

Taking Risks in Teaching

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June 2003

Prepared for *Perspectives* at Purdue University-Calumet

What is the main purpose of a First-Year Experience Course?

First-year seminars have existed in American higher education for almost 100 years. One of the most interesting features of these courses is that they vary from campus to campus, reflecting the campus culture, the characteristics of the students, and the stated purposes of the course. Unlike a Shakespeare's Tragedies course, an Introductory Calculus course, or an Introduction to Psychology course that look very much the same on any campus, there is no canon for the content of the first-year seminars. Most first-year seminars are designed to help students gain knowledge of and understand the culture of higher education, to introduce essential student success skills, and to develop a community of scholars within a larger institutional setting. Although many seminars also have additional and varying topical content, these three purposes are, in my opinion, fundamental to effective first-year seminars.

What are the important aspects of first-year seminars?

The concept of a seminar suggests that the class be a discussion-based, non-lecture class, where the students contribute to the teaching and learning that occurs in the course. A pedagogical approach that emphasizes active learning is most desirable. A caring instructor with a sincere interest in students is prerequisite to the creation of a learning environment where students feel safe, comfortable, and able to take risks. Small class size where students can get to know each other and the instructor well and where they can contribute to discussions is essential.

First-year seminars are most effective when taught in a flexible physical environment where student participation is encouraged (for example, in a classroom where students face one another rather than seated in rows). Participation in the course by peer educators (upper-level students) through team teaching or through special topic presentations enhances classroom learning as well.

What are the main challenges in teaching a first-year seminar?

One challenge I see facing most first-time instructors of first-year seminars is their fear of teaching something new and their reluctance to relinquish control of the classroom. Many instructors who taught in their discipline for many years are very comfortable being 'the expert' in their content area, but their initial attempt to teach a first-year

seminar, they find themselves uncomfortable with the new subject area. In a first-year seminar where the content is student transition and success, many instructors feel they must have all the answers and know all the keys to student success. This is impossible, especially given the fact that success, in many cases, is very specific.

Another challenge many instructors face is helping students transition from a “high school mentality” to a college mind-set. This is especially challenging for instructors who normally teach upper-level students. We must remember that the first-year students we teach in the fall term have yet to experience college level learning, and are essentially ‘grade 13 students’ at the beginning of the term. Our challenge is to help them become college learners.

How should this course be taught?

In my 25 years teaching the first-year seminar at the University of South Carolina, I have never taught the seminar in exactly the same way twice. The students change and the issues change, therefore my course must change. I have learned that the more I can engage the students in the course development, the more they learn, the happier they are with the class, and the better the learning outcomes. The old saying about ‘giving a friend a fish to eat or teaching a friend how to fish’ guides me in my teaching. My approach is not for everyone, but it certainly works for me. I have a broad plan for the class, but engage the students in determining many of the details.

I begin each term with a discussion of their expectations of the course and with the distribution of a general syllabus including expected learning outcomes, course requirements, and attendance and grading policies. I then devote a substantial amount of time to group building (learning names, getting to know one another, and developing a group). At times it seems like we will never ‘get to the meat of the course’. But experience tells me that if I don’t spend time creating an open, safe, and caring environment, the student learning later in the semester isn’t as significant.

I then engage the class in creating an operational definition of ‘student success.’ With my guidance, the students first create a broad definition of student success. With that in place, together we identify their needs as a class. What do they need to learn, what do they want to learn, what do they lack, what do they need to experience to become successful students? Surely, I could deliver a course telling them how to be successful students. After all, I’ve been teaching this course for 25 years. But I find that when as a class they identify and discover their needs, they are far more invested in the process, and the class becomes much more relevant to them. They understand the need for the class, and are not as cool to the course content and process.

With a list of topics required to help them become successful students, we then proceed to learn about the subjects they have determined. For many of the topics, I teach the lessons. For some, I have the students investigate the topic and teach. And for still others,

we invite resource people to class or visit campus facilities and services for a tour and presentation. The balance of the course is spent addressing their identified needs.

The final phase is one of the synthesis and projection. Through culminating academic exercises, they reflect on what they have learned about student success and project that knowledge into other situations. They are able to personalize the information and describe how what they have learned can be used in future academic endeavors and in life. Rather than eating the first I have given them, they have learned to fish for themselves.

Miscellaneous advice.

In a chapter on teaching college freshmen in a monograph on instructor development that I edited in 1999, Dianne Strommer contributed “ten tips for success in teaching first-year college students.” Her tips were

- understand your students
- clarify your objectives
- attend to the first class
- establish a climate for learning
- abandon the non-stop lecture
- involve students with varied activities
- provide opportunities for reflection
- take risks
- include upperclass students
- develop a support group

Good advice indeed. Knowing that teaching a first-year seminar is a unique teaching experience for many educators, in 2001 I extended Dianne’s work by developing “ten tips for success in teaching first-year seminars.” I think they might be helpful here:

- embrace high expectations and demand quality work
- learn students names early and use them
- demonstrate self-disclosure
- give students ownership for some aspects of the course
- involve students in teaching the course
- remember that process is content
- meet at least once with each student individually
- obtain feedback throughout the term
- provide opportunity for synthesis and projection
- know that teaching new-student seminars is continual work in progress