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AUTHOR Hunt, Russell A.
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ABSTRACT

The Aquinas Program is an 18-credit first year college learning community which provides a more effective way of ensuring support for first-year students in becoming members of the academic community. One of the most successful innovations of the program is an assignment called Occasions, in which a student convinces a certain number of other students to attend a local public event and then to write about the experience. The student then reads the others' reflections and writes a response, which is posted to an electronically-based class discussion. Benefits of this assignment include: (1) students' choice and organization of their own Occasions; (2) written reflections as public documents because they are posted to a web-based discussion; (3) increased writing fluency; (4) increased campus activity involvement; (5) larger poetry reading audiences; (6) student discussion about events and ideas; (7) wider student awareness of intellectual culture; and (8) increased ability to make connections between disparate experiences. (EF)

"Does This Count as an Occasion?" Engaging Students in the Culture of the Campus.

by Russell A. Hunt

Russell Hunt
St. Thomas University
Atlantic Universities' Teaching Showcase
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"Does This Count as an Occasion?" Engaging Students in the Culture of the Campus

For the past five years, I've been involved with an innovative, 18-credit first year learning community, The Aquinas Programme. More than anyone wants to know about this program is available on the St. Thomas Web site; what is most relevant here is that the basic motive behind the setting up of the programme was the intention to provide a more effective way of ensuring that first year students get as much support as possible in becoming members of the academic community -- that is, participants in the intellectual and social life of the mind which you can find, if you look for it, instantiated on the campus.

The programme entails creating small cohorts of students -- up to 36 -- who are all enrolled together in three of their five first-year courses. The particular section I've been involved in is called Truth in Society, and has involved, in various ways, a collaborative, writing-based investigation of the problem of how people come to believe the things they do. The five teachers who have at various times participated in Truth have sometimes taught the course as one seamless 18-credit interdisciplinary module, and sometimes as three free-standing but interlinked courses. However structured, the student spends 25 hours a week -- in some years, all of every Tuesday and Thursday, and eight or ten hours beyond that -- working on various aspects of this course. This year, for some of the time they're in separate discipline-based introductory courses, and for some they're involved in a collaborative investigation of a particular specific historical instance, chosen by the class, when people's beliefs were challenged or changed. Recent foci of investigation have been the Salem witch trials, the media coverage of the Gulf War, the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, the Scopes trial. But there are other tasks, all intended to help the students become active and engaged members of the academic or intellectual community. In our section, most of these assignments are writing-based.

What I want to focus on this afternoon is one of these tasks, which we invented at the outset of the programme and which has -- in my view, anyway -- been one of its most successful innovations. One of the things they are required to do is to write about a minimum number of local public "Occasions" -- mostly these are on-campus lectures, performances (readings and plays), gallery openings, concerts, etc. In order for the Occasion to "count" toward the course requirements a student needs to make sure (perhaps by persuasion) that a minimum number of other people (depending in part on the size of our cohort) attend *and* write and post a public reflection about the occasion; she then also needs to read the other people's reflections and write a response to at least one of them. And all of this has to be done within a set time frame -- we usually say three class sessions after the event for the original reflection, another two for a response, and we lower the curtain and count the takings. The most recent explanation of this process is on line as part of the ongoing current section of Truth in Society, at

http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/10069900/1006pt00.htm#occasions

All of this, clearly, is designed to afford opportunities for the students to participate in active and engaged

ways in the intellectual life of the campus community. But there are a number of aspects of this process which I think make it rather different from most other ways of seducing students into a campus life beyond beer and hockey.

One is that the students choose and organize their own Occasions -- within a defined range of things that might "count," of course: no pubs, no hockey, no commercial movies. Loosely, it's almost definable as public occasions they wouldn't go to otherwise. It is important that someone in the class has to take the initiative, and people who decide they'd like something to count have to persuade others to go. This, I believe, changes underlying attitudes toward the event in significant ways.

Further, the written reflections on Occasions, like much of the other writing the students do in the course are public documents in a way not much student writing usually is. At the beginning of the course they are written on sheets of paper and posted on the bulletin board in the classroom (because the section comprises three flexibly scheduled courses and the room is reserved for this course all day Tuesday and Thursday, students have time to browse through the documents and post their responses). At some point in the fall term, however, the venue for the reflections and responses is moved to a World Wide Web based discussion program, and the process of composing reflections and reading and responding to those of others moved to the computer lab or to students' home computers. The program we currently use is called HyperNews; it displays the postings in an outline format so that students can see at a glance what topics have been begun and who has responded to which, and can read postings simply by clicking on them. In this it is somewhat like the actual cork bulletin board in the classroom, though less tedious to maintain and *much* easier to read, especially for old folks like me with bifocals. To see what that looks like, you can go to the archive of these discussions from last year maintained at this Web site:

http://www.stthomasu.ca:80/HyperNews/get/tisarch.html

If you follow up any of the highlighted links on that page, you can see the overall shape of individual discussions. For example, the discussion of a poetry reading by the MicMac poet Rita Joe:

http://www.stthomasu.ca:80/HyperNews/get/tisarch/24.html

It is important to remember, too, that the writing produced in this process is not assessed in any way other than a stated requirement that the postings be "substantial and thoughtful." Students write in a situation where the only response to their text will be instrumental -- it will be a *response*: that is, it will not be a comment on the merits of their writing or their ideas. Normally, as well, it will not be a comment or response -- or, especially, a grade -- from the teacher.

What are some consequences of this little trick? I've not had time to do the kind of research you might want to do to establish convincing empirical evidence, but here are some things I think I see.

Increased writing fluency. Students rarely write telegraphic value judgements, in part because this is public writing -- in fact, the average length of the postings tends to increase steadily through the first few -- and then they get shorter toward the end of the term. But writing done in this kind of situation tends -- this is something I believe very fervently, and I've written about it elsewhere over the last couple of decades -- to become more rhetorically engaged, more flexible, more disciplined, and more fluent. One of the most moving pieces of student writing I've seen in recent years was a response to Rita Joe's reading, which is on the Web site, at:

http://www.stthomasu.ca:80/HyperNews/get/tisarch/24/2.html

Although the responses to these Occasions only rarely show this level of reflection, they are even more rarely perfunctory or thoughtless. The situation, I think, invites engagement very strongly.

Increased involvement in campus activities. Students attend events they'd never, ever have attended in other circumstances. Regularly the most common finding of any survey of first year students is that *no* students not in such a programme *ever* go to a poetry reading, almost none go to a play, almost none to a public lecture -- and Aquinas students regularly report as one of the most interesting things that happens to them that, for instance, they went to hear Rita Jo read, or attended a concert by the Gallery Singers in the Black Box Theatre.

Larger audiences at poetry readings. The first year of the Aquinas Programme people involved in organizing readings at the neighbouring University of New Brunswick regularly asked me where all the students were coming from -- half the audience at most of the readings was made up of Aquinas students.

Student discussion about events and ideas. In order to set these Occasions up, people have to persuade other people that things might be interesting. Two years ago a student with a Nietzche fixation persuaded eight or ten others to attend a Philosophy department guest lecture on Neitzche. It was apparently a disaster: even the Nietzche nut didn't understand it -- but I don't think it was a loss. One thing people can learn by such "disasters" is that there really are other people who are genuinely and actively interested in Nietzche and similarly recondite people and ideas.

Wider student awareness of intellectual culture. The sort of thing that happened with Nietzche is the worst that can happen; the best is the kind of report you get from students who have never heard -- never even conceived of -- a poetry reading coming away quoting good lines and images in their reflections.

Increased ability to make connections between disparate experiences. This one was a surprise to me, but students often find themselves analyzing a poetry reading from a sociological perspective, or considering the religious implications of a theatre production, or considering the rhetorical strategies of a political address.

And what are the costs? There really aren't many. This takes almost no effort to organize, since the students do most of the work. It doesn't need to be graded -- all you need to do is periodically count up the contributions (and *extremely* occasionally toss one out because it's utterly and obviously trivial -- actually, I can't remember that happening in the last few years). And, best of all, you can participate yourself. It gives me an excuse to go to things I might otherwise have skipped because I was, oh, grading papers or something.

Further discussion of some of the ideas, with attention to their implications for writing and literacy development, can be found in these conference papers and publications:

"On the Origin of Genres by Natural Selection: Inventing Genres Online. " Paper, Second

International Symposium on Genre, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, January 17, 1998. [http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/sfu/origin.htm]

"Present at the Evolution: Watching Student Writers Participate in the Development of Genres". Interactive Poster Session, Second International Symposium on Genre, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, January 16-17, 1998.[http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/sfu]

"Speech Genres, Writing Genres, School Genres and Computer Genres." *Learning and Teaching Genre*, ed. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway. 243-262. Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1994. [http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/genres.htm]

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Signature:	Printed Name/Position/Title: Russell A. Hunt, Prof. of English	
Organization/Address: St. Thomas University Fredericton NB Canada E3B 5G3	Telephone: 506-452-0424	Fax: 506-450-9615
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