

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Beyond Writing: Integrative Learning and Teaching in First-Year Seminars

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Campuses across the country continue to establish first-year seminars that promise students integrative and transformative learning experiences necessary for the twenty-first century. This trend inevitably challenges faculty members to teach in ways that transcend or subvert both their disciplinary expertise and their familiar, comfortable ways of teaching. These challenges become especially visible in the design and evaluation of assignments. At Columbia College Chicago, for example, where the majority of students aspire to careers in the arts, media, and communication, teachers have been negotiating the place of writing in a required first-year seminar in liberal learning. These negotiations play out differently within other institutional cultures, but almost inevitably engage common pedagogical questions: what kinds of writing should be required to demonstrate authentic student engagement with and understanding of important concepts? How central or marginal should writing assignments be to a particular multi-disciplinary course? What other kinds of evidence of student learning should be elicited and counted? These negotiations not only raise questions about how students learn, but also about how faculty learn: If I do not consider myself a writing teacher, then how do I meaningfully integrate and assess writing? If I *do* feel most comfortable teaching through writing, then how do I meaningfully

move beyond writing?

Multi-modal Student Work and Cross-Faculty Collaboration

At Columbia College Chicago, negotiating the challenges and questions of integrative learning has become the central business of a Teaching Academy composed of faculty members representing the full spectrum of disciplines in the College, including photography, theater, film, literature, history, music, and television. Faculty members join this New Millennium Studies Teaching Academy as Fellows at least one semester before beginning to teach the first-year seminar. The structure of the seminar, which uses a common syllabus, includes four units, each of which explores a dimension of “Identity and Culture.” The units unfold from “Composing a Self” through “Freedom and Responsibility” and “Ethics and Essential Choices,” to “Creativity and Conscience.” Class discussions and assignments for each unit revolve around one or two common texts, drawn from a variety of genres and media—from play to film to graphic novel. This is not an uncommon structure for a first-year seminar or even an uncommon model for faculty development. Perhaps less common, however, are the seminar’s twin commitments to: 1) having each student develop an original body of work in a multimedia course portfolio; and 2) having each teacher collaborate with colleagues through the Teaching Academy to design and evaluate innovative student portfolio assignments. The Academy has made a sustained effort to respond to the challenge nicely posed by Richard A. Gale: “It is well and good to say that we want our students to be integrative learners, but how will that integration be demonstrated and how will those demonstrations translate to the world of grades?” (Gale 2006, 9).

Student Learners as Artists and Authors: Creative Projects and Artist’s Statements

Students in New Millennium Studies at Columbia College Chicago create a portfolio piece for each of the seminar’s four units, each in a different medium, and each accompanied by an “artist’s statement” of about 500 words. In lieu of a final examination, students typically generate a more comprehensive “artist’s manifesto,” reflecting on their full body of work. Whichever approach students take to a particular portfolio project, and whatever media they use, their work is evaluated on how well they document their attention to the process

of creating it, and how articulately they can reflect on that process, not just on the final product. Each piece must demonstrate evidence of careful thought and planning; originality and willingness to take some risks; clear organization and focus; awareness of contexts and traditions; attention to detail; and respect for an audience of peers. Additionally, if students take a collaborative approach, their project is evaluated in the context of principles and practices for effective, creative teamwork. Students have opportunities to revisit, re-imagine, and revise selected components of their portfolios throughout the course.

During Unit Two of New Millennium Studies, for example, students confront questions about freedom and responsibility through Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In a literature course students might, understandably, be expected to write a traditional five-page textual analysis. In this integrative first-year seminar, however, students are invited to demonstrate their engagement with the thematic questions through music, photography, art, performance, or another medium. Representative options (students always have several from which to select) have included: producing a musical soundtrack for a production of the play; generating a series of original illustrations for a new special edition of the play; designing a website for a theater company producing the play; or designing an original poster and program (or even a full marketing campaign) for a specific production of the play. Prompts for these and other options are always framed in ways that direct students to the themes of freedom and responsibility and always suggest open-ended strategies for approaching the project. Students are expected to test themselves in different media through their body of work, which means that a prospective photography major may submit only one photographic essay and a prospective film major only one video, and so forth.

Each artistic piece in the New Millennium Studies portfolio is accompanied by an artist's statement. These artists' statements are written in students' own most authentic voices, from their own (often idiosyncratic) points of view, but cannot be superficial or overly casual. They show evidence of a student's sustained engagement with—and serious reflection on—his or her own creative process. Prompts for artist's statements invite students to explain what

motivated them to create a particular piece. These prompts ask students to narrate and reflect on their creative process, emphasizing key choices, difficulties, imaginative solutions, as well as what it feels like to “let go” of a project and share it with an audience. Students are taught that an engaging, effective artist’s statement is not just an afterthought to the work of creating, but rather provides a frame or lens to enhance an audience’s understanding of a creative piece. Such a statement is as creative in its way as a work of art is in its way. While these artists’ statements are obviously examples of “reflective writing” as distinguished by Dee Fink from “substantive writing,” their full meaning and value emerges only in dialogue with a substantive piece of art (Fink 2003, 116-117). Through this creative and critical process, then, students integrate multiple levels of understanding and purposefulness. They integrate writing with some evidence of learning beyond writing.

Teachers as Learners: Cross-Disciplinary Faculty Collaboration

New Millennium Studies instructors collaborate with each other through the Teaching Academy to develop compelling and valid ways to evaluate the bodies of work that are produced in response to their integrative assignments. This crucial collaboration depends on the cross-disciplinary mix of the Academy. Not surprisingly, faculty members from disciplines that traditionally privilege writing tend to be more confident responding to the artists’ statements, while those from the visual and performing arts and media tend to be more comfortable with the artistic productions. The Teaching Academy has, then, necessarily and happily, become a creative and integrative pedagogical space in which teachers become learners. Teachers engage each other in structured conversations about bodies of work that include, but are not entirely defined or circumscribed by, writing.

Teachers often find conventional writing assignments as limiting as students do. How many five-page essays on the role of Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* should even the most devoted Shakespearean read? Inviting students to respond in unconventional, yet thoughtful, ways to the “big questions” raised by texts can result in a heady sense of freedom for everyone involved, providing opportunities for fresh—and often wholly unexpected—kinds of insights. Visual, artistic, or performance-based

arguments engage and persuade differently than arguments grounded solely in writing. Neither mode of argument is inherently better. The potential for harnessing the illuminating properties of each—by using both in dialogue with each other—is limitless.

Like those institutions surveyed for “Integrative Learning Nationwide: Emerging Themes and Practices” (DeZure, et al, 2005), Columbia College Chicago continues to grapple with the implications of integrative learning and teaching for both students and faculty. Launched only in 2005, New Millennium Studies remains a new program without longitudinal patterns of evidence to document the impact of this integrative first-year seminar on student learning. Evidence is accumulating, however, that by moving so deliberately beyond mere writing, the seminar is educating students and teachers to value process as well as product, creativity as well as critical thinking, the visual and aural as well as the linguistic. Just as importantly, the New Millennium Studies Teaching Academy brings together teachers as learners in genuine fellowship. Teachers who learn together across disciplinary and departmental boundaries are much more prepared and motivated to help their students learn together to see and construct connected, integrative ways of knowing and communicating.

References

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