



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

**<http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii>**

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## **Intentionally Adrift: What The Pathways Project Can Teach Us about Teaching and Learning**

**Bonnie D. Irwin**

Among the myriad books bemoaning the crisis in higher education published in 2011, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Arum and Roksa 2011) garnered the most attention both within and outside the academy. While Richard Arum's and Josipa Roksa's research deserves some of the criticism it has received (Brooks 2011), readers keep returning to the book and wondering about the authors' conclusions. There appears amidst the cacophony of praise and blame, a grain of truth: students in general seem not to be learning as deeply and broadly as their predecessors. Arum and Roksa spread the blame around: parents focus on credentials, students focus on social life, faculty focus on research, and administrators focus on rankings and budgets. No one, they claim, is really focused on *learning*. Students are left without a compass, it seems, academically adrift in a boat without a rudder.

Those of us who teach literature, however, want our students to get lost, "becoming lost in that other way that isn't dislocation but about the immersion where everything else falls away" (Solnit 2006:368). Literature professors have chosen our profession because we have all been lost in texts, reading so intently that time slips away, suspending our disbelief so that we are standing on the wall with Helen and Priam, watching the battle between the Achaeans and the Trojans. We imagine the epic poet's audience in much the same way: transfixed by the narrative, occasionally calling out to one of the characters and then surfacing above the sea of narrative and calling on the poet to sing a particular episode that will allow them to dive in once more. When our students, denizens of the eWorld (Foley 2011-), seem too distracted to follow us into the depths of story, we blame many of the forces listed above: vocationalism, budgets, helicopter parents, and the eWorld itself for their apathy. We believe students are lost because they have not followed the literary pathways we have constructed, and, indeed, often students are lost; other times they have even abandoned the journey completely, having discovered a far more interesting (to them) pathway away from the text and toward facebook, Hulu, or Pandora. The tools for guiding them back, however, are in the study of oral traditions themselves.

Certainly any professor who has been paying attention to students over the last decade has noticed that more and more of them are firmly planted in the eWorld, and the famous Beloit

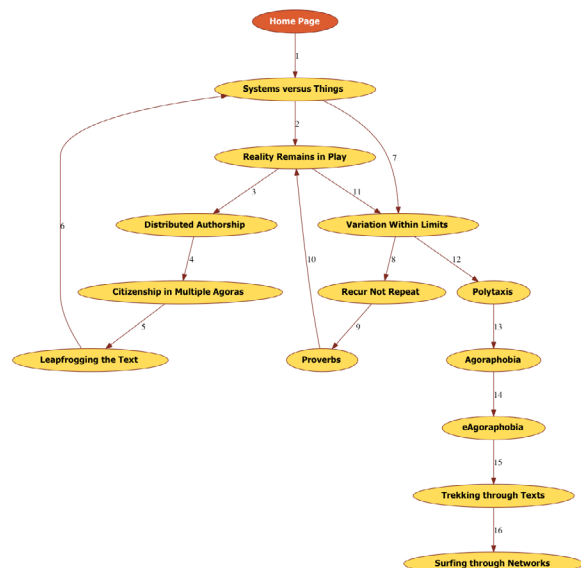
College *Mindset List*<sup>1</sup> has confirmed this phenomenon. The class of 2015 has grown up with Amazon.com, swipe cards, cell phones, smart boards, and music downloads (2015 *Mindset List*):

Members of this year's freshman class, most of them born in 1993, are the first generation to grow up taking the word "online" for granted and for whom crossing the digital divide has redefined research, original sources and access to information, changing the central experiences and methods in their lives.

The eWorld itself is a crucial situational factor (Fink 2003:62) that must be considered in teaching this generation of students. Just as we study the performance context of verbal art in order to more fully understand it, we need to look into the contexts of our students' learning. Given the many parallels between the eWorld and oWorld, however, this context should be particularly familiar to scholars of oral traditions.

The Pathways Project (Foley 2011-) provides us with an excellent model not only for studying texts, but also for teaching them. As I prepared to write this essay, I took the following pathway: Systems versus Things > Reality Remains in Play > Distributed Authorship > Citizenship in Multiple Agoras > Leapfrogging the Text > Systems versus Things > Variation Within Limits > Recur Not Repeat > Proverbs > Reality Remains in Play > Variation Within Limits > Polytaxis > Agoraphobia > eAgoraphobia > Trekking through Texts > Surfing through Networks ("Bonnie's Research Map"). The pathway allows readers to see how I navigated through the various topics and may encourage them to speculate about the choices I made as I read. In teaching, however, we often jump straight to the conclusion, providing students with facts or interpretation, but not with tools. What if we could amass the many conclusions we had drawn over decades of reading a text, laying the process bare for our students to see?

Readers of this essay might rightly assume that I began my own pathway with "Systems versus Things" because literary texts are things, whereas oral composition and performance are systems. One might also conclude that this writer sees teaching and learning as a system rather than a thing. Both interpretations are correct, and the fact that I returned to that first node twice more shows the process by which I began to construct the analogy that underlies this essay. One might interpret the fact that I doubled back on more than one occasion as losing my way; others will see it as a recurring theme of my study. How does seeing the context for teaching and learning as a system rather than a thing influence the way we act within it?



"Bonnie's Research Map"

[http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/linkmap/Bonnie's\\_research\\_map/0](http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/linkmap/Bonnie's_research_map/0)

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/2015>.

Just as we study *how a poem means* (Foley 2002:10), our students need to see *how* we read, rather than merely *what* we conclude. Lendol Carter (2006), in studying his own history survey, came to the realization that more than teaching students history, he wanted to teach them how to think like historians. This epiphany led him to explode the traditional structure of the history survey course, as sacrosanct as the literary survey is for some English professors, and focus on specific moments, concluding that if students had the tools, they could study any era of history with some measure of success. Similarly, if we teach our students the pathways of reading and interpretation, we may better prepare them for their own lives as readers and thinkers.

Each scholar and professor takes a unique pathway through a text. Interdisciplinary study further frees the literary scholar. It takes her down new pathways and generates new ideas that enhance the overall meaning of a work. In an interdisciplinary context, a work of verbal art becomes even more evocative. One reads or hears and one's mind immediately starts constructing new readings. Students, however, like poetic apprentices, do not yet recognize the more sophisticated pathways and are not fluent in the language of interpretation. They have learned, by the time they reach a college class, that there are multiple good interpretations of any work of literature, but they are not always aware that there are wrong ones. While most are not as lost as Anders Henriksson would have us believe—"The Trojan War raged between the Greeks and the Tories" (2008:11)—they can and will take missteps. In the torrent of information that overwhelms students, they will often be swept away because they lack the tools and the discipline that the scholar has acquired over years of reading and study.

If each of us reveals and explains our own pathway rather than just where that pathway has led us, students will eventually gather a range of ways of reading. They will see not only what a text means but also how. If one takes an extra step and lays this pathway over the process of surfing networks, a technique with which our eWorld students are already quite familiar, one can compare not only disciplines, but also systems. As students become more comfortable along the pathways of reading and thinking, they eventually overcome the obstacles of distraction or apathy. Subsequently, the classroom becomes a locus for distributed teaching and learning. Like "distributed authorship" in the oWorld, distributed reading and interpretation allow students to participate in the construction of meaning and integration of their own learning. As they acquire these skills, they will be able to navigate and surf more skillfully and drift more intentionally rather than finding themselves pulled under the waves.

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