

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Popular Romance Studies: What is it, and why does it matter?

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Since joining the editorial team of *JPRS* as Teaching and Learning Editor in late 2012, I have had numerous conversations with scholars about the scope and purpose of this section that have raised some important (and difficult) questions. The main questions for those who are already active in the research community of popular romance studies are very practical ones: What does an article about teaching and learning look like? My research does inform the work I've been doing with my students, but how can I tell if my teaching practice is significant enough to report and analyse in a public academic forum? Why should I put time and energy I would usually devote to my "real" research into writing an article on teaching and learning? For those who are already very familiar with the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education, the questions raised by this section relate to its place in *JPRS*. They ask: What is popular romance studies? How widely and in what disciplinary and institutional contexts does it inform teaching? What other forums are there for discussion and debate about the teaching and learning of popular romance studies? While I have found some of these questions easier to respond to than others, none of them have simple or single answers. It will, I hope, be the collective and ongoing work of contributors to the section to think through the issues such questions raise and to inspire others to join the conversation. I envision "Teaching and Learning" in *JPRS* as a "trading zone"^[1] for the open exchange of ideas, research findings, and tools for enriching the experience of teachers and, most importantly, students in courses which examine the meaning and significance of romantic love in global popular culture.

There is as yet no readily identifiable body of work that we can call the "scholarship of teaching and learning popular romance studies." This is not to say that the number of scholars talking and writing about the place of popular romance studies in the university classroom is yet to reach critical mass. To the contrary, *JPRS* decided to launch this section because of strong evidence that the teaching and learning of popular romance is already a hot topic of discussion and debate, at least for those of us based in literary and cultural studies. Existing forums for trading ideas about popular romance in the English classroom include: RomanceScholar, a listserv for "scholars and teachers of romance fiction"; the blog *Teach Me Tonight: Musings on Romance Fiction from an Academic Perspective*; and the

Resources for Teaching Popular Romance Fiction website hosted by DePaul University Professor of English and *JPRS's* Executive Editor, Eric Selinger. As this journal defines it, “popular romance studies” is a cross-disciplinary banner for scholarship about “romantic love in global popular culture, now or in the past.” While there is no question that literary studies has been to date the dominant discipline in this still emerging field, *JPRS* remains committed to its vision of the journal as a genuinely cross-disciplinary site where scholars with common interests from diverse disciplinary backgrounds can disseminate, build on, and critique research.

Popular romance studies and the scholarship of teaching and learning have, in fact, a lot in common. They are both broad-based areas of scholarship that resonate in different ways in particular disciplines, and whose key players see their greatest potential in cross- and interdisciplinary terms. Further, they are both relatively “new and marginal” (Huber, *Balancing Acts* 214) scholarly domains where experienced and new participants worry over established cultural and professional hierarchies that threaten to devalue their work. There is an abundance of evidence that scholars who pursue their research interest in love and popular culture have often done so against the prevailing view that their time would be better spent investigating more serious and weightier issues. Similarly, as Mary Taylor Huber demonstrates in her book *Balancing Acts: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Academic Careers*, academics whose passion for teaching inspires them to invest time and intellectual energy in the scholarship of teaching and learning (especially before achieving tenure) are often intensely aware that they do so in an academe that values research over teaching (see also Linkon; Ramsden).

In Gerald Graff’s words, “teaching has been . . . notoriously undervalued in universities” (5). How much more intensely is this bias felt by teaching academics who focus on popular culture? Graff offers a fascinating corrective to the short-sighted and elitist orthodoxies he finds in higher education: “In a real sense, the university is *itself* popular culture—what else should we call an institution that serves millions if not an agent of mass popularization?” (21; emphasis is original). Henry Giroux also insists on the relationship between teaching and learning and popular culture:

. . . pedagogy is about the creation of a public sphere, one that brings people together in a variety of spaces to talk, exchange information, listen, feel their desires, and expand their capacities for joy, love, solidarity, and struggle. Though I do not wish to romanticise popular culture, it is precisely in its diverse spaces and spheres that most of the education that matters is taking place on a global scale. (x)

Giroux’s argument that the most active and meaningful pedagogical spaces are not managed by universities will, I am sure, be a compelling one for readers of this journal. Popular romance studies of genre fiction, for instance, have long strived to include the activities of writers, fans and readers which, in Ken Gelder’s words “is in fact academic in its own way, often concentrating on the finer details of the fiction and even working at the level of literary scholarship” (75). But what does all of this mean in practical terms for academics who take popular culture so seriously that they have made it the focus of their teaching? This is exactly the kind of thorny question I would like to see explored here.

The idea of a designated “scholarship of teaching” is usually credited to Ernest Boyer, who introduced the term in his 1990 book, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (“learning” was added nearly a decade or so later). As Liz Grauerholz and John F. Zipp explain, there are numerous definitions of the scholarship of teaching and learning, but “common to most approaches is that scholars investigate and share publicly the impact that various methods have on student learning” (87). The scholarship of teaching and learning is therefore a “form of practitioner research.” In other words, it is “a practical enterprise, anchored in the concrete realities of teachers, students, and subject matter” (Hutchings and Huber, 229). As I see it, engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning is an opportunity to reflect in a sustained way on one of the most challenging and most rewarding aspects of an academic career—finding ways to help our students learn.

Following Lee S. Shulman, most proponents of the scholarship of teaching and learning argue that it must be based on the three central components “of being public (‘community property’), open to critique and evaluation, and in a form that others can build on”:

A scholarship of teaching is *not* synonymous with excellent teaching. It requires a kind of ‘going meta,’ in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning—the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth—and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it. (Hutchings and Shulman 13; emphasis is original)

The most common type of journal article in the scholarship of teaching and learning reports and reflects on the development, implementation, and/or outcomes of a novel approach to undergraduate teaching, typically at the individual unit or course level.^[2] Such articles offer practical case studies of a particular approach to teaching and learning and employ a range of evidence to support claims about the effectiveness of course design, classroom practice, or assessment (e.g., quantitative and qualitative student evaluation data; class observations and staff reflection; analysis of student assignments; and pre- and post-test results). However, as Hutchings and Shulman suggest, teaching and learning scholarship does more than provide templates that others might adapt for their own purposes, although this is certainly one of its uses. Instead, I hope that potential contributors will use their teaching practice as a launch pad for interrogating more deeply the place of popular romance studies in higher education. Possible topics for contributions include, but are not limited to:

- Key issues in the teaching and learning of popular romance studies
- The research/teaching nexus and popular romance
- Curriculum design for teaching popular romance
- Assessment models for teaching popular romance
- Teaching and learning popular romance in the digital age
- Student responses to studying representations of romantic love
- Popular romance fans as teachers and students
- Supervising dissertations in popular romance studies

Submissions to this section will be peer-reviewed in exactly the same way as those submitted for the main section of the journal. My strong feeling is that, as universities around the world increasingly require staff seeking tenure and promotion to provide high-level evidence of their success against the three categories of research, teaching and service, forums such as this will only become more important. In this regard, “Teaching and Learning” in *JPRS* will (although it may take some time) have a role to play in the career pathways of up-and-coming scholars.

Popular romance studies—as even the briefest perusal of the literature reveals—is not a clearly defined area of scholarship. This is, in part, because of its still-nascent interdisciplinary identity. As with any emergent field, the classroom is one of most important sites for mapping the parameters of popular romance studies, identifying and defining its key concepts (most importantly “love”), and for determining theoretical frameworks and methodologies. One of the guiding principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning is that the classroom functions as a “site of inquiry” for students and teachers. This resonates in two main ways in this context: 1. reflecting on the teaching of topics relevant to popular romance studies in this journal will add detail to the picture of what this area of study is and of what it might become; and 2. reflecting on the effectiveness of approaches to learning and teaching popular culture will build knowledge about techniques and strategies for improving student learning. “Teaching and Learning” is, to the best of my knowledge, the only academic site devoted to the publication of peer-reviewed studies of the teaching and learning of popular culture. This means, I think, that its success depends on seeing it as a work-in-progress and I welcome any and all suggestions of what the scholarship of teaching and learning popular romance studies might look like.

[1] Mary Taylor Huber and Sherwyn P. Morreale borrow Peter Gallison’s notion of a “trading zone” to describe the intellectual and professional work of SoTL: “It is in this borderland that scholars from different disciplinary cultures come to trade their wares—insights, ideas, and findings—even though the meanings and methods behind them may vary considerably among consumer groups” (“Situating the Scholarship” 2; see also Huber, *Balancing Acts* 219).

[2] This was the model followed for the first article published in the section under its initial banner “Pedagogy,” which I co-authored with Rosemary Gaby and Jennifer Kloester.

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