

The *OED* in the Literature Classroom

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Students quickly discover the best way to get me sidetracked during a class: ask any question about word origins or histories. They have seen that I cannot resist pausing to open up the online *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) and investigate. And while they may be motivated by a desire for a respite, the questions themselves are also evidence of a deep curiosity about language. I teach medieval literature seminars, surveys of early English literature, and a version of the History of the English Language course focused on literary issues and applications. In all of these courses, I want to encourage students' curiosity about language, which can become the impetus for looking closely at texts in their historical context and can destabilize any assumptions that language and literature have been evolving progressively toward a recently achieved zenith of stability and perfection. To cultivate that curiosity and build the knowledge and skills necessary to capitalize on it, I integrate the *OED* into these courses in three different ways: as object, entertainment, and dictionary. Each of these approaches can be adapted and scaled for various courses or aims.

Early in the term, we consider the *OED* as a material object. We look at how much the twenty-volume print version weighs: 137.72 pounds (Shea 2008); how many pages its longest entry covers: more than twenty-five—although that entry, “set,” has apparently been overtaken by half a dozen other entries, topped by “run,” in the online edition (Shea 2008; Simpson 2013); and how much it would cost to buy on Amazon.com (over a thousand dollars at the time of writing—but eligible for free Prime shipping!). While Oregon State University students have free access to *OED Online* (www.oed.com), this price point gives them some sense of its economic value and locates it within the familiar financial framework of tuition, fees, textbooks, and living expenses; the print *OED* costs about the same amount as tuition for two courses at the university. Students are used to consulting free online dictionaries for short, current definitions of a single word; the weight and page length figures for the print *OED* point to the vast amount of information it collects and help students conceive of the even vaster online *OED* in concrete terms. Paradoxically, these numbers also remind students that this resource has limits—it continues to grow but remains finite.

I open subsequent classes with a “fun fact,” delving into the contents of the *OED* and approaching it as a source of entertainment. Many English majors are already attentive to and interested in language, so they find this form of entertainment particularly appealing. These fun facts can take diverse forms and require varying levels of interaction. Some look at the historical time line, asking which word shows up first in the written record: *hellzapoppin’* or *bootylicious*? *Electricity*, *electron*, or *computer*? *He*, *she*, or *they*? According to the *OED Online*, “*hellzapoppin’*, adj.” (1945) comes a few decades before “*bootylicious*, adj.” (1992); “*computer*, n.” (1613) predates “*electricity*, n.” (1646) and “*electron*, n. 2” (1891); and “*he*, pron., n. 1, and adj.,” which has recently shifted from a date of 893 to the more general “early Old English” (600–950), still edges out “*she*, pron. n.1, and adj.” (1160) and “*they*, pron., adj., adv., and n.” (1200). The viewable previous entry for “*he*” and the discussion of the change in dating Old English usages from manuscripts (Esposito n.d.) provide further avenues for exploration and discussion.

Other fun facts look at the evolution of meanings. I provide students with a snippet of an *OED Online* entry and ask them which word is being defined. Is “foolish, silly, simple, and ignorant” an obsolete definition for *nice*, *crazy*, or *nasty*? Was a “steadfast, firm, constant” person in the Middle Ages *sad* or *sober*? (The answers are *nice* and *sad*.) Framing these fun facts as questions allows students to see the *OED* as a resource for investigating etymologies and evolving denotations—in other words, the fun facts introduce the students to problem- or inquiry-based learning in a lexicographic context and in a way that they can build on as they move to full-fledged assignments (for additional fun facts, see Barber 2006; Cook 2010; Garg 2007; Hitchings 2009). In some classes, I have asked students to come up with their own fun facts to share. They have looked into such things as the many different meanings of *buffalo*, the etymological relationship between *edge* and the verb *egg*, and the origins of the golf term *bogey* in the song “The Bogey Man.”

This approach to the *OED* as entertainment may run the risk of reducing it to a source of trivia or fetishizing the arcane and unusual etymological cases. To me, however, either risk is outweighed by the enthusiasm and engagement generated; long after the class ends, students still e-mail me with links to announcements about the emoticon named word of the year, TED talks about language, or news articles about slang. These fun facts can produce a pleasurable surprise that encourages students to dig deeper, approach language more thoughtfully, and read texts more slowly. Significant political questions often have a linguistic dimension, and students who

have engaged with historical dictionaries will be better equipped to investigate the history of *they* as a singular pronoun, the impact of immigration on language, or other issues with weighty implications for the twenty-first century.

The contrary risk is that students may come to see the *OED* as an oracle. To counteract this phenomenon and to demystify the nature and production of dictionaries, we explore the long and colorful history of the *OED*. The time we spend depends on the nature of the class. I do a full unit on dictionaries in my literary History of the English Language course and devote an entire class to the story of the *OED*, while I have time for only a few remarks about it during a lower-division literature survey—but the point is all the more important to make in that context: Students coming from various disciplinary backgrounds may imagine dictionaries as authoritative and unchanging records of meanings. I want to emphasize that the *OED*, and other dictionaries, are human endeavors, constructed by people making decisions based on necessarily incomplete information. At the lower-division level, we can consider the *OED*'s own definition of “dictionary, n. and adj.” as “a book which explains or translates . . . the words of a language” and ask who crafts the explanations and provides the translations—in other words, who writes this “book.” In response, we can note the many people who have worked on the dictionary, including J. R. R. Tolkien, whom students know from *The Lord of the Rings* rather than lexicography (Esposito n.d.). At the upper-division level, we can get a feel for the ongoing *OED* endeavor by examining the online archival materials, as well as the current call for submissions. We talk about the editors, the appeals for readers, and the response. We look at the photographs of the slips of paper with quotations filed in pigeonholes and at the list of top sources. I ask students to try writing a dictionary entry of their own and to compare it with their classmates' entries on the same word.

Attending to the *OED* as an object makes students cognizant of the literal and figurative dimensions of the resource; drawing on the *OED* as a source of entertainment nurtures their curiosity and encourages engagement with it; and emphasizing the *OED* as a dictionary that has both a past and a future guides them to use it mindfully. When we turn to an assignment that requires students to be aware of the long history of a word or to analyze the language of a text from any time period, they do so with a comprehensive understanding of the nature, potential, and limitations of the *OED* and how it can enrich their understanding of literature. Perhaps most important, they bring a sense of curiosity, ready to be amazed by what they might discover while reading a text, researching a paper, or raising a question during lecture.

Works Cited

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"The Course of Her Whimsical Adventures"

"Fantomina" and Trigger Warnings at a Women's College

Kate Levin

Trigger warning: This article discusses literary representations of rape and its aftermath along with potentially unresolvable conflicts about the effects of such representations in the college classroom.

"A Young Lady of distinguished Birth, Beauty, Wit, and Spirit, happened to be in a Box one Night at the Playhouse" (Haywood [1725] 2004: 41). I thought that nothing about those opening words of Eliza Haywood's 1725 story "Fantomina: Or, Love in a Maze" or the story itself could surprise me anymore. But one February morning in 2015 began with this e-mail from a former