

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal
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Ventura College

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Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status

Full Time Hire Date: August 2010

Previous Sabbaticals: 1, 2016-2017

Sabbatical Time Scope: Fall 2023 and Spring 2024

Statement of Purpose

I propose to use a sabbatical leave during the 2023-2024 academic year to increase the impact of our Children's Literature and Film class on students, instructors, and the Ventura community as a whole. As a course that reaches a wide variety of students, this class encourages a sharp examination of worldview and what is normalized and centered in "every-day" stories and film.

First, I will research and recommend library acquisitions that complement and add to the diverse materials taught in the class. Second, I will strive to bridge the gap between the English Department and the Early Childhood Development Department. This collaboration has the potential to mutually benefit all students interested in children's literature and film. Finally, I will create a Canvas course shell full of resources and assignments that can be shared with others who teach this class. In working on these three areas, I will investigate the feasibility of offering a second Children's Literature and Film class to build on the existing one.

Sabbatical Project Background

Children's literature and film classes are often an "afterthought" at colleges and universities. Does this class belong in the English department or in an education department, perhaps as part of early childhood development curriculum? At Ventura College, the English Department proposed English V18, Introduction to Children's Literature and Film, and began offering it in the fall of 2017 as part of a two-year rotation of English electives. The class has been popular enough to be offered yearly, with the possibility of increasing its listing to every semester at VC. All students are welcome to enroll in this class, although English V01A is recommended. English V18 meets general education areas: CSU C2, VCCCD GE area C2, IGETC area 3B, and IGETC Area 4.

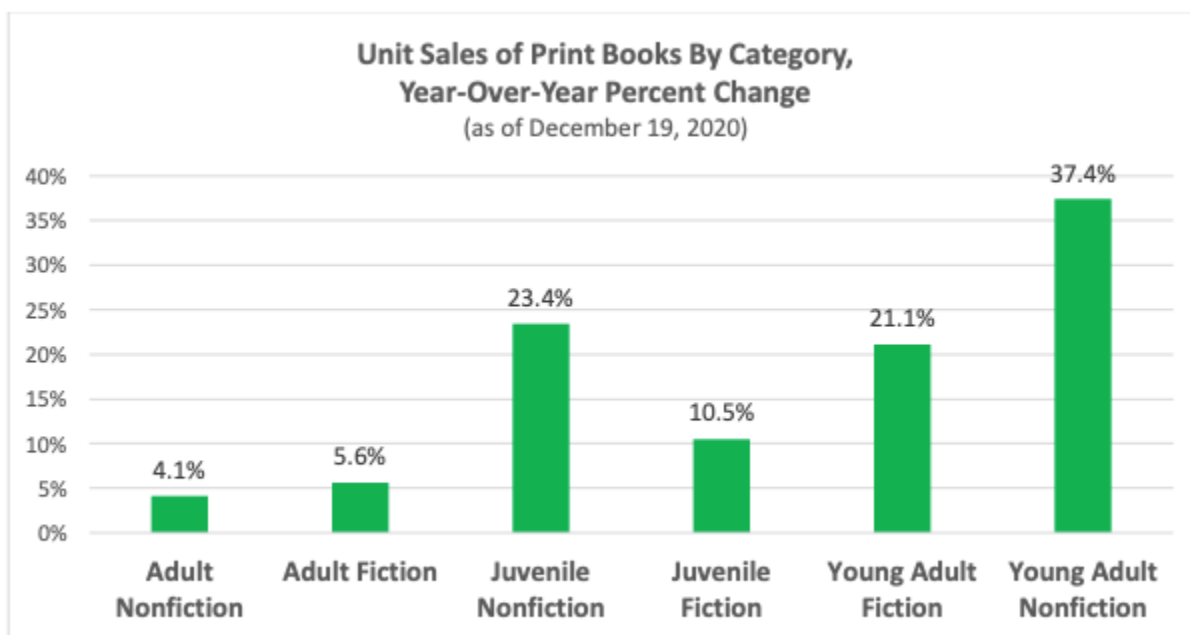
As the instructor of English V18 at VC, I have had the privilege to see the extraordinary impact this class has on a wide variety of students. The students who enroll are English majors, parents, future and current teachers, and those interested in thinking through their favorite books and movies. English V18 offers students the chance to examine the "importance of literature in

providing symbolic models of moral decisioning and the need to expand children's moral orientations beyond gender-linked stereotypes" (Tetenbaum). At every turn, norms around gender, race, sexual-orientation, disability, and class are questioned and considered. This class offers students a chance to evaluate the fairy tales, books, Disney movies, and TV shows they know and to consider the impact of these texts on their own worldview.

The importance of deeply considering literature aimed at children and young adults has grown through the years. In the 1980s and before, young adults often read the novels the adults around them read. In the past few decades, however, the numbers of young adult texts available has increased dramatically. In 2012, over 10,000 YA books were published compared to about 4,700 in 2002 (www.liveabout.com).

And not all of these books published are read by children and young adults. Indeed, "nearly 70 percent of all YA titles are purchased by adults between the ages of 18 and 64" (www.liveabout.com) suggesting that the appeal of children's literature has become universal.

In the following chart, we see the growth in publishing books for children as compared with adult fiction and non-fiction.



Source: NPD BookScan and *Publishers Weekly*, December 2020

As English V18 focuses on the literary elements of texts, graphic novels, and films made for children (birth through high school), the scope of the class is wide and the possibilities are boundless. My goal in teaching this class has been to ask students to carefully consider the impact of “ordinary” stories on their own understanding of the world. How does this literature question or reinforce societal norms and structures?

Controversy in Children’s Literature and Film

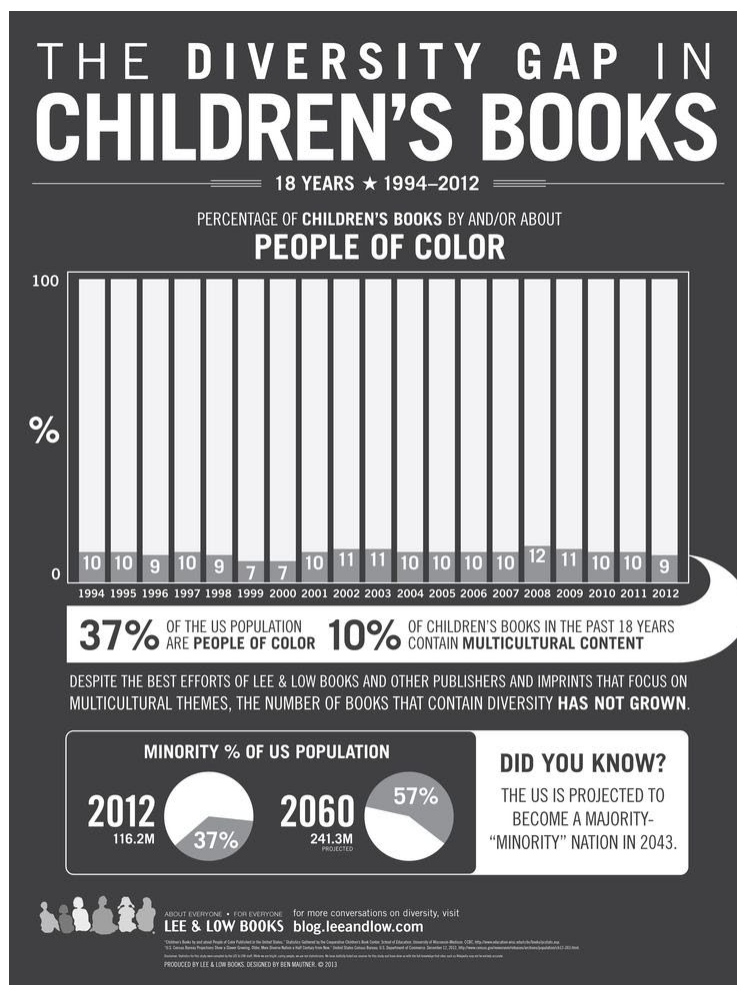
As the sales and publishing of children’s literature have increased, the industry is growing in other ways as well. Debates rage about what is appropriate for children and what should be made available to children in school libraries. Many question what texts should be taught and who should write those texts. At the center of these debates lives the reality that children’s literature and film has enormous power to introduce and reinforce worldviews.

Over the past several decades, more books have included LGBTQ+ characters as well as characters of color. There are now young adult novels that center same-sex love stories or characters with disabilities. These offerings, however, represent a “threat” to the conservative bent of children’s literature. After all, much of what we read to our children was read to us as children. And, unquestioned, children’s literature and film can stay the same for generations as we continue sharing our own history with the children of the future. A primary goal of English V18 is to examine what we deem appropriate, who we center in texts, and what this all means.

With stakes so high, many organizations (such as Diversity in YA and We Need Diverse Books), and movements (such #OwnVoices) argue that “the most important and prominent recent movement in YA is the increase in representation of diversity of experience in young adult books: skin color, race, and ethnicity, yes, but also religion, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, ability, sexual identity, and geography” (Carstensen).

Issues of how to teach young people about their own bodies are also central to English V18. Research points toward the way “American culture is greatly influenced by conservative and religious views that construct adolescent sexuality as problematic” (Smith). Middle and high school texts inevitably “reflect and communicate such dominant societal attitudes to young readers” (Smith). In an era where most children are exposed to pornography in or before middle school, positive ideas about human sexuality have never been more important.

The following visual shows the “diversity gap” in children’s literature. While most writers are white and center hetero-normative whiteness, the population of readers are not reflected in the stories being published.



This background on the changes and controversies in children's literature and film are meant to emphasize the burning importance of thinking carefully about the stories we tell children. Instead of accepting that the old stories are best, we must consider how princess fantasy stories impact our democratic society; how mental health and sex are taught so children learn how to take care of their minds and bodies; and how inclusion of the "other" in texts encourages empathy and open mindedness.

Sabbatical Project Components

- I. Research and Propose Titles and Resources to the Ventura College Library
 - I propose to read and watch broadly to learn about new titles for our library that could increase the diversity and representation of characters and experiences. I will work with our excellent library faculty members to find out what we have and how we might augment our holdings. I am also interested in figuring out how I might better use the Children's Book Area in the VC library as a teaching tool.

The goal here is both to increase my own knowledge as well as figure out how the students in children's literature and film can benefit.

- II. **Initiate Communication and Cooperation with Early Childhood Development Faculty**
Many students majoring in Early Childhood Development seek out the Children's Literature and Film class. I would like to learn how this class can be more useful to our sister department and discuss possible collaboration with the on-campus children's center.
- III. **Create a Canvas Course that Can Be Shared with Other Faculty**
I have worked over the past year or two to make English V18 a zero-cost textbook class. In doing this, I have accumulated much research and reading material for students. I would like to continue to expand on this curriculum development with an eye toward sharing materials with other faculty at VC and elsewhere. Depending on the new texts that I discover, I will work to develop units that teach the importance of exposing children to culturally diverse children's literature and film. The focus of these units will expand on the idea of what we define as a "normative worldview."
- IV. **Consider the Feasibility of Designing another Children's Literature and Film Class for VC Students**
As I strive to re-imagine our Children's Literature holdings and the English V18 curriculum, I will work with our department chair to consider the possibility of expanding our Children's Literature and Film offerings in the English Department. This might mean something like separating out the young adult part of the class from the early childhood portion. Once I have a better idea of what other campuses have done, an informed discussion of the best course of action will be clearer.

Proposed Research

The research for this project will be both academic and practical. Research into texts that are culturally sensitive and inclusive will be done using library databases as well as the course outlines from other institutions. Working with our librarians, I hope to discover the extent of our children's book holdings as well as our film and graphic novel holdings. I will compile lists of texts with an eye toward pedagogy. I will ask questions of each text (i.e., How might this be useful in teaching critical thinking? How are gender, race, class, ability, etc. portrayed?).

Value of the Sabbatical Project:

To Ventura College and the Community

Our library is used by not just students and faculty, but by the community as a whole. I imagine an area in our library dedicated to children's literature that inspires anyone who walks by. By evaluating our children's literature and film holdings related to English V18 and supplementing those holdings, the community of teachers, students, and children will inevitably benefit.

Future teachers of English V18 will also benefit by having access to a Canvas shell full of well-researched resources. I also believe that in reaching out to work with the Early Childhood Education department, the college community will benefit from this collaboration.

To the Instructor

I am eager to learn everything I can about children's literature and film. What began as a fun project to expand our English department electives has become a consuming passion for me. I want to turn my enthusiasm for English V18 into in-depth research about the pedagogy of children's literature and film. I am especially interested to learn new texts that center characters as diverse as our student body.

To the Student

I have grown passionate about the importance of children's literature and film. Every student who enrolls in this class was once a child and was shaped by the texts around them. I want to do everything I can to offer a chance for students to consider the impact of what we consider "normal" stories for children. I believe that these future teachers, parents, aunts, uncles, etc. can greatly benefit by thinking carefully about which stories are included in our canon and which stories are excluded.

To the District

By focusing on English V18's curriculum and import to the community, I believe this proposal goes a long way toward meeting the district's equity goals as we work to become "a leader in the development of high quality, innovative educational programs" (VCCCD mission statement).

VC Classes affected directly by this proposal

English V18, Children's Literature and Film

Works Referenced

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