

The Cultural Encounters Model: Incorporating Campus Events into the Honors Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Honors students are, almost by definition, committed to excellence. As a result, they tend to be overextended (Guzy). They also “tend to be more *eager, exploratory, and experienced* than their non-honors counterparts” (Achterberg 77). They typically take a full load of coursework while at the same time juggling clubs, learning communities, governance bodies, athletics, music, theater activities, and community service (Long and Lange 2002). One also assumes that they cultivate a social life and perhaps hold down a part-time job. Such a conspiracy of curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular realities can make it difficult for honors students to engage fully in the cultural resources available to them on a college campus.

To provide opportunity and encouragement for honors students to experience Ithaca College’s unique culture and identity, we have developed an honors seminar called “Cultural Encounters with Ithaca.” In this course, students identify, publicize, attend, discuss, and reflect on a number of campus events. Ultimately, they come away with a deeper understanding of their college’s culture and identity as well as a feeling of connection to the campus community. We offer the details of this seminar as a potential low-cost, high-impact model for other honors programs to incorporate into their curriculum the rich mix of cultural events available on most campuses.

BACKGROUND

Ithaca College is a comprehensive college with about 6,000 students, 93% of whom are undergraduates and most of whom live on campus. Located in upstate New York and featuring strong programs in music, theatre, and communications, the campus hosts hundreds of events each academic year ranging from sports, music, film, and theater to stand-up comedy, fiction readings, and scholarly lectures. Students often feel overwhelmed by the number of events, especially when they are already beleaguered by curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular obligations. As a result, by the time they earn their diploma they have often attended few campus events and are unaware of the college’s unique

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culture and identity. Our goal for the honors seminar was to make students part of this campus culture, a goal that was aptly summarized by one Ithaca College student's comment that the seminar gave her "reason and motivation" to attend events that she otherwise could or would not make time for: it "helped me with my scheduling and becoming an active member of Ithaca's college community."

Early deliberations about the seminar focused on two strengths and a drawback. One strength was that the majority of our students live on campus, so geographic obstacles would not inhibit our students from attending events. The other strength was having five academically distinct schools within the college so that students could be exposed to a range of artistic, disciplinary, and professional perspectives. At the same time we saw a drawback inherent in that second strength: while the existence of five academically distinct schools bears the potential for cross-curricular exploration, the reality is that students often get entrenched within their own school.

We sought a solution to our problem that would leverage the existing strengths of our institution as a comprehensive residential college and also address one of its most salient shortcomings, the perception of its five schools as silos. Moreover, we wanted a solution that (1) provided a viable and sustainable structure for experiencing Ithaca College's diversity of events; (2) entailed little, if any, additional costs; (3) was attractive and flexible yet engaging and structured; and most importantly (4) compelled our students to question their assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs about Ithaca College.

SEMINAR DESCRIPTION

"Cultural Encounters with Ithaca" was first offered in 2011 as a spring-term, 3-credit extension of the required first-year honors seminar. Advertised mainly to the freshman honors class, the course enrolled twenty students, eighteen of whom were freshmen. The class met three times a week, and the instructor assigned readings that addressed one upcoming event, which students posted on the Google Calendar site. The readings were largely online: websites, blogs, newspaper and magazine articles, or Wikipedia pages. Additionally, the instructor assigned regular readings from Robert Bresson's *Responding to Art: Form, Content, and Context* (2004), Richard Wingell's *Writing about Music: An Introductory Guide* (2007), and Marcia Furguson's *A Short Guide to Writing about Theatre* (2008).

Class time was spent reviewing the assigned readings, sharing general and specific experiences at events, analyzing positive and negative experiences, and discussing how all these experiences, and the events proper, contribute to an Ithaca College identity and culture. Students also brought artifacts from the events—e.g., pictures, programs, supplemental texts, and songs—to share and discuss with their peers and then to post on the blog. The instructor projected student blog posts on the screen, along with student comments on their peers' posts, for class discussion. The instructor also used the class period to check in

with the students about their attendance of the required number and categories of events.

In spring 2012, after positive student feedback from the previous spring, the seminar was offered again with two minor adjustments: the number of class meetings was reduced to two days per week, and students were given more flexibility in their choice of events to attend. Twenty first-year students enrolled. The goals, course requirements, technological backup, and assessment for the 2012 seminar are described below.

GOALS

Each of five groups of four students developed and approved a set of three course goals. The class received copies of each group's proposed goals and rated them anonymously on a GoogleDocs questionnaire. The groups then further edited the eight highest-rated goals and rated them again. The instructor took the three highest-rated goals, made final edits for clarity and conciseness, and presented them to the class for approval:

- become a more active Ithaca College community member by attending a variety of cultural events in and beyond the Ithaca campus;
- cultivate an immediate and reflective meta-awareness of "being an audience member"; and
- promote awareness, respect, assessment, and exchange of culture-related content.

In evaluating the goals, some students felt that the seminar should include only on-campus cultural events, but, to accommodate some dissenting voices, a compromise led to the amended first goal:

become a more active Ithaca college community member by attending a variety of cultural events in and beyond the Ithaca campus, with the understanding that no more than four off campus events will be attended.

The students all agreed on a proposal to clarify the phrase "culture related content," so the third goal was amended to read:

promote awareness, respect, assessment, and exchange of culture related content, where "culture related content" is broadly defined as "those things, diachronic and synchronic, that contribute to an aggregate identity."

The first amendment indicated that students were already starting to work as a team, and the second demonstrated that they were prepared to think analytically about the definition and role of culture.

REQUIREMENTS

The three major requirements for the seminar were the construction of a comprehensive cultural events calendar, attendance at a number of events, and publication of reflections on the course blog.

Each student was required to enter at least one event into the course's Google Calendar. Attendance at events counted for 40% of the final grade. Students were required to attend a total of twenty-six events by the end of the semester, with a minimum of one event per week. Students were not allowed to be part of the event itself, whether in a presentational or supportive capacity; they were to be observers, i.e., audience members, and they needed to provide evidence for their attendance of events such as ticket stubs, playbills, programs, cell phone pictures, blog reflections.

To ensure that students went to a variety of events, five categories were constructed, as illustrated in Table 1.

In addition, students were required to write one reflection per week and to publish it on the course blog. Reflections were worth ten points and had to be posted by 11:59pm of the Sunday after the event. Postings were accepted up to one day late for half credit. Table 2 gives a summary description of the weekly writing assignment.

TECHNOLOGY

We chose the two Web 2.0 applications for the seminar—Blogspot.com and Google Calendar—because we assumed that students would already be familiar with them; other advantages were their user-friendliness, interoperability (e.g. embedding, tagging, RSS feeds), and infrastructural reliability. The instructor, as administrator of the free blog site <<http://ithacaculturalencounters2012.blogspot.com>>, was able to manage access rights and designate the students as author, allowing them to comment on their peers' posts. The instructor also had the option of making the blog publically accessible or restricting it to followers and contributors. The blog automatically added a time-stamp to each post, so the instructor had an exact record of when students completed the weekly writing assignment. Finally, the blog allowed students to organize their posts by event category through label "tagging." (See Appendix A for the home page of the blog.)

Three considerations informed our choice of Google Calendar: we wanted a convenient, easily accessible, and manageable venue for advertising up-coming cultural events to the students; we wanted students to be active participants in the search for events and dissemination of details about them; and it was easy to embed the calendar within the blog. Each time the site was brought up or refreshed, the calendar was automatically updated with the events students had added, and the application attaches a user name and time stamp to each event that the student adds. (See Appendix B for a Google Calendar image.)

ASSESSMENT

Student achievement was based on the following course requirements: attendance of events (40%), blog reflections (25%), Google Calendar

Table 1. Summary of Cultural Events

Category	Total Required	Explanation
Music	8	Event where the focus is on music artistry, whether played or sung (though not on the lyrics). *Note: opera and musicals count as either music OR visual, but not both, and NOT as verbal-creative.
Visual	6	Event where the focus is on the visual artistry, including but not limited to: museums, exhibits, theater, dance, all genres of film.
Verbal-Creative	4	Event where the focus is on the creative use of language, including but not limited to: readings of fiction or poetry, stand-up comedy, free-style rapping, improv theater.
Verbal-Scholarly	4	Event where the focus is on non-fiction or scholarly content, including but not limited to: guest lectures, talk-backs, panel discussions, scholarly presentations, conference papers.
Your Choice	4	Students can either choose from one of the four categories above OR propose an Additional Event. Students must get instructor approval before attending an Additional Event. They must make, in writing, a convincing argument that the Additional Event is a “cultural encounter with Ithaca.” Additional Events might be, but are not limited to: political rallies, spiritual or religious ceremonies, culinary experiences or festivals. *Note: sport events do not count as Additional Events.

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contributions (5%), class participation (20%), midterm exam (5%), and final exam (5%). Students checked in with the instructor during one class period each week and presented their evidence of event attendance. Both the instructor and the student used an Excel spreadsheet (see Appendix C) to keep track of which events were attended, when, for which category, and the type of evidence provided.

Reflections posted to the blog were assessed according to the five rubrics in Table 2. The instructor kept track of students' weekly Google Calendar

Table 2. Summary of Student Reflection Piece

Assessed Component	Points	Guiding Questions
Length and Style	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 500 words? • Reader-friendly format, including spacing and/or evident breaks between paragraphs? • Style appropriate to your intended audience? • Clean grammar and correct punctuation?
Descriptions	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you include specifics about the event: location, time, audience, performers, etc?
Explanations	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you choose the event? • What were your expectations of the event? • Did you look up information on the event beforehand or following the event, secondary or primary literature? Why/ why not? • What was the content of the event (i.e. summary of plot, which authors or composers or artists, etc.)?
Assessments	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think about the following: the performance, the performers, the content of the event, the audience, your own expectations?
Conclusions	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your experience at the event contribute, or not contribute, to our seminar's goals? • How does the event shape, support, or challenge your notion of "What is Ithaca College"? • Would you suggest the event to other students? Why or why not?

contributions, and .5% of the student's final grade was subtracted for each missing contribution. The student's participation grade was based on attendance and student engagement in class discussions. Both the midterm and final were take-home exams that students posted to the course blog. The midterm comprised the following three parts:

- Summative: Address, in general, what you have learned so far about what it means to be an audience member at Ithaca College cultural events. Support your points with specific examples from events you have attended.
- Comparative: Compare/contrast two memorable events you attended. Note that events don't have to be memorable because you loved them; hating an event can also be memorable.
- Commentative: Select and read two postings from your peers on events that you did not attend; comment on these two postings, and argue for why/why not the postings convince you that you would have liked to attend the event.

The final asked students to address the following four sets of questions:

- What were your expectations of the course, when you signed up last fall? Did your actual experience confirm these expectations, or were there aspects about the course which surprised you?
- How will this semester's experiences affect your attitudes, behavior, or choices in the future—in particular, when you go to any event?
- Do you think that the Ithaca Cultural Encounters course should be a required course for all incoming freshmen at Ithaca College?
- Drawing on at least three events that you attended this semester, how would you respond to the question "What is Ithaca College?"

Both exams were assessed according to the same rubrics used for the weekly reflections.

CONCLUSION

Our original motivation was to encourage students to attend a range of cultural events on campus. Of the forty total students from both seminars, only two did not succeed in attending all of the required twenty-six events. Several other attended more than the required number. All the students noted that they attended events that otherwise would not have been part of their college experience, or, as one student put it, "I was forced to look for and attend events and learned all about the Ithacan culture." Other students remarked on their increased sense of connection to the college culture, writing that the seminar was a "[g]reat way to learn about what our campus has to offer and become a more active and engaging member in the community."

Another benefit of the seminar was that, through class discussions and blog posts, students were exposed to each others' work. For honors students in

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particular, this collaborative use of blogs can be pedagogically effective, fostering a better learning community (Johnson). By the end of the semester, the students had gained a greater appreciation for what their peers experienced, with one student discovering, for instance, that others in the class had had “a completely different experience than me at the same event.” Another student remarked:

I always felt like it's such a shame not being able to learn and grow from other people's strengths. But through this course, I was given the chance to improve my depth of thoughts and writing skills by learning from my peers. I'm sure other students benefited from this reciprocity as well.

Through the seminar, students more fully appreciated not just cultural events and the college campus but also each other.

Students' writing for the seminar was made public not just to each other but to an audience that extended beyond the walls of the classroom, making them more aware of the content, style, and effect of their writing. Scott and Bowman sum up their experience with this kind of public writing:

We are intrigued by a pedagogy that makes classroom walls porous so that student work becomes a communication not to the instructor but to a larger public, an audience who can potentially hold students accountable, and current Internet technology makes logistical hurdles trivial. We have students keep course blogs and record podcasts on class discussions, practices that open up their understanding of and response to class material to the larger world. . . . [Students] are not primarily jumping through a hoop prescribed on a syllabus; they are communicating to people unseen and are responsible in a new way for clarity, comprehensiveness, and thoughtfulness. (42)

Similarly, our students came to understand the seriousness of their thinking and writing by making it public.

Another student achievement was mastery of the Web 2.0 applications used in the course. At the outset of the semester, most of the students were unaware of Google Calendar, and, although all of them claimed a familiarity with blogging technology, few had ever kept their own blog or regularly posted on a blog. By the third week of the course, the Google Calendar was peppered with events, and students were integrating hyperlinks and audio and YouTube clips into their blog posts.

A major course achievement was the sense of empowerment that students derived from serving as co-administrators of the course, determining the course goals, finding events, publicizing events on the Google Calendar, promoting events during in-class presentations and discussions, and writing analyses of the events. One student wrote, “The course put the responsibility on our shoulders

as students to find and promote the events, and then assess them. At times it felt like we were the teachers, and that we were deciding what the content of the seminar was going to be.”

Cultural Encounters with Ithaca entailed a number of valuable lessons for the instructor as well as the students, especially a comfort with *The Curricular Unknown*. Given the fluid nature of the seminar’s content and the dependence on students as co-administrators, the instructor had to take a hands-off pedagogical approach, letting go of the deeply ingrained academic precept that the instructor is the expert and the boss. The instructor also developed confidence in using instructional technology and, most importantly, shared the students’ astonishment at the number and variety of events hosted by the college as well as the talent and knowledge of the performers. The instructor is now in a position to discuss these events with colleagues from other departments and schools, perhaps helping to dispel the perception of the schools as silos.

Finally, Cultural Encounters with Ithaca has had important consequences for the Ithaca College Honors Program. Now a permanent part of the honors curriculum, the seminar has become one option for students to fulfill the program’s Cultural Awareness requirement. Given its popularity, we anticipate offering multiple sections, so we will need to identify instructors and provide faculty development for them. The administration at Ithaca College, having taken note of the seminar’s success and of the honors program’s commitment to intellect, creativity, and character, will start offering a scaled-down, one-credit version of the seminar as a required course for all first-year undecided majors. Assessment of this one-credit course, as well as the three-credit honors seminar, will occur through an e-portfolio, for which the students must submit a reflective artifact (e.g., paper, presentation, short story, or media project) demonstrating that they dealt critically with the relationship between cultural events and communal identity at Ithaca College.

We believe that Cultural Encounters at Ithaca College represents the sort of curricular innovation and “pedagogical risk-taking” that honors programs should exemplify. Gary Bell has written:

Honors must also be programmatically experimental. One of our honors shibboleths is that we need to be a laboratory for new ideas and educational experiments on campus. . . . [H]onors must provide the cauldron out of which campus innovation can evolve. (58)

Cultural Encounters at Ithaca College has played just such an experimental role within our honors program and beyond. We hope that our model of incorporating cultural encounters into the honors curriculum may prove useful on other campuses.

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APPENDIX A

BLOG HOME PAGE

Ithaca Cultural Encounters Spring 2012

The place to share our experiences as audience members at various events offered at Ithaca College during spring semester 2012.

Home Course Goals and Means of Assessment Guidelines for a Good Reflection Particular Aspects of Focus Midterm Final

Cultural Encounters with Ithaca

Today Apr 15 - 21, 2012

Sun 4/15	Mon 4/16	Tue 4/17	Wed 4/18	Thu 4/19	Fri 4/20	Sat 4/21
	7p - 7p Hifa Sk ion vpe	7p - 9p Split That!	7p - 7p Ba For le bic of I the B Ba Sinf ds onle tta	7p - 8:30 Pulse Hip Hop Showca ca	8p - Ith aca ppe lla Bio	8:30p - 1 IC Comedy Club present s:

Events shown in time zone: Eastern Time

Friday, May 11, 2012

Final Reflection

When registering for this course last fall, I had few expectations. I had heard good things in that the students who had taken it before me enjoyed it and recommended it. My knowledge of the class was sparse, knowing just that it was an Honors seminar and assuming that we attended a certain number of events and wrote a lot about them, while having discussions about it three times a week. My perception of this course was quickly changed on the first day of class. When handed the syllabus, I noticed only one day listed for class time per week. I next learned that we would be required to write only one blog post a week of approximately five hundred words, an amount much less than what I had anticipated. That said, I think the events I attended were about what I expected. I feel that the number of events required was comparable to what I had projected and that I had an overall experience similar to my prediction: that there would be a solid number that I enjoyed, a few that I strongly disliked,

Labels

- Final (18)
- Midterm (20)
- music (56)
- Music event (26)
- Verbal-creative (33)
- verbal-scholarly (42)
- Visual (67)
- Your Choice (19)

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APPENDIX B

GOOGLE CALENDAR SITE

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://www.google.com/calendar/hosted/ithaca.edu/>. The page title is "Ithaca Cultural Encounters S: x - Calendar". The interface includes a search bar, navigation tabs for "Today", "March 2012", "Day", "Week", "Month", "4 Days", "Agenda", and "More". A sidebar on the left contains a "CREATE" button, a calendar grid for March 2012, and sections for "My calendars" (with "Cultural Encounters ..." selected) and "Other calendars" (with "Add a coworker's calendar" option).

Day	Week	Month	4 Days	Agenda	More	Settings
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
26 6p Church at Chapel 6:30p The Class of 9p Night of the Living	27 7p Composition Pre	28 10 I.C.M.S.A. Relaxa 7p Brewed Justice 8:15p Symphonic B	29 8p SAB Comedy H 8p Concert Band	Mar 1 10 Voices: Truth Ide 12:05p Distinguish 7p Elective Recital: 9p Recital Clarinet	2 8p Ithacappella Bloc	3 7p Elective Recital:
4 1p Graduate Recita 3p Junior Recital: El 4p Symphony Orch	5 7p Tracing Music In 7p Distinguished Ex 8:15p Jazz Ensemb	6 7:30p RTF Docume 8:15p Brass Choir	7 7p "KONY" Docume 8p SAB Comedy: 8:15p Thaler Violin	8 6p Thursdays at the 7p Miss Representa 7p LATIN AMERICA 7:30p SAB Presents 8:15p Ithaca College	9	10
11	12	13	14	15 6p Thursdays at the	16	17
18	19 11 World Water	20 12p Leadership Sch 5p Music from Chini 8:15p IC Bach Ense	21 5p Masterclass- Flu 5p A Necessary Lu 7:30p Exonerated C 8:15p Ithaca Jazz C	22 6p Thursdays at the 7p The Color of Fea 8p Screening of Flo 8:15p Guest Conce	23 9:30p The Yips, Sec	24 1p Senior Recital: Si 2p Junior Recital: Di 8:15p Choir Concer
25 2p Junior Recital: N 4:30p Opening Rec 7p Junior Recital: W	26	27 12p ICSm Course F 4p Music: Editor: J 8p Trafficked: Spea	28 7p 15 Annual FLEFF 7p CP Snow Lectur 9p Open Mic Night	29 7:30 Jessica Savitri 6p Thursdays at the 7:30p Pet a Puppy C 7:30p SAM CHAMP	30 7:30p THE MUTUAL	31

APPENDIX C

EVENT SPREAD SHEET

NAME _____			CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS WITH ITHACA			SPRING 2012		
MUSIC (8)			VISUAL (6)					
Event	Date	Evidence	Event	Date	Evidence	Event	Date	Evidence
1)			1)					
2)			2)					
3)			3)					
4)			4)					
5)			5)					
6)			6)					
7)			VERBAL-CREATIVE (4)					
VERBAL-SCHOLARLY (4)			Event	Date	Evidence			
Event			Date			Evidence		
1)			1)					
2)			2)					
3)			3)					
4)			4)					
YOUR CHOICE (4)			Event	Date	Evidence			
Event			Date			Evidence		
1)			1)					
2)			2)					
3)			3)					
4)			4)					
NOTES								