

*American Love Letters: ASECS Innovative Course Design*

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**Aims and Origins**

I first taught *American Love Letters*, the course I will describe in this proposal, Spring Term 2011 (April-June), and I will teach it again Winter Semester 2012 (January-April), during the upcoming ASECS conference. The course springs, at least in part, from the intellectual inertia of *In My Power* (2009), Konstantin Dierks's pioneering study of eighteenth-century epistolary culture in America. Dierks underscores the extent to which the rise of letter writing technologies empowered the white middle class, enabled social mobility, and created a stratified society in which Native American and African American communities that relied primarily on oral communication were effectively disenfranchised by high rates of illiteracy. He also provides an excellent overview of the complex global economies that supported the letter-writing industry and were, in turn, shaped by it. Framing the eighteenth-century proliferation of American letters in terms of Dierks's work helps students to grasp the historical and political significance of the epistolary texts we study in class and underscores the importance of examining eighteenth-century literature, culture, and history through a generic lens.

While British historians and literary scholars have long recognized the letter as a separate, important genre, relatively few early Americanists have studied the genre as such. Works such as John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* clearly have much in common with each other and also share similarities with other, less obviously related collections of letters, such as

William Hill Brown's *Power of Sympathy* or the collected letters of John and Abigail Adams.

Notwithstanding their commonalities, these texts are rarely taught or discussed as components of a coherent genre. By combining these and other, related sets of letters, this course helps students to understand that eighteenth-century writers responded to their generic predecessors as well as the immediate historical or cultural influences that faculty tend to emphasize in surveys or thematically organized courses.

The letter is an especially appropriate genre for study in the modern classroom because it is so foreign to modern students. Rapid technological advances have led to the resurgence of oral communication in audiovisual modes such as cellphone and Skype conversations, while the dominant textual modes of the twenty-first century, including email, Facebook or Twitter posts, and texting, privilege brevity. Few things are more foreign to modern students than the concept of drafting and revising a handwritten letter only to painstakingly reproduce it in fair copy. One primary goal of all my classes is to promote the serious self-reflection that results from sustained exposure to and the study of alterity, and the examination of epistolary culture has prompted my students to question basic assumptions about the most effective method of communicating their ideas. Many students reported that writing letters (which I require them to do), as much as the experience of reading letters, has shifted their conception of personal communication and prompted them to engage in regular epistolary exchanges. This result, even more than students' awareness of curricular content and its connections to historical events, is an outcome reinforcing my sense that the study of early American letters can be a transformative process.

### **Content and Organization**

The course is conceptually divided into three units: public letters on public issues;

private, familial correspondence; and epistolary fiction. Subdividing the course into these three units helps students to recognize the versatility of epistolary writing and underscores the point that letters shaped all facets of eighteenth-century life. By linking letters to transformative political events, intimate family affairs, and emerging literary movements I help students draw connections between cultural studies and culture itself, while also highlighting the relational networks of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. The first text we study in each unit is an exemplary set of British letters; we then move to American letters influenced by those English epistles and trace the emergence of distinctively American ideas and stylistic moves. Readings for the course are as follows:

- **Public letters on public issues:** *The Spectator*, numbers 1-4, 311, 313-14, 318-20, 322-23; Benjamin Franklin's Silence Dogood Letters; John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*; J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*; and Peter Markoe's *The Algerine Spy*.
- **Family correspondence:** John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, Introduction & "Friendship, Love, Marriage"; "My Dearest Friend," the letters of John and Abigail Adams; and *To Marry an Indian*, letters on the marriage of Elias Boudinot and Harriet Gold.
- **Epistolary Fiction:** Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*; William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*; and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*.

## Assignments

This course requires students to write in three very different modes. As mentioned previously, I ask students to write a number of letters throughout the course of the semester. Some of these letters, written to me, serve as a channel of communication that allows me to understand and respond to student needs, while also allowing students an opportunity to practice writing a formal letter of the sort they might submit in the future to a supervisor or employer. Other letters are addressed to family, friends, or loved ones and encourage the writer to enact for others the same interiority that they have witnessed in our unit on family correspondence.

Because of the potentially sensitive nature of these letters, and in order to protect student privacy, I do not read these personal letters, which account for a very small portion of the student's grade; students self report the writing and delivery of all personal letters.

Along with letters written to modern audiences, I ask each student to research one of four historical topics and, adopting an eighteenth-century persona, write a letter to the editor of an eighteenth-century newspaper. This assignment, more than any other, excited student interest and elicited excellent work. Asking students to inhabit history both engaged their curiosity and allowed them to respond to the assigned issue in a personal way. Because a letter to the editor is meant to persuade a public audience, I require students to grade three of their peers in a double blind exchange. During Spring Term, this peer evaluation was candid, constructive, and fairly graded. I am convinced that students learned more from this assignment than any other, and its success has prompted me to incorporate other alternative learning assignments in several of my current classes.

Critical analyses of texts offer students the opportunity to demonstrate a deep understanding of an individual work and the scholarly conversation surrounding it. I ask students to write three relatively brief (1,800 word) argumentative essays on three different works, one from each unit. These essays require students to engage current secondary literature and to situate the text with respect to relevant cultural or historical events. By assigning three essays instead of a single, longer term paper, I afford students the opportunity to learn from and respond to my feedback in future essays; this emphasis on revision is formally built into the syllabus in a requirement that students revise and resubmit one of their essays.

In addition to these written assignments, I give regular reading quizzes in class as a reward for those who arrive prepared to discuss the day's assignment. At the end of the semester

I also administer a take-home final exam. For this exam, I ask students to read Mark Dunn's very short modern epistolary novel *Ella Minnow Pea* and to craft an argument about the book that situates it in the American epistolary tradition, referencing at least one eighteenth-century work from each unit of the class. This assignment helps students to distill themes from each unit, familiarizes them with modern epistolary works, and asks them to apply lessons from the eighteenth-century to modern problems. The take-home essay was a popular assignment and students described it as a welcome reprieve from the traditional diet of exams.

### **Revisions**

The first edition of this class was taught during Spring Term 2011, and a few students complained that the class asked too much of them during the compressed, eight-week learning experience. I have not, however, substantially reduced the workload because I have in the past taught more demanding classes to a similar audience of upperclassmen during the regular sixteen-week semester without encountering complaints about the workload. I anticipate that switching the class to a semester schedule (thus reading *Pamela* over the course of three weeks instead of one) will substantially address the concerns of those students. Other changes include the incorporation of a day spent examining manuscript letters from the eighteenth-century housed in the Special Collections department of BYU's Harold B. Lee Library and the doubling of time set aside for in-class discussion of students' letters to an eighteenth-century editor and the historical issues on which they are written.