

The Canon

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Felicia Truman

**Department
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PSU English Alumnus Angie Miller Named New Hampshire Teacher of the Year

By Felicia Truman

Plymouth State alumni Angie Miller, a language arts teacher at the Holderness Central School, received the prestigious New Hampshire teacher of the year award after being chosen from dozens of nominations by the NH Department of Education. After receiving this honor, Miller remembered her time at Plymouth State University and how her experiences as an undergraduate helped shape her into a teacher worthy of such recognition.

Miller was honored to receive the teaching award, and believes she won the award not because she is perfect, but because she has a teaching style that involves both the community and the parents of students. "My philosophy in class is not to teach within four walls. I teach with other teachers. I'm not perfect — none of us are perfect every day. There's a lot of pressure on student achievement, and when the community and parents are involved, student achievement is

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Students and their Pen Pals Learn about Literature and Life

By Crystal LaVoie ('04)

When presented with the challenge of teaching the act of reading and writing nonfiction text to the seventh-graders I student-taught, I did quite a bit of brainstorming. How could I make nonfiction interesting and relevant to these kids? Rather than assign the same biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Benjamin Franklin I was assigned in school, I wanted to try to make nonfiction interesting and exciting to my students.

My close friend and fellow Plymouth alum, Angela Hartmann ('05)

and I came up with the idea to conduct a pen pal project between her Native American ninth-grade students at the Santa Fe Indian School and my own students. My students read biographies of Native American authors, a short autobiography on Sherman Alexie, and a few nonfiction essays written by Native American students before receiving their letters. We watched autobiographical poetry performed by the poetry club at Santa Fe Indian School and wrote poetry in response.

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Alumni Updates

Scott Serano ('07) is now an Associate News Editor for ESPN.

Paul Martin ('09) created a monthly non-profit online magazine called Street Root Magazine with a friend. They are taking submissions from all who want to take part. Martin does the designing and helps co-edit the content.

Kenneth Butler ('99) taught at the Woodward School for Girls in Boston from 2000-2007. During the

same time period, Butler taught at Phillips Exeter Academy's summer program. For the 2008-09 academic year, Butler filled in full-time at the Holderness School. He is now in Portsmouth, NH, working on an MFA in fiction through Southern New Hampshire University; his thesis is an 80,000-word novel.

Derek Heidemann ('09) was recently promoted to marketing associate within Ventus, a company based in

Norwalk, CT, that provides infrastructure for the world's leading financial institutions, wireless connectivity for automated branch back-up, network monitoring, and security services.

Andre Beriau ('09) is currently serving in the education sector as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Beriau graduated in May 2009 and shipped off to Sierra Leone just over a year later. Beriau is also a teacher in the junior secondary school system.



Shawn W. Murphy ('88, pictured above with his students) is chair of the journalism department at SUNY Plattsburgh. The student-run newspaper he advises, Cardinal Points, was inducted into the college newspaper Hall of Fame on Oct. 30, 2010, at the 89th annual National College Media Convention in Louisville, KY. Murphy, who has served as faculty advisor to the newspaper since fall 1997, attended the Associated Collegiate Press induction ceremony with 13 of his student-editors. Murphy previously taught journalism and advised student newspapers at colleges in Nebraska and Oklahoma. To date, student newspapers that he has advised have earned 16 All-American ratings and two Pacemaker Finalist awards.

*Alumni and Majors:
Check out the English department Facebook group, PSU English Majors.*

How I Read

by Karolyn Kinane, Associate Professor of English, PSU

“Advanced literacy is a specific intellectual skill and social habit that depends on a great many educational, cultural, and economic factors. As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active, and independent-minded. These are not the qualities that a free, innovative, or productive society can afford to lose.”

From Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, The Boston Globe, April 10, 2005

Much of the reading I do these days should be called “skimming.” I skim web pages looking for the gist of an article, an answer to a specific question, or contact information. Many high school assignments actually trained me to do this kind of reading. For example, when I’d be assigned a chapter to read in a Social Studies textbook, I’d also be given a list of questions. By skimming for key words (i.e. “cotton gin”), I’d answer all of the questions correctly (“Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin”). I did not read. I hunted and gathered. I am now an excellent and efficient skimmer of online information.

But is “efficiency” a hallmark of good reading? When I read, *really* read, other stuff happens in my brain. I use my memory, remembering conversations or experiences I’ve had or other texts I’ve read. I use my imagination, forming new connections and wrestling with unique constructions of thought. Rather than myopically hunting for a fact to complete an assignment, my curious mind ranges freely among sentences, allowing the text to act upon me.

When my brain is active like this, really engaged in a text, I enter the state called “flow.” I don’t recognize time passing. I am completely absorbed. I am both out of my body (*ek-stasis*) and deeply rooted in my body at the same time. It is utterly delicious!

I have a theory that all English majors have at some point experienced flow when reading or writing.

What draws them to this major, perhaps unconsciously, is the desire to tap into that feeling on a regular basis. We’re looking to recover that particular kind of pleasure that lies beyond aesthetics, that’s rooted in the activity of our brains. Is this true for you?

I find that when I’m restless or bored by reading, it’s because I haven’t tapped into my own curiosity and energy. When I mindlessly approach literature as though it were an online article or textbook—when I skim—I deny myself the ecstatic experience of losing and finding myself in active reading. What a relief and joy it is for me to remember that all I need to do is close my door, tune into the book, and become lost in

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Aren’t we lucky?**

the mental aerobics literature inspires my mind to perform. Accessing that flow, that ecstasy, is part of our homework as English majors. Aren’t we lucky? We aren’t required to skim textbook material; we are instead, each evening, invited to plug our minds into a rich text and begin exchanging information with it, stretching our abilities to comprehend, imagine, and create.

Each hour we have the opportunity to be moved and absorbed—we simply need to remember that this is the goal of our reading, our purpose as English majors.

And so I invite you to come to your reading with a mind awake, eager to be fired up, to remember, and to imagine. This kind of reading not only inspires us to take notes, develop ideas, and ask questions in class. It also trains our brains to recognize patterns, to synthesize parts into a whole. When we read well, we have the big picture in sight and we rarely feel overwhelmed by and lost among details.

Commercials, web pages, and magazines target us by our age, gender, socio-economic class, and ethnicity. When we read these texts, we often encounter our own familiar version of reality reflected back

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New Hampshire Teacher of the Year Angie Miller

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raised,” Miller says of her teaching style.

Miller entered Plymouth State University as a young mother. She found that the English department was very supportive and helped her excel as a teacher. “The English department made my education. (They) modeled what I needed to do here. To teach I had to learn,” says Miller.

Miller admits that at times, teaching can be challenging and unpredictable — but then, with a smile, she adds that those same reasons that make her job so difficult also make it so rewarding: “I don’t know anyone who works harder than teachers ... to (teach) well you have to put a year’s worth of work in eight months.” She advises those students currently interested in becoming teachers to get involved in schools and with kids as soon and as often as possible: “Get into schools as often as you can. Substitute teach.

“It’s always unexpected but that’s why I love teaching. You never know. It’s never a routine day.”

Volunteer to be with kids. You can predict lesson plans, but you have no control over students, so be flexible. Your plans will be sabotaged. Remember to praise kids; sometimes teachers focus on weaknesses, but it’s good to praise them too.”

The only thing that can adequately prepare a teacher certification major is experience in a classroom, a place full of unexpected surprises. Miller, as a fledgling teacher, didn’t expect the disciplinary side of her occupation or the unusual occurrences that happened almost daily: one example is the day one of her students was locked in the bathroom when the doorknob fell off. Despite these odd instances, Miller enjoys teaching language arts and wouldn’t have it any other way: “It’s always unexpected, but that’s why I love teaching. You never know. It’s never a routine day.”

Pen Pals (continued from page 1)

Finally, after learning about our pen pals’ background and the *real* history and treatment of the Native Americans in our country, we wrote to Angela’s students. Many of our students had never received a handwritten letter, let alone written one. In the age of Facebook, Twitter, texting and email, letter-writing has truly become a lost art. After receiving and replying to the letters, my students wrote a biography about their new friends. So much for informational text being a bore!

Three years later, I am teaching ninth-grade English at Sanborn Regional High School in Kingston, NH ... which happens to be Angela’s hometown. She and I have continued the project over the years, where it has morphed into a unit

devoted to diversity and the understanding of other cultures within the United States. This year, I paired this project with Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, focusing on the ideas of racism and stereotypes. Together, Angela and I emphasize to our students that although they may appear different, they are actually more similar than they may have thought.

Through this project, many of the 300 participating students have developed lasting friendships and continue to correspond. Although our students are impatient when waiting for their letters, they do acknowledge that it “means more” to receive a handwritten letter from someone than an email.

Should I Go to Graduate School?

By Felicia Truman

As I near the end of my undergraduate career, like many other college students, I have been forced to explore options for my future and must make the difficult decision between graduate school and the working world. Both options are highly recommended, depending on whom you talk to. Many people in my life, including classmates, professors, and relatives, have been pushing graduate school on me, promising it will make me more marketable when applying for jobs and will guarantee that I receive more money when I do get one. This argument is highly appealing, especially since the job market isn't exactly secure. According to Melissa Sayers, a writer from EmploymentGuide.com:

Senior year of college, teachers, peers and guidance counselors turn into cheerleaders for continuing education. They recite attractive reasons to go: you'll make more money, get a better job and move up in your career faster. The extra years of schooling translates into about \$16,000 per year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Sixteen thousand extra a year sounds pretty good to me but with the economy as bad as it is, and more people than ever getting higher degrees, is

it really necessary for me to get a master's degree, or will I just end up jobless and swimming in unnecessary debt?

I think it all depends on the career I plan to pursue. If I were an education major it would be absolutely necessary for me to get a master's degree, but as an English major with a concentration in writing I wonder if experience would be more attractive than a master's degree, especially if I'm not 100 percent sure what I want to do with my life or even my bachelor's degree yet. According to Steven Thomas, writer of the Theory Teacher's Blog:

Many seem to believe that the best way to defer choosing a career is by going to graduate school. This is, however, probably the worst way to defer, because you never get to test out real career paths ... But more school is not always the answer. So, my advice is to defer choosing not by avoiding the world of work, but to defer choosing by experimenting with real jobs ... The upshot here is this: only when you really know what you want to do should you actually start applying to graduate school.

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How I Read

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to us. Literature is different. As English majors, we intentionally expose ourselves to texts that aren't necessarily "meant" for us. Perhaps they were written a long time ago, or by someone on the other side of the world. As strong readers, we rejoice in the opportunity to mingle with this "otherness." Watch yourself when you next encounter a strange or difficult text. What do you do when you encounter such diversity? Do you neglect it? Run from it? Disconnect from it? Or do you *get curious* about it?

I invite you to explore your own personal boundaries through strange and difficult texts. As you learn more about them, your own boundaries will shift. Your range of understanding will expand. You

will get more confident and fearless in the face of the strange or difficult. Ignorance can feel pretty scary, but it's temporary. We have the ability to activate our memories and imaginations to encounter difference with joyful curiosity. In fact, that's our duty!

Active, alert reading that fires the memory and imagination can carry over into the lives and relationships. We can learn how to prioritize sentences *and* experiences, to linger on surprising phrases *and* people, to explore confusing concepts *and* situations.

We are so lucky! Our homework assignments have the capacity to be gateways to bliss. Are you up for the adventure?

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It is obviously best to wait until you have decided your own personal career path before choosing a graduate school so that way you don't waste a large amount of money on something you aren't certain about. But what if you have chosen a career path already? Should you still pursue that master's degree, or should you enter the working world?

Some people would argue that you should do both. In many cases you can enter a job with a bachelor's degree and they will help pay for a higher degree if needed: "I'm teacher cert, so for me it's better to go get a teaching job and have them help me pay for a master's than going straight (into graduate school). That way (my employers) don't have to pay me right away, but if I start with a master's degree they might

not be able to afford me," says Meg Knight, a senior. So having a master's degree in many cases is less marketable than a bachelor's degree because employees with a master's degree are paid more than those with a lesser degree.

Ever since I was a child I was told that I would someday go to college and get a good job, but it was the part in between graduation and working that had been left vague. After researching the subject and thinking hard about the right decision for me, I think it is best that I try out some different careers and get into the working world before I think about graduate school. I am not completely ruling out graduate school, and think it would be fun to get a master's degree someday, but for the moment I am content with my bachelor's degree and excited to start my future.

What Are English Faculty Reading this Fall?

Liz Ahl

Currently reading: *The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories* by Steve Almond, *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void* by Mary Roach, and *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems 1990-2010* by Maxine Kumin.

Scott Coykendall

On my night-table I have *Discipline & Punish* (Foucault), *The Selfish Gene* (Richard Dawkins), and *Cloudsplitter* (Russell Banks).

Angela Ricciardi

Okay, I feel a little silly for admitting this, but ... *The Hunger Games*.

Robin DeRosa

I am reading Richard Russo's *Bridge of Sighs*, which, like most of Russo's books, is a humorous but melancholy character-driven novel about friendships and families. I am also reading Nathaniel Philbrick's 2006 history of the Mayflower, which argues (against popular mythology) that Plimoth was a bloody landscape torn apart by war and genocide.

SPRING SEMESTER DATES TO REMEMBER

February 16: Winter Carnival

March 21-25: Spring Break

April 4-15: Advising Weeks

April 18-29: Registration for Fall 2011 classes

May 9: English Department Senior Reading, Award Ceremony and Reception

May 20: Convocation

May 21: Commencement



Members of the English Department faculty bowling team (L to R) Joe Mealey, Karolyn Kinane, and Paul Rogalus. (Not pictured: Mark Flynn, Liz Ahl, Joe Monninger) Alumni and current students alike will be thrilled to know that our team, "The Little Lebowski Urban Achievers," is entering the Spring semester in second place in the PSU faculty/staff league.