

In Their Own Words. . .

The seventh installment in a series of profiles of our English majors

Laura Allen graduated from Mississippi State in 2010 as a double major in English and Foreign Languages and holder of a TESOL Certificate. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Cognitive Science at Arizona State University, where she already has a long list of research publications to her credit. I asked Laura to share how her English major has been important to her further studies and future plans.

Dr. Ginger Pizer

“...English, mathematics, and foreign languages are not about anything in the same sense that history, biology, physics, and other primarily empirical subjects are about something. English, French, and mathematics are symbol systems, into which the phenomenal data of empirical subjects are cast and by means of which we think about them. Symbol systems are not primarily about themselves; they are about other subjects. When a student “learns” one of these systems, he learns how to operate it. The main point is to think and talk about other things by means of this system...an English major is someone who is studying how to master the use of the symbol system.”

James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1969)

It’s hard to say whether there was ever a time in my life when I knew what I wanted to be “when I grew up.” Although I was intensely curious as a child, this drive to learn and question the world never really factored into my perceptions of schoolwork or my plans for a future career. So, when it came time to enter college and select a major, I was admittedly a bit lost. I was overwhelmed by the expansive list of majors and areas of study available to me and I found it extremely difficult to narrow down my interests to one specific major. I ultimately chose to focus on English and this ended up being the best possible choice that I could have made.

Although *arguably* less practical than other skills that I learned from my courses (e.g., writing papers and analyzing texts), perhaps most important to me is that majoring in English taught me about the strong power (and importance) of language. Before college, I never thought deeply about the words that I used or the multiple meanings and implications they carried with them. Words were simply neutral symbols to me – their only job was to *objectively* reference items in the world. Over my four years in the English department, however, that misconception was not only corrected – it was shattered. I learned that, in reality, the words we use *do* have power and that language *does* matter. Just as words have the capacity to describe objects, they also have the power to convince, to manipulate, to sway, and to incite to action. As George Lakoff put it, “English

does not just fit the world. English fits the way you understand the world via your frames.”

Once I began to realize the ambiguity and complexity of language, I developed a much stronger appreciation for the skills that I was taught in my English courses. What’s great about majoring in English is that you don’t just learn about languages and books and stories – you develop the skills necessary to critically analyze, interpret, and develop arguments about these sources. It is this perspective that can

ultimately benefit you in a number of different ways. You learn to question the things that you hear and read. You learn to debate. You learn to deal with constructive criticism. You learn to really wrestle with difficult and complex ideas. You learn that there isn’t just one answer to a question – rather, there are many possible answers that can all be interpreted and argued in different ways.

Currently, I am pursuing a PhD in Cognitive Science at Arizona State University. I am affiliated with the Learning Sciences Institute, which is a multi-disciplinary organization that focuses on understanding how students learn and on developing methods to enhance their learning. From a practical

standpoint, my English degree has been useful in helping me to make sense of complex issues and ideas related to learning and education. In reflecting on how a student learns, there are a number of variables to consider that range from localized issues, such as their cognitive capacity, to more global variables, such as the attitude of their



In Their Own Words. . . (continued)

teachers or their socioeconomic status. One of the biggest challenges I have faced in my research is learning to consider and think deeply about this host of variables, rather than simply reducing students to a number on an IQ test or a product of a bad home life. It is the critical analysis of these issues that has been key to my success in graduate school, and which is directly tied to the skills I was taught in my English courses.

Beyond the *skills* I was taught as an English major, the motivation for most of my research is also intrinsically tied to the knowledge I gained as an English major. As a graduate student, the overarching theme of my research is to better understand the cognitive processes involved in language comprehension, writing, knowledge acquisition, and conceptual change, and to apply that understanding to educational practice by developing and testing educational technologies. In other words, I want to identify and teach students the strategies that are needed to produce, comprehend, and manipulate language in ways that will allow them to succeed in any number of contexts. Ultimately, my goal is to work as a professor and to conduct and disseminate research that specifically teaches these language skills to members of underprivileged groups, such as non-native English speakers and students living in poverty.

David Foster Wallace once said, “There are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about in the great outside world of wanting and achieving. The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline...That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.” To me, this kind of freedom that Wallace is referencing – this freedom to think *well* – is the single greatest strength of the English major. Throughout your time in the English department, you will undoubtedly learn a lot about stories, and history, and human nature. You might learn to recite poetry, to teach a class, or even experiment with fiction writing. All of these experiences will likely teach you important skills that you will be able to use for many years to come. Most importantly, however, you will learn how to question, how to analyze, and how to interpret the world in a way that many people never learn. It is these skills that have ultimately been most valuable for me and that I hope to continue to develop throughout my time as a researcher.

Laura Allen

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Of course, our needs to continue to grow. In addition to supporting writing contests, scholarships, travel, and equipment, we have a growing Writing Center—now with five sites—that needs on-going support.

If you’re interested in making a tax-deductible donation to help us to meet these needs, please contact **Alex McIntosh, Director of Development** for the College of Arts & Sciences at MSU. You can reach Mr. McIntosh at 662-325-2646, or at amcintosh@foundation.msstate.edu. You may also visit our departmental website and click on “Friends, Alumni, Visitors,” then on “Support our Mission”.

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