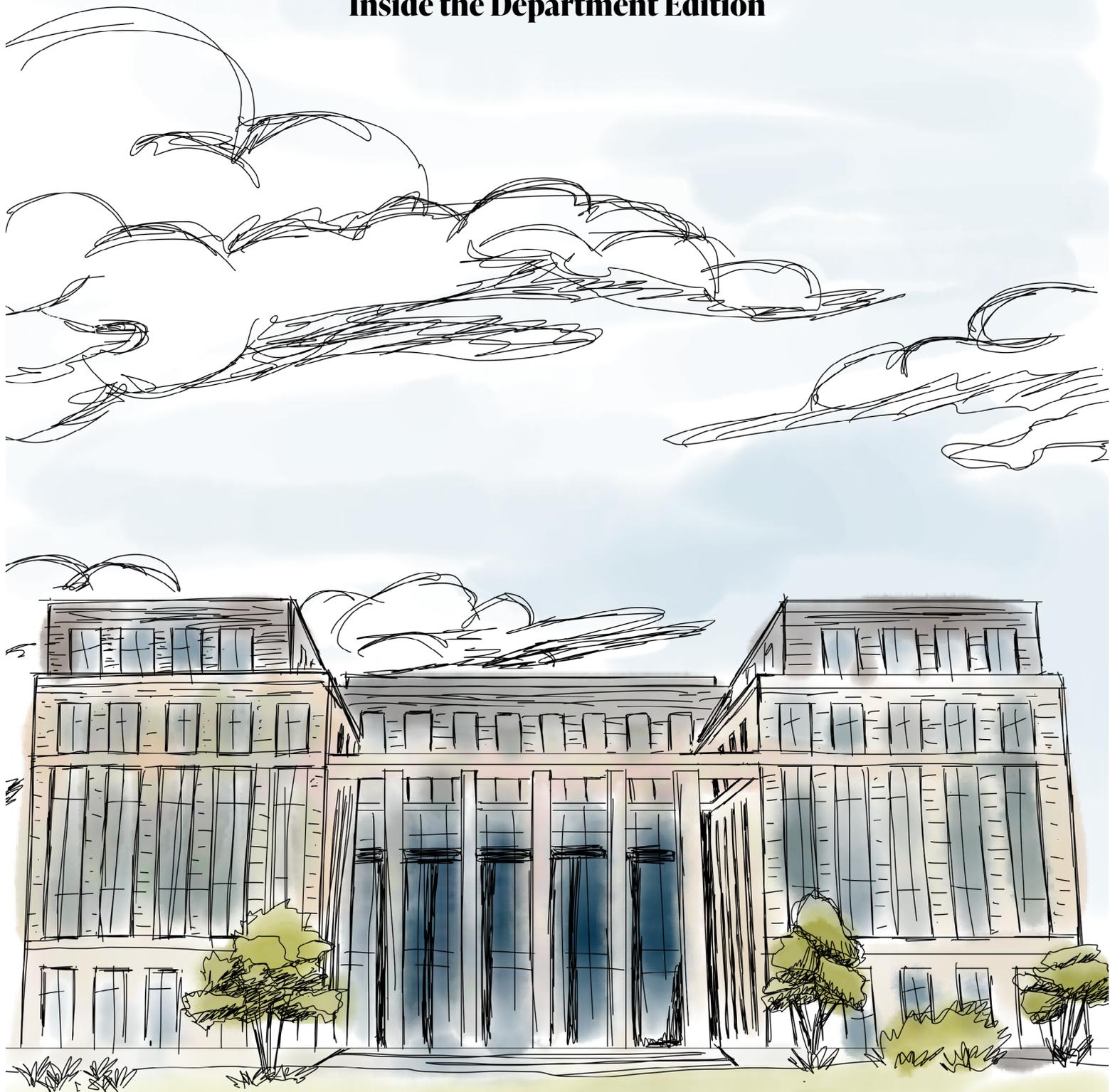


October 2020

The English Aggie

Inside the Department Edition



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Professor Profile

Dr. Joshua DiCaglio on Scale, Mysticism and Rhetoric

And yes, they're all related



If you asked someone what a mystic and a scientist had in common, they'd probably wait for the punchline. It only takes one meeting with Dr. Joshua DiCaglio, Assistant Professor in the Department of English, to learn that the two actually have a lot in common. Dr. DiCaglio explores this topic in his book, *Scaling Theory*, which focuses on the implications and foundations of rhetoric dealing with scalar dimensions ranging from the quantum to the cosmic. The book is set to be published next year by the University of Minnesota Press.

At the beginning of his academic career, Dr. DiCaglio started out studying English at the University of South Carolina where his studies later evolved into a self-designed major in the Rhetoric of Science and Technology. Going into his graduate education at Pennsylvania State University, Dr. DiCaglio focused his research on the Rhetoric of Nanotechnology. Through this work, Dr. DiCaglio realized he was working under a notion that we hardly understand: scale.

"I couldn't find anyone who had specifically thought about how scale gets developed as a notion or discourse," Dr. DiCaglio said. "This conceptual tool—scale—sifts between all these different interests, concerns, and rhetorical forms. It's there in the middle of them. When we talk about viral transmissions, we talk about them in one moment as microscopic entities, then another time we're talking about them in terms of planetary flows. We have just switched the way we are talking about reality, and we don't even realize that we're doing that or what the conditions are for doing that."

The power of scale as a conceptual tool is, to Dr. DiCaglio, extreme. "It's like being armed with a nuclear weapon and not knowing that's what you've got. That's what our rhetorical forms are. We have all of these incredibly powerful ways of talking about reality, and they're doing stuff to us," he said. "Literally, we're doing stuff to DNA. We're doing stuff on the planetary scale in the form of ecological alterations of the planetary landscape. We're doing this stuff, and we don't even fully understand the conditions and what that discourse is doing to us. That's what ultimately makes it a rhetorical question and not a philosophical one."

Through his research, Dr. DiCaglio found that when scientists developed or discovered a scalar view, such as Earth's blue marble image from the moon, they nearly always struggled to articulate its significance. Commonly, the solution would be to turn to the rhetoric of mysticism, even though these scientists and their findings suddenly became "unscientific." Dr. DiCaglio argued that there is a reason for this.

"Scientists find themselves articulating, in the most rhetorical way that they can, closest to mysticism. That's because mystics have



been developing scalar language for thousands of years," said Dr. DiCaglio. "Mysticism arises when one personally encounters reality outside of the human scale. Mystics develop language and practices for observing and working with these changes in scale. This is why mysticism is about scale, but it's also why it's about rhetoric: mystical rhetoric attempts to reorient you to nonhuman scales."

For anyone who has ever taken a class Dr. DiCaglio, mysticism is a familiar topic of discussion. The similarities between Dr. DiCaglio and his class offerings are not accidental. "My teaching and my research mesh together pretty well because I always teach the things that I'm thinking about," he said.

Dr. DiCaglio's class offerings for undergraduate students include English 481 Senior Seminars, in which he rotates topics between Rhetoric of Space and an in-depth look at the works of Phillip K. Dick called "This is your brain on information." In addition, he also teaches English 354: Modern Rhetorical Theory, English 303: History of Rhetoric and English 320: Technical Editing.

“It's like being armed with a nuclear weapon and not knowing that's what you've got.”

"Students will get a really interesting mix of things from me," DiCaglio said. "In one class I might talk a lot about science, in another class I might talk a lot about rhetoric, and then I teach the tech editing class."

"In certain ways, I am sort of a different person in each of [the classes]," Dr. DiCaglio said. While the classes he teaches might seem very different, Dr. DiCaglio does not think they should be considered entirely separate subjects within the English major.

"It doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, the argument is that you're better at rhetoric if you have a better sense of your rhetorical situation, then you can also do these very practical things," Dr. DiCaglio said. "As English majors, we need to get good at those things, rather than just refusing it."

For his work in the ENGL 320: Technical Editing class, Dr. DiCaglio received the CTE Montague Fellows award, which is a University-wide award, last year. Part of the award is dedicated to developing the Technical Editing Wikipedia project Dr. DiCaglio created, in which students analyze, interact with, and comprehensively edit Wikipedia articles.

"When I go into something, I really get into it," Dr. DiCaglio said. "I'm just really fascinated in what I teach."

Sidebar | Editor's Note

The Major Impacts of an English Minor

Even though I'm not an English major, my experiences with the Department of English have been the most impactful in my entire college career, and it all started with my English minor.

When I started college, I knew that I loved English, but I couldn't double major in both English and Business. Even though I couldn't major in it, I needed to figure out a way to be involved with the Department of English. I started with an English minor. The minor gave me the freedom to choose English classes that I found genuinely interesting. Many of those classes also counted for credit towards a Professional Writing Certificate.

My English classes were the highlight of my day when I was taking them. The professors were engaging, the classes were fascinating, and it's what I loved to learn. Through these classes, I gained valuable writing, communication, and editing skills that I can use anywhere—in my Marketing major, my current part-time jobs, and my future career.

I love talking about my English minor and my other involvement with the Department of English in my job interviews because it makes me stand out. Not many people in my major have an English minor, and generally, almost every workplace could use more people who can effectively communicate. The fact is, English is a marketable skill and one that is highly valued in today's workforce. With just 18 credit hours, I've made myself twice as marketable as any other student because I have a minor that shows I am well-rounded and ready to excel in any workplace.

Words of advice? If you can't major in English, get a minor. You won't regret it.

Open Educational Resources

Reducing the cost of textbooks is a noble goal, even though it may seem impossible. Within the Department of English and Texas A&M University Libraries, there were a few faculty, graduate students, and librarians who refused to see it that way. They rallied together to accomplish a task: reduce the cost of textbooks for students. With their help, the days of heavy and expensive books dragging students down by their backpacks and by their bank accounts are headed towards a bitter end. The solution is known as an OER, or Open Educational Resource, and it's changing how students will buy and use textbooks for the foreseeable future.

The Texas A&M University Libraries defines an OER as a “teaching, learning, or research resource that is in the public domain.” Free of charge and easily accessible, an OER can include open access textbooks, but also case studies, teaching materials, media, assessments, and software. In other words, it's more than just a textbook.

An OER can take many forms. While some OERs can be PDF files, others can be a simple Google Doc file, easily shared and stored as a link. Other OERs can be delivered via platforms such as Press Books. There are currently two OERs in use for courses within the Department of English: one recently developed for English 210: Technical Writing and another for English 104: Introduction to Composition. Both OERs were funded by grants provided by the Texas A&M University Libraries. Another OER for English 203: Writing About Literature is currently in the very early stages of development.

Sarah LeMire, Associate Professor and

WHAT IS AN OER?

The Texas A&M University Libraries defines an OER as a “teaching, learning, or research resource that is in the public domain.”

Coordinator of First Year Programs with Texas A&M University Libraries, was a key player in developing the OER for both ENGL 210 and ENGL 104. She explained how the project began as professors saw a need for more affordable textbooks.

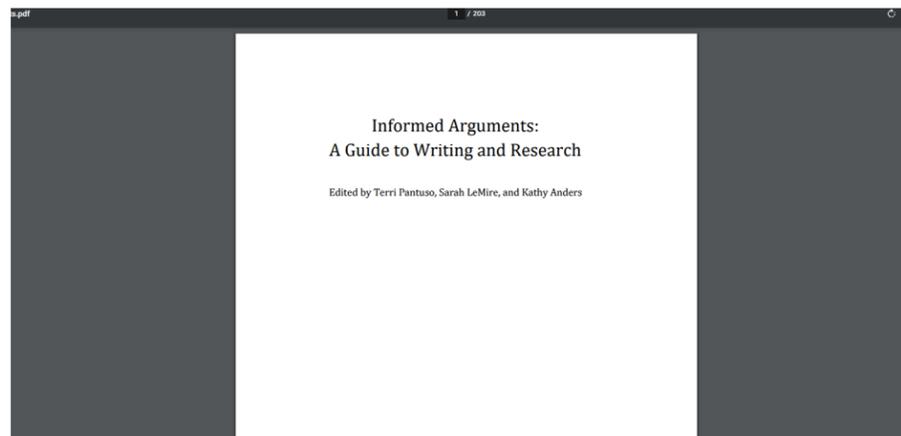
“Reducing cost barriers for students was really the driving force behind this,” LeMire said. “I think all of us as instructors have had that conversation with students who are having a financial barrier to actually having the text that is important to their success in the class. An OER would largely resolve that. Everyone would have a level playing field. Everyone could access the textbook for free.”

Dr. Terri Pantuso, Department of English Instructional Assistant Professor and Coordinator of ENGL 104, worked with LeMire and Kathy Anders, another Texas A&M University librarian with a specialty in copyright, to develop the ENGL 104 OER, which is in use for many of the ENGL 104 sections currently being

taught today. Their first edition of the ENGL 104 OER won the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) award for innovation. The team is currently working on a second edition, to be published in a digital format by the Texas A&M University Press.

While both the ENGL 104 and ENGL 210 OERs were synthesized, created, and edited specifically for the classes for which they were being used, the flexibility of an OER allows for a level of customization as well. The customization is meant to increase the cross-disciplinary relevance of the materials and the class, but it also allows for more timely examples and discussion points to be used each semester.

“[The OER] is really just teaching the skills and how you apply those skills,” Dr. Pantuso said. “So if we talk about logical fallacies and appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos, those are timeless skills to learn, but then you look at different writings that are done. We

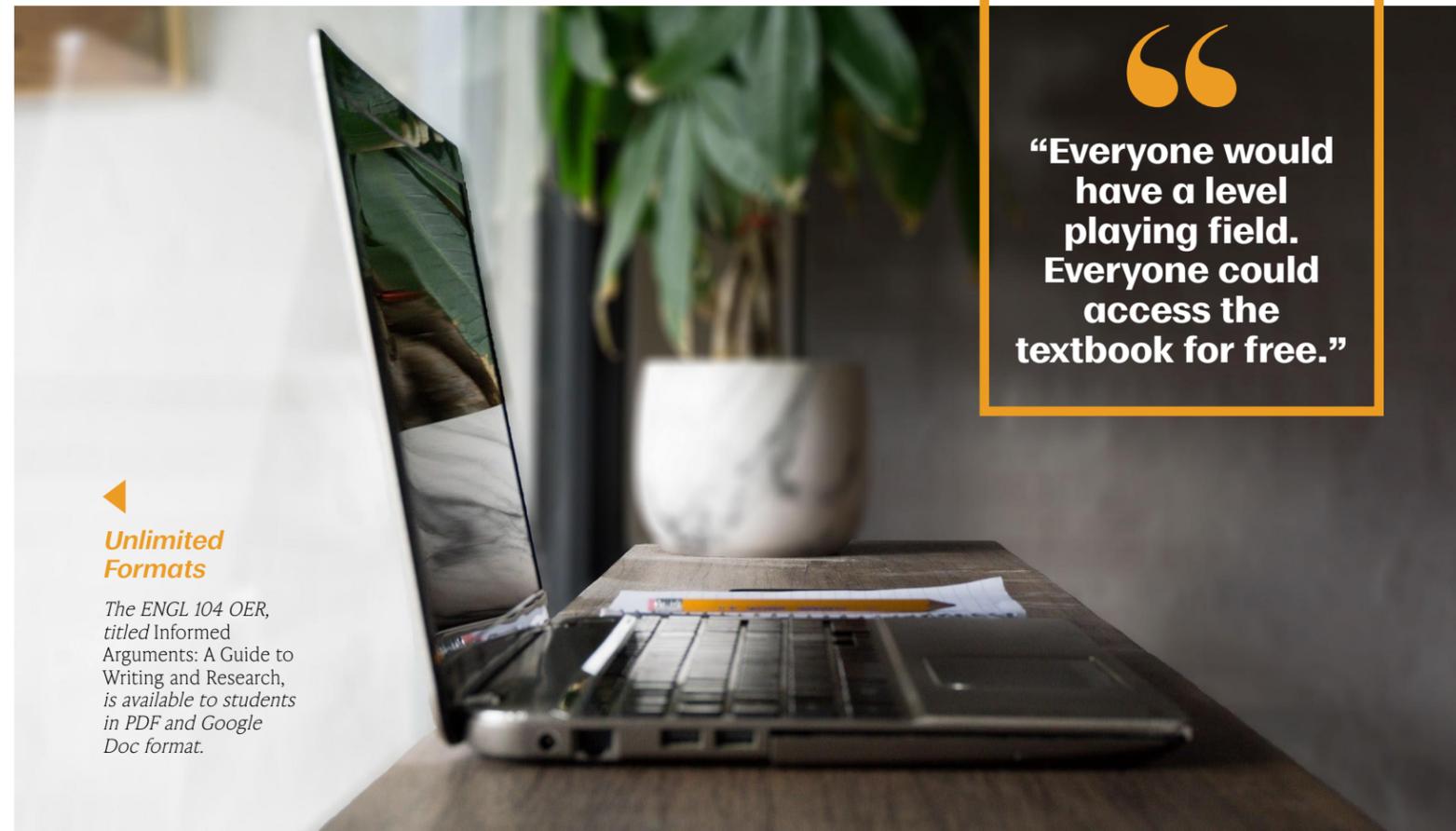


look at articles, we look at TED talks, we could even look at a Tweet and break it apart to see how different types of writing are all rhetorical and part of that discipline community.”

As many of the developers of the ENGL 210 OER will point out, the collaborative and innovative nature of the OER development process had a direct impact on the class itself. At the same time the OER was released, the ENGL 210 course was relaunched with more collaborative projects and assignments. Dr. Claire Carly-Miles, Instructional Assistant Professor and Coordinator of ENGL 210, said, “I personally was beginning to learn, in our [OER development] meetings, working together and collaboration really is an important thing.” She

OERs are born digital, making them free and easily accessible to students.

▼ Born Digital



◀ Unlimited Formats

The ENGL 104 OER, titled Informed Arguments: A Guide to Writing and Research, is available to students in PDF and Google Doc format.

The Changing Face of Textbooks

we want to take the course into, like making it more international and expanding the scope of communication across cultures. There's quite a bit of stuff we hope to add in the future, as we fine tune the OER and the course.”

Dr. Pantuso has even greater plans for the OERs. “I would love to see at least our Core Curriculum have OERs. Because if we could say that chances are in your first 45 hours at A&M you'll spend very little or nothing at all on textbooks, that is even more appealing.”

An extended version of this article is available on The English Aggie blog: <https://englishaggie.blogspot.com/2020/10/open-educational-resources-changing.html>

added, “That really is important and as we continue to revise the course, hopefully, there will be more interactive activities worked into it.”

In total, between ENGL 104 and 210, 37% of all English course sections are using OERs. For the past three semesters that ENGL 104 has used an OER, students have saved between \$65,000 to \$135,000 on textbooks, depending on if they are rented or bought new, respectively. In the one semester ENGL 210 has used their OER, students have saved between \$30,872 to \$66,284, depending on rented or bought new, respectively.

Looking into the future, the OER has endless possibilities for improvement. As Dr. Matt McKinney, a lecturer with the Department of English, stated, “There's also the vault of materials we haven't even had the time to add into the OER, or the other directions

First, what does the course look like? What will students get out of it?

The course is an overview of some of the chronological and historical milestones of the graphic sequential narrative—so we're covering some exemplary work from Will Eisner and Alison Bechdel and learning about the underground independent scene, but also dealing with some more commercial recent materials, like the comic *Locke & Key* which was adapted for Netflix.

I hope students are picking up helpful tools for analysis of comics. So far, I'm confident they are learning strategies of reading for craft, as emphasized in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and the cultural insights collected in Hillary Chute's *Why Comics?*

Beyond doing analysis of themes and techniques—such as how comic books employ a range of synaesthetics via different styles—there is a creative option available instead of a traditional research paper. Students who wish to try their hand at making their own brief comic narrative can do so in this class and then analyze their creative product in context with the materials we've read. We're going to have 3-4 guests via Zoom too, from comic book artists to the President of GalaxyCon, who organizes huge comic book conventions both in-person and virtually—and some professors, including one who is part of a BFA in Sequential Arts program in Missouri.

Who should consider taking this course?

The course is for anyone interested in narrative art. You don't need a background in comics but just that intellectual and aesthetic curiosity to wish to explore what comics are and can be. As it turns out, this current semester we have some students

Q&A

English 220: Graphic Novels is a relatively new course within the Department of English that explores the origin of graphic novels and how the format has developed over time. I spoke with **Dr. Jason Harris**, Instructional Associate Professor and the current Professor for the course, to learn more about the class.

who are big fans of comics, whether superhero classics or manga, and we also have some art students already working on comic projects, and students who have never been exposed to comics yet.

What inspired you to create and/or teach this course?

Dr. Vasilakis created the course last year, but I'm the first professor to actually teach it. I know there's some overlap in the texts between the version I teach and the original, such as Charles Burns's *Black Hole* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. I didn't actually learn about Tom Hart, who is a graphic novelist featured in this course, until I saw him at a conference a couple summers ago, but he is a very effective graphic memoirist. Students have enjoyed his autobiographical *Rosalie Lightning*, which explores the grief he and his wife experienced after the death of their daughter.

I've enjoyed graphic novels since I

was an undergraduate, and had grown up reading comics of various sorts. I even had a brief period of collaborating with a comic book artist when I taught in Michigan, though that project did not reach completion. In terms of appreciating the art of narrative, I was glad to try my turn at teaching the course, and my students have so much rich background they are educating me, too.

Do you have any graphic novel reading recommendations?

I'd recommend the materials on the reading list which includes Hiromu Arakawa, Will Eisner, Alison Bechdel, Charles Burns, Tom Hart, etc. but also for fans of fantasy, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and Bill Willingham's *Fables*. Certainly for literary merit: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Students are probably familiar with Alan Moore already too—particularly since there's the recent *Watchmen* adaptation. There's a new book out of the webcomic/blog *Hyperbole and a Half* by Allie Brosh, and that's a fun quixotic reading experience.

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“I see myself using this certificate in many industries, a few of which are the manufacturing industry and the marketing industry. I could work on more technical documents such as RFPs or I could do marketing by creating blogs and outlines for a marketing campaign.”

ANNA BOLAND '20
ENGLISH MAJOR

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“I have gained a deeper understanding of rhetoric and an attentive eye for style. My courses have involved real-world experiences, which include editing a Wikipedia article, a research publication, and a website. They have also taught me to analyze texts on a deeper level, looking for the smallest details or rhetorical choices and understanding their impact on the overall text.”

ELAINE SOLIMAN '21
BIOLOGY MAJOR, ENGLISH MINOR

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