

Notes on the Series

As I introduce the second volume in this comprehensive series on designing, implementing, and assessing first-year seminars, I hope the readers will indulge me in a moment of personal reflection. I have been teaching at the college level for about 13 years now. Prior to going back to graduate school for a degree in English, I worked in student affairs. In this capacity, I *taught* students in a variety of situations—resident assistant training, roommate mediation sessions, disciplinary hearings, academic advising appointments, just to name a few. My training and professional experience in student affairs gave me a solid understanding of how college students learn and develop. I certainly was not a novice educator, but when I walked into that first composition class and took my place at the front of the classroom, I was keenly aware of my amateur status. To be sure, much of my discomfort was due to having to teach a subject that I myself was still trying to master. And despite the clear emphasis on collaborative learning and shared authority in the literature on composition pedagogy, I was still strongly influenced by the received notion that the instructor should be the master and commander of that classroom ship.

During my graduate studies, I also taught the first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina a couple of times. Here, I did not struggle with the content—my student affairs work had prepared me to address the more common topics in the seminar—but I did struggle with the emphasis on process. I was still very much a white-knuckle kind of instructor, holding on to the podium as if my life depended on it. I lacked the confidence in my own teaching—and perhaps in my students—to let them take the reins.

Back in the English classroom these days, I still experience moments of anxiety, driven by the notion that I need to be in charge. While I cannot claim that my classroom is completely learner-centered, I do try to give students more control of the learning experience. When I teach a course on critical reading and writing, I select the readings for the first month or so and then let the students pick what we read for the rest of the semester. In my course on teaching

writing at the high school level, I share instructional responsibilities with the students, asking them to present mini writing lessons in which I participate as a student with the rest of the class and to guide our discussion of the readings. Early one semester, students raised concerns about the common practice of asking students to write proposals in advance of final projects. Since that was an assignment on my syllabus, I spent part of a class asking students to help me design an alternate assignment that better served their needs and learning styles while still achieving some of the basic goals for the course. In all of my courses, I ask students to give me some informal feedback about halfway through the class, and I make adjustments based on what they tell me.

That I struggled during my first few years of teaching is not a unique story. In fact, I suspect it is an all-too common story on our campuses. Just like our students, any time we step into a new role, we are likely to experience some minor bumps during the transition. My challenges in the classroom resulted from concerns both about content mastery and delivery of instruction. As Jim Groccia and Stuart Hunter suggest in this volume, these twin concerns provide the impetus for faculty development initiatives for first-year seminars. The content for first-year seminars frequently includes topics that influence student learning, development, and success, such as campus involvement, major and career selection, substance abuse, sexuality and sexual relationships, health and wellness, and so on. Faculty may feel ill-equipped to address these topics with college students, especially if there is not a natural connection to their discipline. Some first-year seminars focus on a disciplinary topic of the instructor's choosing. In those cases, faculty may feel less anxiety about the content; however, the student-centered, process-focused nature of the seminar may present challenges to their preferred instructional strategies.

The first-year seminar was explicitly designed to help students navigate the social and academic transitions to the college environment. But it is important to recognize that the first-year students may not be the only ones undergoing a transition here. If the course is to be successful, we must also support educators—faculty and administrators—in their transition to first-year seminar instruction. Obviously, the first step in that transition would be some type of in-depth training experience exploring the goals of the course, recommended content, the nature of students enrolled in the course, and strategies for instruction. Yet, as is the case with new students entering college, intensive, one-shot learning experiences are necessary but not sufficient to support long-term success. New instructors need ongoing opportunities to

learn about the course, to discuss their challenges, and to receive feedback on their performance. Veteran instructors of the seminar need exposure to new content areas and pedagogies. As such, this volume offers advice for designing initial training opportunities for seminar instructors and implementing ongoing faculty development initiatives.

We hope this volume offers ample guidance in designing and redesigning faculty development initiatives in support of first-year seminars. We also hope that readers will find inspiration for more generalized faculty training programs. As the authors have drawn from the larger discussion of training and development, much of the advice here could encompass a campus-wide approach to training instructors that was inclusive of the first-year seminar. Such a comprehensive approach to faculty training and development would mean that my story would become much less common on American college campuses. And that would be a very good thing—for both students and those who teach them.

As always, we welcome your feedback on this volume and on the larger series of which it is a part.

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in Transition

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