

# Notes on the Series

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I am pleased to introduce the third volume of the series on the first-year seminar to readers. Brad Garner's coverage of teaching strategies is a useful companion to Groccia and Hunter's work in volume II, instructor training and development. Here, Garner delves deeper into the strategies and concepts Groccia and Hunter introduced as they offered advice for preparing instructors to teach in the first-year seminar. In particular, he uses the literature on effective teaching as a springboard for discussions on organizing a syllabus, structuring individual class sessions, engaging students in the classroom, and conducting meaningful assessments of their learning.

The strategies Garner describes are not content-specific, making them well-suited for the more process-oriented approach typical of many first-year seminars. Further, because the strategies are generic, they have wide applicability across the range of first-year seminar courses offered on American college campuses and, indeed, across the entire undergraduate curriculum. While the volume would be an ideal text for use in first-year seminar instructor training and development programs, it is also a useful resource for anyone teaching college students today. I know it will have a place in my teaching library for many years to come.

When I read the first draft of this manuscript in the spring of 2011, I was in the middle of teaching an upper-level English course. I immediately regretted not having read it a month before I started teaching. Holding Garner's ideas about effective teaching and classroom management up to my own course, I recognized the myriad things I could have done differently, could have done better. This is not to say that I thought my course was going badly. In general, the students were thoughtful and engaged. They seemed to like the class. At the same time, I sensed there were things I could do to take my teaching and their learning to a new level.

As I prepared to teach the course a second time in fall 2011, I made a number of adjustments—some of them driven by own assessment of what had

not worked as well as I might have liked and some by the strategies described here. For example, I kept Garner's bookshelf strategy in mind as I planned individual class sessions, interspersing periods of lecture or discussion with group activities and reflective writing. In looking at the evaluations for the class, the days where I was able to do this most effectively were successful. In fact, students wanted more activities to balance out discussions of our readings and the very rare lecture I might deliver.

Yet, there is still room to incorporate more of these strategies in my classroom. I have always prided myself on learning my students' names very quickly, but I do not spend much time helping them get to know one another. While I would have incorporated ice breakers and other get-to-know-you activities without a second thought when teaching the first-year seminar, I do not do much beyond first-day introductions in my English classes. However, a student comment late in the semester pointed out the value of engaging in these activities in all courses, especially those in which you hope to have students actively engaged. I cannot remember now what prompted it, but one afternoon Arianne noted that the students in the class did not know each other's names. We took a few minutes to go around the room, introducing ourselves, and then returned to the discussion at hand. When I reviewed the comments on the course evaluation where students wished for more participation in class discussions, I was reminded of Arianne's comment. I wondered whether students would have been more willing to contribute to those discussions if they had *known* their fellow classmates.

In addition to focusing more on community building in my classroom in the future, I will also be revisiting Garner's suggestions on collaborative learning. This is a particularly interesting topic for me, as the course I teach concerns teaching writing at the middle and high school levels. Collaborative learning is a subject we read about and discuss in relation to the students' own teaching practice in the future. The students are typically scoffers, almost all of them recounting a negative experience with group work in the past. Paradoxically, students in the section I taught most recently wanted more group activities in the class, despite their vocal resistance to it. For this course, in particular, I need to invest in strategies that clearly demonstrate the value of group work to my students while offering models they can take to their own classrooms one day. Yet, as Garner notes, the ability to work collaboratively is an important life skill—one that faculty in a variety of disciplines can help students master.

Having recently reread this manuscript and reflected on the application of some of these strategies to my own teaching, it occurs to me that Garner's book is one that requires readers to get their hands dirty. It is not a volume to be read and then placed on the bookshelf. Teaching like learning is an iterative process. It demands that we examine our current practices, incorporate new strategies, and assess the outcomes of those approaches. This volume is an excellent starting point, but it will only take readers as far as they are willing to travel.

I invite readers to get their hands dirty as they use this book to improve their teaching, whether it be in the first-year seminar or another undergraduate course. As always, we welcome feedback on this work, especially as readers discover nuances and valuable innovations of the ideas presented here.

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