Cross-Course Collaboration: The Picture Book Project

One core component of ENG 415: Literature for Children is an illustrated text for young readers. In the past, students in this class have been asked to generate both the story and the illustrations for a book for young readers. While there have definitely been some fantastic results, students have often noted the challenges of this project—in particular, that it is more time-consuming than they anticipated and that they feel self-conscious or insecure about their skills as artists.

We reimagined the project in order to address students’ concerns and hopefully broaden the possibilities for the finished texts. We also wanted to give students a taste of how the publishing process for illustrated texts frequently works, since relatively few picture books are written and illustrated by a single person. Therefore, while students in ENG 415 still write the texts for their picture books, the artwork became the domain of students in Intermediate Drawing Exploration I and II. Essentially, the art students would work only with the text to create a spread (or illustration on facing pages), with no additional input from the authors. Students selected stories to illustrate from the ENG 415 class and got to work finding the right way to capture the simple emotional intensity of their narratives with shapes and colors. Once they understood the power of those visual elements, they went further with more descriptive imagery.

Our original plan for this project had the children’s literature students completing their texts by the week after Spring Break and then sharing them with the drawing students. The art students would then spend the last four weeks of the semester developing their illustrations. Finally, the authors of the picture books would generate a set of questions about the artists’ inspirations, efforts, and choices for the artists to answer as part of a reflective process for both courses. The timeline has had to change somewhat as a result of the move to online instruction. Now, the artists are working with the rough drafts that the literature students produced before the break and will return their completed spreads early in April. The literature students will still create reflection questions, but now they will also be able to revise their texts (if needed) based on the ideas they see in the completed artwork. Although this project was certainly not designed to be undertaken online, it’s also been a pleasant surprise to see how easily and effectively it could be completed in this mode.

As the students complete their projects, we can already see some great ideas coming to fruition. For example, the children’s literature students produced texts that were more ambitious than those of previous semesters and the drawing class has had to think more about how simple elements communicate powerfully. We are excited to see the final results of this cross-course collaboration and look forward to our students’ insights about the process.