Developing a book lust

Vampire novels used to teach reading, writing skills

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APTOS — Bella and Edward, the brooding teen/vampire duo battling with forbidden love in Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" novels, have made pale skin and denial of one's carnal desires hip.

Now, they can also take a bow for serving as the entryway to get more students interested in literature and writing.

Two professors at Cabrillo College have collaborated on a set of classes that teach students reading and writing skills using the "Twilight" novels and the horror genre in general.

Cabrillo English instructor Joseph Carter to create a thematic learning community, in which students take both Richey's reading class and Carter's composition class concurrently, allowing the two teachers to work together and plan coordinated assignments. They started offering the vampire and horror-themed courses last spring, and are teaching them again this semester.

This particular section of English courses is designed for students entering Cabrillo with reading and writing skills that are considered below the college level. At Cabrillo there are several different learning communities, which are designed to heighten the student experience and draw correlations between their studies.

"I do believe the students are getting more out of [the learning communities]," Richey said. "There is a lot of collaboration between instructors, and like professor Carter and I are doing, you can have integrated assignments. Studies have shown that course structures like these help students develop a connection, and they are more likely to come to school and more likely to stay in school."

It is not the first time English professors have chosen to explore depictions of zombies, monsters, vampires and other horrific creatures in literature and other media. Across town at UC Santa Cruz, English professor Marshall Leicestet has covered horror in classes, and this semester is teaching a course entitled "The Films of John Carpenter," the horror and science fiction film director known for "The Thing" and "Halloween." Supernatural creatures are common in literature as vivid allegories for everyday societal problems.

"We ask the students to explore how the ideas in the literature reflect the culture," Carter said. "I had one student, writing on 'Dracula,' who focused on how Dracula uses his own higher class position to manipulate people of lower classes."

The course covers other works from the horror genre, such as Bram Stoker's "Dracula," an Asian Rice short story, and even the film "Night of the Living Dead," while also delving into some literary theory.

"Twilight" has received mixed critical reviews — the Washington Post wrote that "Meyer's prose seldom rises above the serviceable, and the plotting is leaden" — and at times, the professors do have to use the novels of examples of what not to do.

"["Twilight"] is a pathway to get people reading," said Carter, who assigns the students compositions and other work coordinated with Richey's lessons in the reading class. "I'm not a huge fan of 'Twilight,' there is better written horror than that. But that's not all they are doing. We also read 'Dracula,' and for this level it is certainly challenging. It is Victorian-style literature. 'Twilight' gets them in the door, and they stay for 'Dracula.'"

The class is not just for swooning young women who faint at the words Robert Pattinson, the steel-jawed actor who plays Edward in the films. Guys can get into it too.

"You'd think with 'Twilight,' a young-adult romance, that the interest would be primarily female," Richey said. "But a lot of guys like it too. They are called 'Twihards.'"

Richey and Carter plan to offer the learning community again next semester, and perhaps in fall 2011, but they already have their sights set on picking a new theme for a future course set. The bestselling "Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" trilogy, perhaps?