

# Reading, Appreciating, and Teaching Literature like an Amateur

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# Context

- HON 350: “Great Books”
  - Converted to an online section during COVID
  - Exceptionally small number of students
  - Required to graduate with honors
- Catalog Description
  - This course is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Great Books. The shared inquiry method will be used to explore both classic and contemporary works. Students are expected to be active participants in the search for meaning in the chosen selections. This course can be taken for credit multiple times, as the content changes each time it is offered.

*In the chat, what is one of your favorite books and why?  
Consider picking a book that might be a good fit for this course.*

# Challenges

- Picking texts that do justice to...
  - Literary/intellectual history
  - Contemporary debates about issues like equity and access
- Cultivating a “shared inquiry method” that allows students to become “active participants in the search for meaning”
- Helping students see themselves as stakeholders in traditions and future that circumscribe them: liberal arts, political/intellectual/cultural history.

## A possible rationale

The liberal-arts tradition that such courses represent is instrumental in transmitting a political philosophy dedicated to balancing the rights of individuals against the needs of community cohesion. This tradition asks questions like: Who gets to be counted as an individual? Who belongs to a community? These are the very questions students need to be raising in order for democracy to flourish. The Great Books can teach the respect of and openness to other people and traditions that are the minimal condition of a diverse society.

-Eddington, "The Splintering of the Student Mind: Why the Canon is Necessary for Social Justice," 2018.

## A possible pedagogy

Teaching is a social practice not merely in the sense that it occurs in the social. It's social in the sense that it is enabled by the sociability of texts and ideas. That sociability is richer and more productive if we understand that it is constituted by an amateurism that can speak to the needs and desires of beginners and experts alike, that is capable of registering the failures and surprises that happen when someone who knows a field of knowledge well invites newcomers into it.

Foote, "Amateur Hour: Beginning in the Lecture Hall," 2010.

## A possible pedagogy

...there is indeed an institutional role — and obligation — to teach students to appreciate poetry, both as enjoyable experience and as the vehicle of a rich cultural inheritance. Appreciation is a acquired response; more important, it is the foundation from which the urge to engage, critique, analyze, and judge springs.

Rosenfield, “Wine, Poems, and Song: Lateral Reading and the Pedagogy of Appreciation,” 2017.

# My Invitation

- Identify and respond to the shared needs of expert and novice
  - Why are we reading this?
  - What makes it good?
  - What in particular is remarkable about it?
- Acknowledge the problem and possibilities of “cultural inheritance”
  - There’s a lot, and you’ll never get to it all in a perfectly balanced way
  - We don’t all register cultural history in the same way
  - It’s also kind of cool to connect with someone – a character, an author, another reader – who is different than you
- Teach respect and openness
  - For/to people
  - For/to ideas
  - For/to expressions

# Course Structure

## Six Books

- Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)
- Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1892...ish)
- Homer, *The Odyssey* (~700 BC)
- Borges, *The Aleph and other Stories* (1952)
- Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1608)
- Austen, *Emma* (1815)

## Snippets from Six Main Critics

- D.H. Lawrence, Aristotle, Borges, Emily Wilson, Samuel Johnson, Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Regular Discussion

- Meet Sessions and discussion boards

## Long Projects

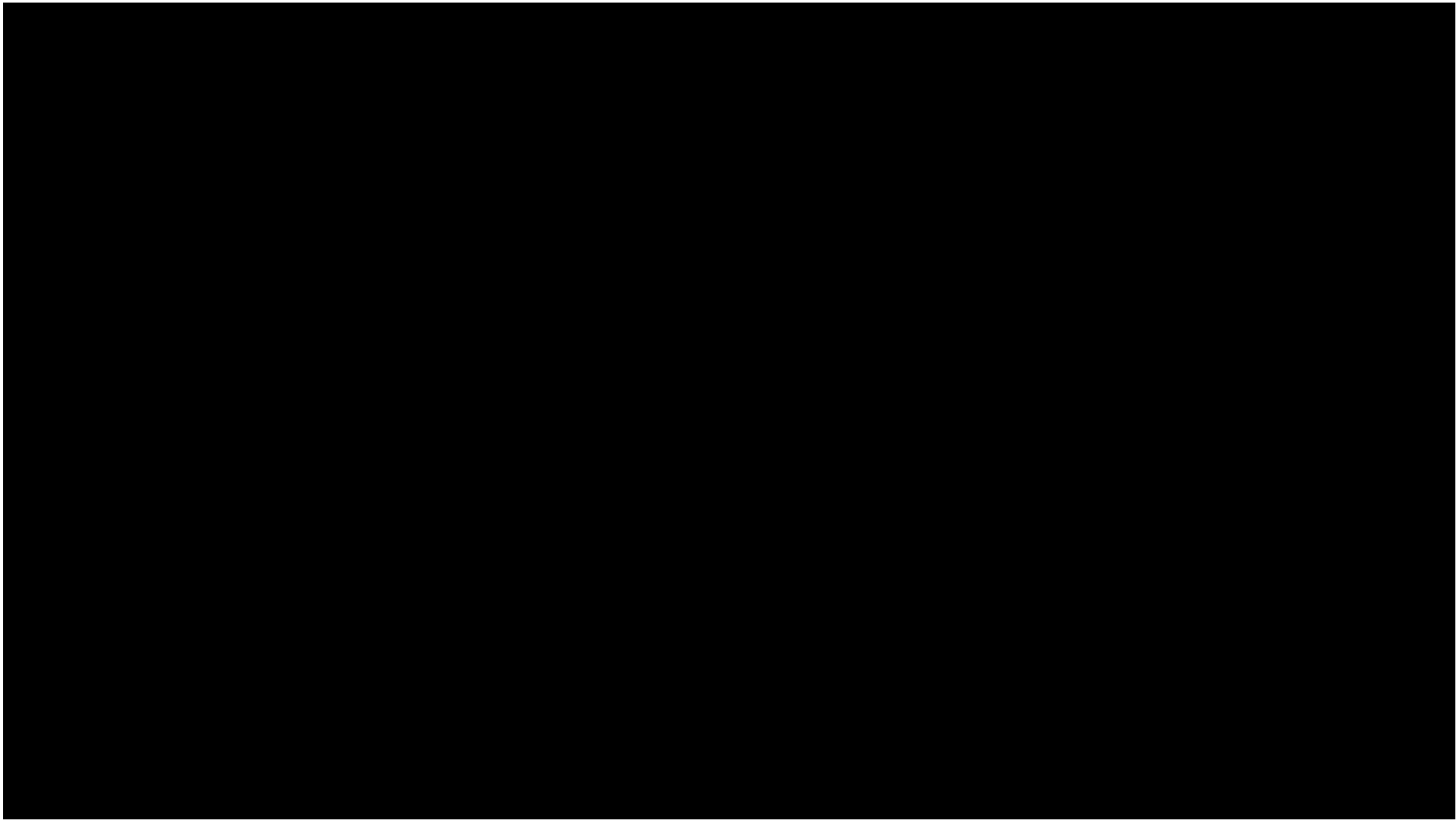
- Close Reading (Week Six)
- Final Project (Week Twelve)



| Week | PPT Title                                   | Text   | Critic   |
|------|---|--|--|
| 1    | The How and Why of Reading Great Literature | <i>Citizen</i> , Rankine, 2014                                 | Eddington, "Why the Canon is Necessary for Social Justice," 2018.                    |
| 2    | Self, Society, and Poetry                   | "Song of Myself," Whitman, 1892ish                             | D.H. Lawrence, selections from <i>Studies in Classic American Literature</i> , 1923. |
| 3    | Plot, Scene, and Storytelling               | <i>The Odyssey</i> , Homer, 700BCish (Wilson 2014 translation) | Aristotle, "Poetics"   |
| 4    | Interpreting Stories                        | <i>The Odyssey</i> , Homer, 700BCish (Wilson 2014 translation) | Borges, "The Homeric Versions," 1932   |
| 5    | Ending Stories                              | <i>The Odyssey</i> , Homer, 700BCish (Wilson 2014 translation) | Selections from Wilson's "Preface," 2014   |
| 6    | Locating Literature                         | <i>The Aleph</i> , Borges, 1954                                | Johnson, "Preface" from <i>The Plays of William Shakespeare</i> , 1765               |
| 7    | Judging Literature                          | <i>King Lear</i> , Shakespeare, 1606                           |  |
| 8    | ???   | <i>King Lear</i> , Shakespeare, 1606                           |  |
| 9    | Literary Focus                              | <i>Emma</i> , Austen, 1815                                     | Cornell West and Fran Leibowitz, "Reflections on Austen"                             |
| 10   | Literary Focus (cont.)                      | <i>Emma</i> , Austen, 1815                                     |  |
| 11   | Coming to an End                            | <i>Emma</i> , Austen, 1815                                     |  |
| 12   | Remembering Literature                      | <i>Emma</i> (film), deWilde, 2020                              | Emerson, "An American Scholar," 1837   |

## Reflecting on the outline

- Asks students to read (1) great literature and (2) another reader's attempt at appreciation such that they can make (3) their own appreciative attempt.
- Balances the *why* and the *how* of reading great books
- Inherently playful and asks students to bite off more than they can chew
  - **Close Reading Essay:** "Essays must advance an argument related to the works form, theme, and/or the response it elicits from readers"
  - **Theory of Great Literature Essay:** "Students must complete a 5-6 page essay in which they define 1-3 qualities of great literature. As they develop their definition, they should cite at least **two** other writers/critics. After developing their own definition of "great" literature, they must analyze a work assigned in the course demonstrating how the work does (or does not) realize their definition of great literature."



# Educational Community and Tradition

*Lit Hum*, as it is commonly known, is designed to enhance **students' understanding of main lines of literary and philosophical development that have shaped western thought** for nearly three millennia. Much more than a survey of great books, Lit Hum encourages students to become **critical readers of the literary past we have inherited**. Although most of our Lit Hum works (and the cultures they represent) are remote from us, **we nonetheless learn something about ourselves in struggling to appreciate and understand them**. Why did these works cause previous generations to value them so highly? In what ways are our authors in conversation with each other? How are these books relevant to our lives? In the end, what do we gain from them?

[\(Columbia's Great Books Program\)](#)

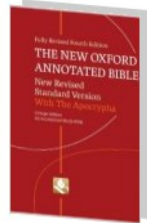
# Columbia (Fall)

## LITERATURE HUMANITIES SYLLABUS HUMA1001, FALL 2020

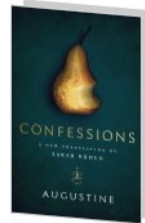
|       |                |   |
|-------|----------------|---|
| Sept. | 7 (T/W/R only) | Homer, <i>Iliad</i> (1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> day)   |
|       | 14             | Homer, <i>Iliad</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> day)   |
|       | 21             | Sappho, <i>Lyrics</i> (1 day)   |
|       |                | Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> (1 <sup>st</sup> day)   |
|       | 28             | Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> day)   |
| Oct.  | 5              | <i>New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha</i> , Genesis (1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> day)  |
|       | 12             | <i>New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha</i> , Job and Song of Solomon (1 day)  |
|       |                | Aeschylus, <i>Oresteia</i> (1 <sup>st</sup> day)  |
|       | 19             | Aeschylus, <i>Oresteia</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> day)  |
|       |                | Sophocles, <i>Antigone</i> (1 day)  |
|       | 26             | Midterm / Projects  |
| Nov.  |                | CONTEMPORARY CORE: Parks, <i>Father Comes Home from the Wars</i> (1st day)  |
|       | 2 (W/R only)   | Parks, <i>Father Comes Home from the Wars</i> (2nd day)   |
|       | 9              | Plato, <i>Symposium</i> (1 <sup>st</sup> day)   |
|       |                | Plato, <i>Symposium</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> day)   |
|       | 16             | Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i> (1 <sup>st</sup> day)   |
|       |                | Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> day)   |
|       | 23 (M/T only)  | Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> day)   |
|       | 30             | Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> : 1.1-567 (Proem; the creation; Lycaon and human depravity; the Flood; the rebirth via Deucalion and Pyrrha; Apollo and Daphne: 28 pp.); 3.339-510 (Echo and Narcissus: 7 pp.); 6.1-312 (divine retribution and/or vindictiveness as illustrated by Arachne and Niobe: 15 pp.); 10.243-297 (Pygmalion: 3 pp.); 12-14 (Ovid's Trojan War [12-13.622] and 'little Aeneid' [13.623-14.621]: 129 pp.); 15.745-879 (apotheosis of Julius Caesar; Ovid's epilogue: 6 pp.). [188 pp. total] (1 <sup>st</sup> day) |
| Dec.  | 7              | Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> day)  |
|       |                | Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> day)  |
|       |                | Catch-up day / Projects   |
|       | 14 (M only)    | Last day of class   |

# Columbia (Spring)

## Spring Semester



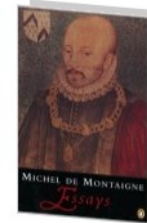
**Luke/John**  
Unknown



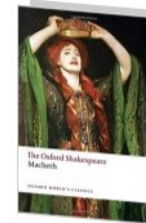
**Confessions**  
Augustine



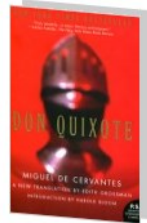
**The Divine Comedy**  
Dante



**Essays**  
Michel de Montaigne



**Macbeth**  
William Shakespeare



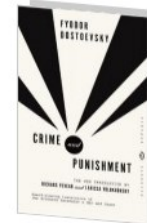
**Don Quixote**  
Miguel de Cervantes



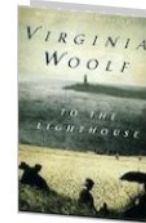
**Paradise Lost**  
John Milton



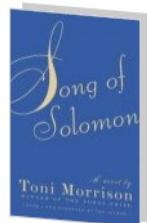
**Pride and Prejudice**  
Jane Austen



**Crime and Punishment**  
Fyodor Mikhailovich  
Dostoevsky



**To the Lighthouse**  
Virginia Woolf



**Song of Solomon**  
Toni Morrison

Columbia  
(Summer  
Reading)



# Ordering Books

## (Class Architecture)

### Chronological

~700 BC: *The Odyssey*

1606: *King Lear*

1815: *Emma*

1892ish: *Song of Myself*

1954: *The Aleph*

2014: *Citizen*

### By Genre

#### Poetry

- *The Odyssey* (sort of but not really)
- *Song of Myself*
- *Citizen* (sort of)

#### Drama

- *King Lear*

#### Novel

- *Emma*

#### Short Fiction

- *The Aleph*



# Ordering Books

## Gender

### Men

- Shakespeare
- Whitman
- Borges

### Women

- Austen
- Rankine

### Both

- Homer trans. by Emily Wilson

## Race and Nationality

### White

- Whitman (American)
- Shakespeare (British)
- Austen (British)
- Homer (Ancient Greek)

### Non White

- Borges (Hispanic, Argentina)
- Rankine (Black, American, born Jamaica)

# Our Goals

- IDEAS: What important themes or subjects do great books raise? How does a given book represent and engage these specific ideas?
- BEAUTY: What does it mean to read a literary text? How does literature allow us to engage ideas in new ways or open up new imaginative, affective (i.e., emotional) or aesthetic (i.e., beautiful) experiences?
- QUALITY: What makes a work “great”? How has “great” literature been defined over time?
- HISTORY: How do great books allow us to *know* our past? What implications does this past have on our present and our future?

# Close Reading

## **Form: what composes the text?**

- Plot structure, characters, narrator, setting, imagery, motifs, symbols, paragraph structure, sentence structure, word choice, punctuation

## **Reading Experience: how do we respond as we read scenes and move through the story?**

- Emotions: shocked, surprised, delighted
- Cognitive: clarity, resolution, ambiguity
- Expectations: things do (or don't) turn out the way we hope for/anticipate

## **Theme: what is the text about?**

- What claims does the text make about X?
- Or how does our understanding of X change because of the way the book is crafted?

**Form:** how does the text *look*?

**RE:** what's your *response*?

**Theme:** what is it *about*?

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.

## Autumn de Wilde (Director)

A lot of people focus on the romance in Jane Austen's novels, which is a great thing to do. But the way she skewers her community is so well done. I didn't want to modernize the story but to accentuate the things that I thought would humanize it for a modern audience. ([Source](#))



## Eleanor Catton (Screenplay)

When we were developing the film, we talked more about the idea of *identifying* with her — which is what the book does so brilliantly by taking us into her mind. We can all relate to the idea of a social rivalry like the one Emma has with Jane Fairfax, I think.

*Emma* is such a contained novel — you never leave Highbury. And the more I read it the more sympathy I have for Emma as someone who's been subject to intellectual and emotional privation. She's too clever for her situation — she has skills that in another time would be put to good use, but as it is they've been turned into weapons. ([Source](#))



## Isobel Waller-Bridge (Soundtrack)

It was clear from the very beginning that every character would have a certain instrument that we associated with them. Emma's instrument is the harp, Mr. Knightley's is the French horn, Mr. Elton became the bassoon. Then it's a case of working with the character's themes and matching the score to that journey, so going through Emma's strengths to her vulnerabilities. ([Source](#))

## An Argument

Great literature is not merely a tale but a story that intertwines the reader with the thoughts and actions of the individuals within the novel. Readers are able to experience the excitement and undergo the sorrow that each character feels. Throughout *Emma*, Jane Austen enables her readers to feel these sorts of emotions. Her readers are drawn into the story through detailed portrayals of characters and their relationships seen through the eyes of her main character, and Austen plays with her narrative structure, in order to create unique insights into the thoughts of individuals. The clear self-awareness of her characters, seen through the use of free indirect discourse, allows the reader to know the character's thoughts and perspectives, and the centralized plot further focuses on the fundamental elements of human existence.

## An Insight

Ralph Waldo Emerson disagreed with the idea of constraints because he believed that self-creation and self-refashioning played a fundamental role in shaping the self and world. Jane Austen's character of Emma goes against Emerson's belief by showing the balance of these constraints and imagination. Emerson imagined an individual that was able to envision all sorts of possibilities and create new ideas and actions, yet it is Austen's character *who creates the imaginable*. (emphasis added).

# Implications (Practical and Otherwise)

- Appreciation and enthusiasm must be modeled, but not necessarily duplicated
- Method and purpose are best understood in tandem
- Let students see and respond to the architecture of your class
- Keep an archive of your teaching – course materials, journals, student work, etc.