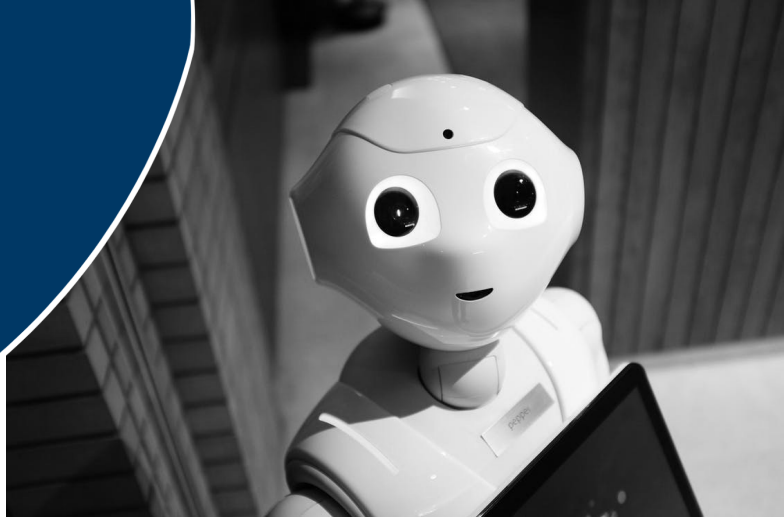


A Case for Science Fiction at Community College

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Abstract

Science Fiction Literature (SF) is a sorely needed course, especially within community college programs. Yet it is equally absent from course catalogs. In addition to bringing the broad benefits of studying literature, SF offers unique intellectual and emotional growth. There may be numerous obstacles that complicate offering such an excellent course; however, this piece offers pathways toward overcoming those restrictions.

Keywords: science fiction, literature, community college

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North Carolina's 58 community colleges make accessible the benefits of higher education, and educators within these vital instructional and economic engines consistently prepare learners for an unpredictable future by inculcating strong foundations, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and much more. No literary tradition accomplishes these goals better than science fiction (SF), and yet it goes woefully underexamined and oft maligned. Since ENG 275: Science Fiction Literature has been in the Combined Course Library from as far back as 1997, why isn't it taught throughout the Great 58?

Benefits

The benefits of reading fiction are well documented. Chief among them is the development of

cognitive empathy, or the ability of the reader to try on another's life, like trying on shoes. SF furthers this tradition by utilizing *cognitive estrangement*—presenting something familiar in a foreign context—which allows the reader to engage with familiar concepts with less influence from prior knowledge or social contexts. Thus readers can re-examine their thoughts and beliefs free from the noise of what others have thought for them.

Another strength of SF is the exploration of the distance between humanity's reach and its grasp. For example, SF can support the evaluation of technology's influence in daily lives (Toscano, 2011) or be a laboratory for "potential future ethical quandaries" (Hansen, 2021, p. 438). SF prepares students for an uncertain future and may help to define their role within it. Directly, SF empowers learners to manage the vicissitudes of an ever changing world.

Obstacles

Although it may seem shortsighted, ENG 275 is often not taught due to resources. English departments tend to practice a utilitarian approach to course offerings, which regularly deprives students of the serendipitous excitement of encountering personally meaningful literary art. Every department tries, but under systemic constraints, the contagious nature of excitement often stalls. Additionally, obsolete disdain of SF continuously undermines ENG 275 by maintaining the course as an elective. Furthermore, the current description elevates science over literature, as though the

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original advocate withered under the jaundiced, disapproving eye of The Academy. Despite parity between SF and British or American Literature, influencing course labels is a tectonic process standing in the way of widespread offerings.

Pathways

Yet if ENG 275's label accurately reflected its academic value, scheduling the course would be justified and would demonstrate greater alignment with the majority of the UNC System's colleges and universities. This is the best, most lasting strategy toward promulgating SF throughout the state; however, it is not the only path forward.

We must also recognize the disdain for science fiction as part of a broader obstacle to English instructor satisfaction. Many have a deep love for this genre that does not fit nicely into UGETC boxes. Denying instructors the opportunity to share that love in lieu of standard courses treats these highly educated, invested, capable professionals as fungible cogs grinding out yet another series of essays. What is the cost-benefit to establishing a rotation of pet project courses, especially considering reduced turnover? An adjunct could cover the lost sections of first year writing courses for approximately six instructors a year, granting those instructors the opportunity of sharing the delight which drew them to the discipline in the first place. The cost of the additional adjunct could very likely be offset by the improved staff retention, generated from the ability to demonstrate their versatility and occupational value.

Improved student retention may also result from SF's greater sense of connection and relevance. While students may struggle to relate to British literature, literature by women or Southern literature surely provides easier access. Likewise, students have often encountered SF in other forms of narrative, which may help it feel just as familiar. What is more, when courses are taught dynamically with strong interdisciplinary connections, learners have the opportunity to engage with the meaningful, highly transferable, and esteemed learning for which literature courses are known.

Finally, barring all other options, we can do what many already have done: shoehorn our passions into regular courses, eking out small measures of joy where we can. We may select favored readings for a literary analysis paper in ENG 112, for example.

Within the relatively recent eight-week model, this leaves little room for meaningful engagement with thought provoking materials, but it does, at the very least, expose learners to something new in an ersatz educational experience. In the wan face of such a depressing representation of our field, is it not time to demonstrate African American Literature, Literature by Women, Southern Literature, and yes, Science Fiction as more academically significant than free electives and raw credits?

Conclusion

Science fiction has long been denied a place within our course catalogs. With the recent report about the return on investment of the Great 58 (Lightcast) and a quick survey of NCCCS mission statements, one can easily identify a hyperfocus on innovation, especially as it pertains to jobs. We have all heard the clichéd remark, "We must prepare students for occupations which do not yet exist," but we consistently deny students the most accessible means of doing so. I cannot fathom a more effective avenue than SF, especially considering the direct connections between much of our current world and the imaginations of SF titans who came before—the number of prescient technological predictions made by Ray Bradbury alone is staggering. Science fiction does more than simply prepare students for an unprecedented future, bolster critical thinking skills, and develop greater resiliency for change; it also furthers our missions as community colleges. Should any instructors be interested in engaging with the genre, I am happy to share any and all of my materials.

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