typically direct students to a specific section

of the text wherein the answer lies. Answer tips might ask probing questions to guide

students' thinking or direct them to outside web resources that will help them answer the

question.

Each work of literature that I am working with is from a different period in history,

which allows me to very show how the English language has evolved since its

conception. I've included various translation activities that ask the students to work with

Beowulf and *The Canterbury Tales* in their original language. Some activities ask

students to listen to the original vernacular while following along with the modern

translation, while others ask students to attempt to parse out a translation on their own

I believe it is important for students to examine these works in their original

and then discuss which words were easy or difficult to discern.

languages because doing so emphasizes their historical significance. Texts like *Beowulf*

and *The Canterbury* Tales have been altered a great deal since they were first

translated from their original languages (and, in *Beowulf*'s case, since it was first told

orally). Even with the closest translation, there are still characteristics of these texts that

Emma Vallandingham, Honors Project 2019-2020

are lost when they are translated into our modern English— and yet, both of these

works have shaped the literary canon and our modern English language. Reading

works in translation is helpful, but also a replacement for the originals.

Another way that I'm trying to generate interest in these texts while also

encouraging students to be active participants in their own learning is providing

additional resources for students who want to learn more about certain subjects, such

as feminism in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* or Gothic influences in *Frankenstein*. I've

included these links, which lead to scholarly articles, encyclopedia entries, and other

reputable online sources, to encourage students to do additional research on the

subjects they find interesting when crafting their essay responses. This is something

that I would have found valuable and interesting when I was in high school, and I hope

that these resources appeal to other budding English majors.

What Research Informed the Project?

As someone who is new to the field of education, I knew that I would need to do

quite a bit of pedagogical research before undertaking this project. That is why I looked

to a variety of resources to help me find the best methods for heightening students'

engagement with this literature.

In "Interactive Instruction: Creating Interactive Learning Environments Through

Tomorrow's Teachers," Jeff Sessoms defines interactive technologies in a classroom

setting as any that allow students to become "active participants" (89). Active

participation, he claims, rarely comes from listening to a traditional classroom lecture;

rather, students become active participants when they participate in demonstrations

Introduction to the Project

(what Sessoms refers to as "learning by doing") as well as absorbing information visually and aurally. This has been proven to help students retain new information and build upon information they already have.

With this definition in mind, I aimed to make my reading guides interactive by providing activities that encourage students to be active participants in their learning. I use Peardeck, a software the works with PowerPoint presentations to allow students to answer questions virtually that the instructor can then project on the board. This software works well to encourage the discussion and sharing of ideas that I've found beneficial and interesting in my own college literature courses.

I also conducted specific research for each piece of literature to see what other educators found valuable when trying to heighten their own students' engagement. One of the most interesting and useful articles I found in this area was Stephen Behrendt's "All Men Hate the Wretched: Teaching *Frankenstein* in 2018." So often when reading this novel, students get so caught up in deciding who is the real "monster" of the novel (something that Behrendt claims is a result of our current political climate) that other valuable takeaways from the novel fall to the wayside. Behrendt encourages educators to instead focus on the effect of compassion and understanding in the novel along with the pervasive debates regarding science and technology— these are ideas that are still prevalent today. Although I was not able to complete a full unit on *Frankenstein*, I still tried to keep Behrendt's suggestions in mind as I wrote the epigraph questions at the end of my introductory document for the novel. I centered my questions onFrankenstein's lack of compassion for the Creature, the Creature's reaction to this

lack of compassion, and the debate around Frankenstein's reckless use of science and technology, which I feel are some of the most important themes in the novel.

I also used several non-library sources written by instructors who have taught or are currently teaching these works to inform my project. Penguin (the publishing company) has released teachers guides for many canonical works of literature, including *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*. They include a list of definitions for the various literary devices used throughout these works, sample discussion questions, and relevant historical context. I found these resources to be especially valuable because I was at a loss at the beginning of this project as to what information would be the most beneficial to students as they begin to read and analyze these texts. By providing examples of methods that have worked to get students interested in these texts, these guides gave me a jumping-off point for what I wanted my own reading guides to look like.

Conclusion

While I may or may not teach *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *Frankenstein* in the future, I know that the skills I have developed by conducting this pedagogical research and creating these reading guides will help me as I prepare to work in higher education. I have learned some of the best ways to heighten student engagement with assignments, reading or otherwise, that students typically find "boring." I also have new strategies for approaching topics that I plan on teaching, including the kinds of resources I want to look for when creating my lesson plans and the kinds of resources I want my students to consult when crafting their own responses. This project has only

cemented my desire to teach literature at the college level and has made me very

excited for my future career.