My goal in the survey class is to get students comfortable testing the flexibility of literary history. I want my students to understand that while the survey class may be built around the idea of such distinct literary and historical categories as Romantic, Victorian, and modernist, these periods, in actuality, bleed into one another — many times sharing some of the same dramatis personae. Actively questioning how literary history operates as we move from Romanticism to modernism in the British Literature II survey course is more intellectually rewarding than, say, conjuring an image of John Bull rolling out of bed, stretching, squinting at a calendar, and bellowing: “Thank God the Enlightenment is over! Bring on the Romantics!” Such an image is good for a laugh on the first day of class, but that’s about it.

In an effort to experiment with the collaboration between literature and history in the survey course (and to nudge students closer to accepting the writers on the syllabus as more than just required reading), I had groups of students (two to three per group) design, develop, and upload MySpace profiles for a cross section of literary figures from the Brit Lit II syllabus. For four weeks in the semester, these groups pulled Blake, Burns, Keats, Mary Shelley, Arnold, Dickens, Christina Rossetti, Wilde, and Woolf out of the past and transplanted them within the, at times, self-indulgent world of MySpace. MySpace as a pedagogical tool in the classroom got my students to think about these figures as more nuanced than just rank and file members of their given literary periods — MySpace helped students appreciate these poets,
novelists, and critics as important links in an extended network of conversations that frame how we understand the nineteenth century. The role playing and social networking that make MySpace so popular with our students breathe new life into the literary figures on the syllabus as students initiate and manage speculative conversations in the same way that they, themselves, use MySpace to talk about the world around them. Such pedagogical applications of popular media are becoming more and more prevalent: Christopher Miller (2007: 44) uses Wikipedia in history surveys “to expose [students] to the idea that history is ‘created’ rather than ‘discovered.’” According to Hiawatha Bray (2007), Jeff Sarbaum uses video games (complete with alien encounters) to teach the fundamentals of economics at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. As this article will discuss, tapping into our students’ collective enthusiasm for MySpace and letting them lean on this familiar form of interactive communication not only gets them to defrost the literary figures they think of as living in the cold distant past, but lets them construct conversations that challenge the extent to which the walls of literary history limit interaction between periods in the Brit Lit II survey.

“And You’re Going to Grade Us on a MySpace Site?”
When I introduced this assignment to the class, one especially brave student asked: “And you’re going to grade us on a MySpace site?” This is a fair question: after all, MySpace is part of students’ social (not academic) lives, and the prospect of being graded on what amounts to a personal Web site feels unfamiliar for an English class. More to the point, students expect to write essays in English courses — essays that help them think through sticky interpretive moments in assigned readings. For MySpace to meaningfully add to students’ understanding of the long nineteenth century, I stressed that this project was more than simply designing clever MySpace sites. Grades were based on how convincingly students dealt with two writing prompts:

- A two-page “Friend Request” has each group member post a meditation on how two literary figures (from different periods) would interact on MySpace. Students base conclusions on what they infer from assigned readings and class discussion. This exercise gets figures from different periods talking about literature, politics, art, the perils of technology, etc.; and
- A three- to five-page group essay that presents and defends design decisions on the MySpace page. MySpace doesn’t require any Web authoring skills, and site administrators give users the tools to include biographical information, blog space, and default imagery such as background wallpaper, music, pictures, and

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videos. Students explain the significance of design decisions in relation to what we know about the figure from assigned readings.

In all, MySpace provides the Brit Lit II survey class with a unique lens with which to rethink assumptions about literary history. Just as important, the writing components embedded within this pedagogical approach require students to consciously take the next developmental step in their writing. Students cannot simply skate by with reports about the decisions and conclusions they generate using MySpace. Rather, students must argue convincingly about the sophistication and responsibility of their own decisions. When students inevitably ask “And you’re going to grade us on a MySpace site?” I’ve found I talk much more about the kinds of writing they’ll do and its importance to the success of MySpace in the English classroom.

**Friend Requests and Family Reunions**

When MySpace hit the “real world” of the classroom, the trajectory of the project stayed its course, but not without some provocative detours cutting across literary history. The written Friend Requests were how members of each group most directly engaged with other literary figures and periods. Students speculated on potential MySpace relationships between William Blake and Robert Louis Stevenson, Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë, Matthew Arnold and John Dewey, and Oscar Wilde and Benjamin Franklin. In particular, students used the Friend Request to give John Keats and Christina Rossetti a chance to commiserate about the frustrations of life in the shadows of other poets. The Friend Request helped Charles Dickens extend encouragement across the Atlantic to Abraham Lincoln for his antislavery political vision. Students even used this short writing assignment to speculate on what Robert Burns and John Pringle—who’s marble busts now stare across the aisle from each other at Westminster Abbey—gossip about when slack-jawed tourists leave the abbey for the day. Yet it was the Woolf and Rossetti groups that engaged in by far the most contentious and sustained back-and-forth through their Friend Requests. Woolf comments in a 1918 diary entry that if she were to put God on trial, she would call Rossetti to the stand because she gave up love for Him. One member of the Rossetti group (assuming the poet’s voice and reputed quick temper) balks at such presumption and fires back that “marriage and children would have interfered with my writing. I heard it took your poor Leonard three proposals before you accepted!” The responding member of the Woolf group stood her ground by maintaining a cool, critical distance: “Woolf seems to critique Rossetti and her religious life-
style, [but] Woolf's comments sound more like a concerned older sister rather than a rigorous critique of Rossetti's lifestyle. MySpace became more than just a venue for literary figures to air out hypothetical personal grievances—it allowed students to lift a passing comment from Woolf's diary and use it to parse out the relationship between two figures important to the Brit Lit II survey but separated by the walls of literary history.

The Woolf group considered itself a surrogate "older sister" to Rossetti, but this didn't stop Dante Gabriel Rossetti from seeking out his sister on MySpace. The Rossetti group posted a series of "adumbrations" from her poet/artist brother, which attracted a MySpace user (not connected to my class) with a site devoted to the life and work of Dante Gabriel. He was looking to reunite with his sister 125 years after his death, and he celebrated their reunion on MySpace by posting comments on Christina's site longing for her to "reach for me again"—presumably on MySpace. Getting Rossetti and her brother talking to each other on MySpace (however coincidental) segued nicely into class discussion about the poetic conversation happening between Dante Gabriel's "Willowwood" and Christina's "Echoes of Willowwood." It is easy to see how the networks students constructed on MySpace hopscotched into our class discussion as we interrogated the Rossetti's personal and poetic relationship.

While most students kept these Friend Requests between Romantics, Victorians, and modernists, some reached well outside the confines of the nineteenth century. Examples included Blake to Michelangelo, Mary Shelley to Gloria Steinem-Bale, and Arnold to da Vinci. In fact, one member of the Oscar Wilde group found a kindred spirit in Andy Warhol: "Wilde's writing has a paradoxical nature—Dorian Gray is a beautiful man with an ugly heart. Warhol's paintings and photographs are primarily of commercial brands and celebrities—an exploration of questionable market culture, capitalism, and celebrity." Admittedly beyond the intentions of this project, this student does gesture in the original direction of the project by grappling with how anxieties over intrinsic/extrinsic value don't exactly disappear as literary history moves from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

**Design Snapshots: Robert Burns, Matthew Arnold, and Virginia Woolf**
The design decisions on the actual MySpace sites (and the accompanying written justifications) exposed provocative facets of how the students understood their figures' roles in literary history. The stated purpose of the Robert Burns page was to "create a place for Burns within Romanticism." The group saw an unequal balance in how much attention the course syllabus gave to
canonical figures and used this inequality to ground assumptions about Robert Burns: “Burns gets an underwhelming two poems on the course syllabus compared with Wordsworth’s overwhelming ten poems.” As such, the Burns group chose for its default background imagery a rustic setting with flecks of purple dotting the landscape. The group explains this decision in relation to Burns’s patriotism and Romantic inclinations: “Above all else, Burns considered himself a Scotsman. For this reason, a rustic background (that any Romantic would be thrilled by) with purple thistle (Scotland’s national flower) is a fitting choice because it highlights his affiliation with Scotland and Romanticism.” The Burns MySpace site and the accompanying explanation reminded the class that before we can reasonably expect to use these figures to scale the walls of literary history, they must first have a recognizable home in their own given periods.

As the Burns group relied on visual imagery to highlight Burns’s place in Romanticism, the Matthew Arnold group kept their site completely bare of any ornamentation. The group premised their site on the simple notion that Matthew Arnold would hate MySpace: “In The Function of Criticism at the Present Time, Arnold states that criticism should ‘keep a man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing.’ The very nature of MySpace rests in the formation of a website devoted to one’s self, and by doing so, this suggests that the creator possesses the very ‘self-satisfaction’ that Arnold believes to be so debilitating. Considering this, Arnold would condemn the function of MySpace as it exists in the present time.” The Arnold site was devoted to critiquing the sites of other groups. Arnold takes issue with Burns’s background imagery described above: “Your adoration of Scotland places blinders upon your eyes. Unless you explore beyond the limitations of your homeland, you shall never know the world, you shall never truly live, and this shall be reflected in your writing.” Matthew Arnold on MySpace gave students the chance to see one of Victorian England’s most contentious figures act the part of the critic, as he unapologetically assesses the health of the long nineteenth century as exemplified in the cross section of literary figures in the class project.

The Virginia Woolf group premised their site on the kind of commercial it offers for business ventures. “Virginia Woolf’s MySpace page is a reflection of a woman who worked hard to make her business and career successful and the [site] is a forum to connect with other literary and artistic professionals as well as potential clients for the Hogarth Press.” The group included links to other MySpace sites dedicated to the Hogarth Press and the Bloomsbury group, as well as a link to a chronological list of Woolf’s bibliog-
raphy at the University of Alabama, Huntsville. MySpace offered something different for each of the nine groups in this project, and even a passing glance at the Burns, Arnold, and Woolf sites shows that pulling these figures out of literary history and getting them to interact with each other on MySpace gave students an exciting glimpse of how each individual shaped the nuances of the changing landscape of the long nineteenth century.

Conclusion
Jennie Nelson (1995) has raised a good point about the kinds of knowledge students bring to the classroom from a legacy of schooling. Nelson calls students “savvy insiders” because of how they actively interpret writing assignments, then apply that knowledge to tasks throughout their careers as university students. I think we can augment Nelson’s point by including the kinds of knowledge students bring to the classroom about the evolving communication techniques inherent in social networking sites like MySpace. MySpace in the Brit Lit II classroom doesn’t take a wrecking ball to the walls of literary history; rather, it allows students to take apart that wall brick by brick by posing the seemingly simple question: if alive today, would William Blake be friends with Virginia Woolf on MySpace, and what would their sites look like?

Note
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