

Jessica Roberts, “Teaching Literature and History of Medicine in the National Health Service.” *Configurations* 26.3 (Summer 2018): 345-351.

Abigail Droge’s review of Jessica Roberts’s article is designed to be read in conjunction with her previous review of Kathryn Strong Hansen, “Literature for Specific Purposes: A Literary Approach to Teaching Ethics in Science and Technology” (*Configurations* 26.3, Summer 2018), also in this issue.

If Kathryn Strong Hansen’s method of “literature for specific purposes” (*Configurations* 26.3, Summer 2018) moves literature into science and engineering fields, then Jessica Roberts pushes literature out of its comfort zone farther still. Expanding beyond the university setting entirely, Roberts demonstrates the impact of literary engagement in the workplace, focusing on the professional context of the United Kingdom’s National Health Service (NHS). Roberts generously frames her article as a response to my Summer 2017 essay in *JLS*, “Teaching Literature and Science in Silicon Valley”, and I am excited to have the opportunity to continue the dialogue here. Engaging with Roberts prompts me to reread my own work with a new outlook. Most importantly, Roberts’s positive experience as the employee of an organization that “does expect and desire that [she] exercise [her] subject specialist knowledge” (345) – a doctorate in “nineteenth-century medicine and the periodical press” (346) – offers a useful corrective to my original pessimistic tendency to assume that humanistic values would too often be corrupted by their applications in industry.

Roberts centers her article on a workshop that employed literature and the history of medicine to engage participants in important questions related to Quality Improvement (QI) within the healthcare system. Through her work with the Haelo Innovation and Improvement Science Centre within the NHS, Roberts facilitates courses that “aim to improve patient experiences or outcomes by changing processes or implementing new care pathways” (346). In September 2017, she and Haelo CEO Professor Maxine Power co-led a session for a group of nurses, anesthetists, surgeons, and QI managers which “focused on common problems teams experience regarding engaging stakeholders and diffusing innovation” (346). Roberts details several vignettes that she draws from nineteenth-century literature and medical history, in order to demonstrate various takeaways for her audience. For instance, an account of Humphry Davy’s life, including his invention of the miner’s safety lamp, his unsafe experimentation practices, and “the moment that he noted the anesthetic properties of nitrous oxide”, allows Roberts to “build a narrative of an innovator who engaged in work outside of his job remit but failed to spread the potential innovation of pain-free surgery” (348). By encouraging participants to “identify a Davy-figure in their organization, somebody who drives innovations but does not have the means to diffuse them”, Roberts emphasizes the lesson that “while innovators should be allowed the freedom and space to exercise their creativity where possible, the early adopters should be identified and nurtured as well” (348).

The powerful construct of matching a distilled and actionable “point” (348) to a historical example continues in two further case studies. A discussion of the role of the nineteenth-century periodical press in validating the practice of blood transfusions with a middle-class reading public underscores the current “importance of

communication of improvement work”, which in turn encourages QI teams to “come together to share and exchange knowledge, . . . and support, coach, or mentor one another” (349). Finally, paired excerpts from Edwin Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population* and Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* help to emphasize “the affective power that data could have” and the importance of including “the human element” (349) of “patient stories” (351) when “engaging influential stakeholders in QI projects” (349).

Since Victorian Studies is my own field, the nineteenth-century examples that Roberts highlights particularly excite me. Speaking of the healthcare industry, Roberts writes that workshop participants “gain a meta-cognition about the institution they are working within” (347). Audience members “realize that they are part of a history of a struggle for improvement and innovation” and “begin to see similarities as well as differences between themselves and their nineteenth-century counterparts” (347). The centrality of the Victorian era to so many of our modern institutions makes it a rich site of relevant paradigms and case studies, which could be used to expand and adapt Roberts’s methodology into other workplace settings. I recently taught a class at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), for instance, that paired Victorian literature with the twenty-first century repercussions and legacies of industrialism, including issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and education reform. One can therefore imagine multiple ways in which workshops similar to the one Roberts presents – which “encouraged participants to interrogate how relevant each vignette is to their individual . . . experience” – could be adapted to a wide range of corporate contexts, catalyzing more “stimulating conversations about the intersections and divisions” between past and present (351).

The uplifting and constructive tone of both Roberts’s and Hansen’s pieces avoids a pitfall that can arise when humanities disciplines are brought into scientific contexts as examples of ethical or practical behaviors. This danger is, namely, that the humanistic discipline becomes the high and mighty voice of morality, meant to enlighten scientists and professionals who, in stereotype, range from misguided and ill-informed at best to malicious and negligent at worst. If such a dynamic exists, an exercise meant to export and apply literature in new settings can quickly create further separation between disciplines, rather than building bridges. The answer to application cannot be pre-scripted; rather, it must be a product of collaborative discovery. Toeing this line was an extremely important element of our class discussions in “Reading with Scientists,” a course that I taught through the UCSB English Department in Fall 2018. The “with” here is crucial: humanists must approach the interdisciplinary situation with a spirit of camaraderie and mutual learning: reading *with*, rather than reading *at*, *to*, or *for*. Throughout the quarter, we emphasized that both humanists and scientists have an obligation to act ethically, to make each discipline intelligible to the other, and to break down stereotypes through peer-to-peer communication. The power of workshops and lesson plans like those provided by Roberts and Hansen is that they assume that ethics is already an ongoing conversation within a scientific discipline or workplace, which literary scholars can participate in and benefit from, in turn. (For a more detailed reflection on “Reading with Scientists”, see my review of Hansen’s “Literature for Specific Purposes”, above.)

Once again, therefore, I would encourage literary scholars not to see Roberts’s use-cases of literature and history as “supplemental” or unusual interdisciplinary encounters on the fringe of academia. Rather, I would suggest that, together, the examples provided by Roberts and Hansen ask us to rethink literary study in a fundamental way. Privileging the transferability, transportability, and translatability of

literary pedagogy that Roberts and Hansen demonstrate can help us to engrain the spirit of application in the everyday literature classroom, which has exciting implications at all levels of academia. A model of exportable humanities prompts us to reconsider two structural relationships: the connections between disciplines (both within the university and outside it), and the inner mechanisms of humanistic practice, teaching, and justification. How would our departmental administration, hiring processes, and publication structures look different if we centered the ethos of interdisciplinary application that Hansen and Roberts describe?

To close, I would like to consider the twin sites of digital humanities and public humanities as places where literature and science pedagogy can play a key role in shaping the future of such engagement and application. The class I have described, “Reading with Scientists”, was taught in conjunction with a public humanities project at UCSB called WhatEvery1Says (WE1S). The project uses digital methods to analyze recent news media at a large data scale in order to understand how the humanities are framed in popular discourse, with the ultimate goal of using such research to inform humanities advocacy efforts. WE1S is the product of a collaboration between three campuses (UCSB; California State University, Northridge; and the University of Miami) and unites scholars with expertise in multiple fields, ranging from technical and computational skills to historical, literary, and ethnographic training. I direct the WE1S Curriculum Lab, which bridges our research and teaching by bringing humanities advocacy into the classroom. (More information about the Curriculum Lab and its related courses is available at we1s.ucsb.edu/curriculum-lab/).

The daily practice of the project’s digital humanities methodology therefore enacts the kinds of cross-disciplinary collaborations that Hansen and Roberts present. The advocacy frame of the project also gives us an opportunity to promote the humanities in a way that privileges application. One of our main goals is to use our research to create resources that might help a range of audiences to find value in the humanities, whether it be college students having conversations with their families about what classes to take, humanities councils designing their programming, journalists covering the arts scene in their cities, or CEOs shaping the future visions of their companies. It is this frontier of public humanities – a humanities alive and active in the world outside of departmental constraints, able to engage with scientists, engineers, employers, and professionals – that I think most strongly resonates with the values embraced by Hansen and Roberts. Both pieces provide generative and inspiring examples of what humanities advocacy could look like. Pedagogical practice informed by such possible applications thus has the power to reshape literary study both within literature departments and beyond them.

Abigail Droge

University of California, Santa Barbara