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Faculty Experience Teaching in an Interdisciplinary First-Year Seminar Program: The Case of the University of Guelph

Abstract

First-year seminar programs have been a feature on the landscape of post-secondary teaching and learning in the United States, since they first appeared in the 1880s at Boston University (Mamrick, 2005). More recently, they have begun to appear at Canadian universities. For example, first-year seminars were introduced a decade ago at the University of Guelph, as a campus-wide initiative. To recognize the first decade that these unique, interdisciplinary seminars have been offered, faculty were surveyed to understand better the impact of the program on those teaching in it, as well as their perceptions of their students. The experience of the University of Guelph suggests first-year seminar programs can have a significant influence on the teaching and professional experience of faculty and encourages them to extend their networks beyond the department and across the campus. Significantly, seminars serve as sites for pedagogical experimentation that can influence departmental curricula. Faculty who teach a first-year seminar have high satisfaction and report myriad benefits to morale, teaching, and research. The salutary effects of a first-year seminar program are not local but would be transferable across post-secondary institutions.

Aux États-Unis, on a beaucoup parlé des programmes de séminaires de première année dans le paysage de la pédagogie dans l'enseignement supérieur, depuis leur première apparition dans les années 1880 à l'Université de Boston (Mamrick, 2005). Plus récemment, ils ont commencé à apparaître dans les universités canadiennes. Par exemple, des séminaires de première année ont été introduits il y a dix ans à l'Université de Guelph en tant qu'initiative à l'échelle du campus. Afin de marquer la première décennie au cours de laquelle ces séminaires interdisciplinaires uniques ont été offerts, une enquête a été menée auprès des professeurs pour mieux comprendre les effets du programme sur les enseignants, ainsi que les perceptions de leurs étudiants. L'expérience de l'Université de Guelph suggère que les programmes de séminaires de première année peuvent avoir une influence importante sur l'enseignement et sur l'expérience professionnelle des professeurs et peuvent les encourager à élargir leur réseau au-delà du département et sur tout le campus. Il est significatif de constater que les séminaires servent de sites pour des expériences pédagogiques qui peuvent influencer les programmes d'études départementaux. Les professeurs qui enseignent un séminaire de première année en retirent une grande satisfaction et rapportent une myriade d'avantages pour le moral, l'enseignement, et la recherche. Les effets salutaires d'un programme de séminaires de première année ne sont pas ressentis uniquement au niveau local, ils sont transférables à tous les établissements d'enseignement supérieur.

Keywords

first-year seminars, faculty teaching experience, faculty professional development, university teaching, educational development, teaching-research link

Cover Page Footnote

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As long ago as the late nineteenth century, first-year seminars appeared in post-secondary education as a means to smooth student transition into university and reduce unacceptably high attrition rates. Following Boston University's transitional approach, seminars frequently took the shape of courses such as "Introduction to University," more colloquially "University 101," or university survival skills (Jessup-Anger, 2011; Mamrick, 2005). Generic, skills-based seminars remain popular and, as recently as 2009, comprised 40% of first-year seminar programs at universities in the United States (Mamrick, 2005; Padgett & Keup, 2009; Porter & Swing, 2006). A different model is found in programs that offer a number of multi-sectioned, interdisciplinary seminars on prescribed topics. In this type of program, students are able to sample the approaches of various disciplines, within an established and consistent prescribed curriculum (Wanca-Thibault, Shepherd, & Staley, 2002). In general, academic seminars focus on intellectual skills development while generic programs tend to centre on the social transition to university (Brant, 2005; Friedman & Marsh, 2009; Porter & Swing, 2006).

There are various manifestations of first-year seminars at Canadian universities. Some are related to a specific discipline or program. The University of British Columbia, for example, offers first-year seminars to small groups of students in the Science One program (2016). At McMaster University, first-year Social Sciences small group seminars are available to students majoring in one of the social science disciplines (McMaster, Social Sciences, 2016). Other universities offer greater diversity and flexibility. For example, the University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts and Science offers seminars, capped at 24, to students on the St. George campus. These "courses focus on discussion of issues, questions and controversies surrounding a particular discipline (or several disciplines)" (University of Toronto, Arts and Science online calendar, 2016). Thus, in Canada, there are first-year seminar programs related to a specific discipline or field of knowledge and programs that restrict enrolment to students in specific programs, fields of study, or faculties. The University of Guelph has implemented yet a different model of first-year seminars.

The Guelph Context

The University of Guelph is a research-intensive, comprehensive university located in southern Ontario. Its student body is comprised of some 21,000 undergraduate and 2500 graduate students. Approximately 4000 first-year students arrive on campus every September, and the university enjoys a retention rate of over 90%. In Canadian universities, there is considerable recourse to large and impersonal lecture at the first-year level, particularly in courses that are foundational to a discipline or serve as a required prerequisite for upper-level courses. The First-Year Seminar Program is one university's response to the goals of National Survey of Student Engagement to enhance student experience and student learning in the first year (Kuh, 2003).

The University of Guelph's First-Year Seminar Program shares many characteristics with similar programs, at other universities, while still reflecting Guelph's unique context and values. The program was piloted in the winter semester of 2003, with four instructors. Declared a success, it was fully implemented in 2004 and now offers thirty-eight to forty-five seminars annually.

This First-Year Seminar Program is freestanding and is not affiliated with any college, department, discipline, or knowledge perspective; rather, it is housed in the Provost's Office and, since 2011, has been administered by a director seconded from her department. The seminars, quite deliberately, have no prerequisites and do not articulate with, or provide foundational knowledge for, any degree program. All seminars are thematic and inter- or multidisciplinary. They count as a 0.5 elective for all students, which is the same credit weighting as all first-year courses. A fundamental principle of the program is that any

student, in their first or second semester, is eligible to enrol in any seminar. Consequently, the student composition across seminars is random and multidisciplinary, with anthropology students sharing ideas with physics majors, and literature and commerce students debating zoology majors. For most students, this may be the only time during their undergraduate education that they share a course with such a diverse group of peers. Seminars are capped at 18 students, so it is very likely to be the smallest course most students encounter throughout their undergraduate education.

Seminars are facilitated by fulltime faculty, senior administrators, and academic professional staff. Some seminars are team taught but most rely on the single instructor model. Additionally, there are two Teaching and Career Development Fellowships awarded to senior doctoral students, to offer a seminar as the instructor of record. Tobolowsky (2005) notes that it is not uncommon for university-based seminar programs to have such a diverse complement of facilitators, although at Guelph the vast majority of seminars are offered by full-time faculty.

The program explicitly encourages topics and themes that break new ground and intrigue students. Faculty members submit proposals to a curriculum committee which ensures that they meet the program's goals. Topics may emerge from an individual's area of research, teaching, or from another area of expertise. Thus, of the approximately 40 different topics offered in a given academic year, all are taught in different ways, and have unique assessment mechanisms. The only criteria for themes is that they be interdisciplinary, relevant, and intriguing. The structure of the seminars is equally flexible. Lectures and examinations are not considered appropriate; instructors are encouraged to be as creative as possible and to adopt non-traditional and active learning pedagogies. Thus, some seminars may use experiential learning, project-based learning, or problem-based learning. Students might go on fieldtrips or construct models or engage with the arts community. Faculty who may be less experienced or uncomfortable teaching small groups of first-year students, or using non-traditional pedagogies, are offered access to peer mentoring. In this way, instructors are encouraged to develop new skills and approaches, but there are no required workshops or training sessions as occur at many other institutions (Fidler, Neururer-Rotholz, & Richardson, 1999; McClure, Atkinson, & Wills, 2008; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). Yet, for all the individual autonomy among instructors, there is also unity across the program in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes. With an attrition rate of less than 3%, the students, themselves, demonstrate that seminars provide an unparalleled learning experience, one that empowers students for success and for lifelong learning.

Faculty Experience in First-Year Seminar Teaching

In the United States, in particular, first-year seminars are frequently a strategy to ease the high school to university transition, remediate poorly prepared students, boost skills, and enhance socialization, with the goal to reduce attrition rates (Jessup-Anger, 2011; Mamrick, 2005; Stassen, 2000). The Canadian context is a bit different, although first-year seminars are one means to assuage the alienation of large classes or enhance entry-level learning. Research reveals an array of issues pertaining to student experience, learning, and assessment. For example, one study focussed on a cohort of students who took a first-year seminar at the University of Guelph, that used closed-loop, reiterative, enquiry-based learning pedagogy. The results revealed that students earned higher grades in subsequent years, irrespective of their program of study or grades upon entrance to the university (Summerlee & Murray, 2010). Moreover, these students were more likely to volunteer in the community, engage in an international experience (academic or volunteer), and assume student leadership roles on campus more frequently than students who did not

participate in a first-year seminar. In other words, the seminar empowered students to engage in civil society and to excel across varied programs of study (e.g., arts, commerce, science, applied science).

While the positive impacts of first-year seminars on student learning is starting to be understood, there is considerably less known about the experience of those who develop and facilitate these seminars, specifically, for this research, university faculty members. There has been some research on faculty experience in the United States from the 1980s to 2013, although virtually every study highlights the ongoing paucity of research on this topic. In particular, there is little information about the influence that teaching a first-year seminar might have on faculty members' educational and professional development and overall job satisfaction. The current research, therefore, seeks to contribute to a greater understanding of the interplay between seminar teaching and other professional activities.

The literature reveals a broad diversity of instructors and teaching experiences. Most of the research, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, is based on relatively small groups of faculty. The largest cohort was that of Fidler et al. (1999), who surveyed 68 faculty and subsequently interviewed twenty. At the other end of the spectrum, Stassen's (2000) study was based on interviews with eight faculty. Wanca-Thibault et al. (2002) surveyed 21 faculty, while McClure et al. (2008) surveyed 20 faculty, and Wills & Allegretti (2013) included responses from 37 faculty. While individual studies focus on a relatively small numbers of respondents, collectively they provide a remarkably consistent portrait of the experience faculty teaching first-year seminars, at a variety of post-secondary institutions, stretching over some thirty years.

Method

This research project seeks to widen our understanding of the impact of first-year seminars from student learning to the teaching and professional development experience of the faculty who teach them. Ninety-two faculty who had taught in the First-Year Seminar Program, from its inception in 2004 through to 2012, received electronic surveys¹. Forty-three responses were received, which led to a response rate of 47%, one that was higher than previous studies². Respondents included 34 full-time faculty and faculty-librarians, seven senior administrators (who also held faculty appointments), and two professional staff members. Responses came from all seven of the university's academic colleges, along with three administrative offices (Judicial Office, Executive and University Secretariat, and Office of Student Affairs). This accurately reflects the diversity and interdisciplinary breadth of instructors in the program. Approximately half of the respondents had been employed at the university for less than fifteen years, indicating a breadth of experience across the teaching cohort.

The survey comprised 16 questions, with responses placed on a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). In addition, respondents were invited to provide qualitative feedback and to amplify on points or to reflect upon their experience. A total of 13 instructors (30% of respondents) volunteered to participate in one of two subsequent focus groups. Both the survey and the focus groups provided qualitative information to supplement the quantitative survey data. The survey instrument and focus group questions appear in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 respectively.

¹ This research received approval from the university Research Ethics Board.

² Fidler et al. (1999) was somewhat larger, with 68 responses from a possible 110 faculty.

Previous Research: Communities of Practice

Research has demonstrated that instructors in first-year seminar programs form faculty communities of practice (Cox, 2003; Stassen, 2000; Wills & Allegretti, 2013), but the characteristics of these communities are far from consistent. Their shape is dictated by the structure of a program, the individuals involved, and the teaching and learning context on a specific campus. They also differ according to what characteristics are shared, for example, discipline, pedagogical perspectives, and so on. In this case, at the University of Guelph, the first-year seminars provided the community in question.

Across first-year seminar programs, there are a wide variety of faculty recruitment strategies. At some institutions, the initiative came from administrators who assigned or invited faculty to participate in a first-year seminar program (Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). At other institutions, the impetus came from faculty who volunteered or applied to participate. There is a consensus in the literature that volunteering or applying is the preferable means of recruitment because it ensures that the individual faculty are enthusiastic and open to a new and unconventional teaching experience. In some cases, the requirement to teach outside one's discipline made recruitment of faculty a challenge (Stassen, 2000). In contrast, in other programs faculty were anxious to volunteer to offer seminars based on their own research interests (Brant, 2005). In virtually all cases, seminars were delivered by full-time faculty members, with the majority of them holding tenure.

Many first-year seminar programs, including both those that focus on generic skills and those that are content-focused, provide mandatory instructional workshops for faculty prior to the commencement of teaching (Fiddler et al., 1999; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). Although these workshops received mixed reviews, in programs without preparatory workshops, some respondents reported being nervous or uncertain about how to develop new pedagogical strategies and set goals and objectives for small groups (Stassen, 2000). This need to impart small group techniques to experienced lecturers stimulated the appearance of various compendia of general advice and specific strategies (Friday, 1989, 1990). In one program, organizers originally intended for teams of instructors to meet regularly to share ideas and experiences, but this was not implemented in practice. The seminar instructors, however, spontaneously began to meet informally to discuss challenges and exchange ideas. In interviews they indicated that they would have benefited from more systematic meetings as had been originally envisioned (Stassen, 2000).

Workshops can also provide an opportunity for faculty to extend their networks and forge new collegial relationships across disciplines (Fidler et al., 1999). Some programs implemented mandatory meetings for all instructors during the instructional term, to supplement mandatory preparatory workshops. Faculty valued these meetings because they provided an opportunity to examine pedagogy, learning objectives, and teaching philosophies in an interdisciplinary context. It is notable that faculty training benefitted from the very same active learning techniques (McClure et al., 2008) or inquiry-based strategies that seminars provide to students (Adams, 2009). In programs with less prescriptive instructional team meetings, faculty still forged relationships across the campus and across disciplines (Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). Research, then, strongly supports the importance of developing communities of practice to ensure faculty have personal support and valuable teaching development activities.

The Guelph Context: Community of Practice

The current study reveals a strong correlation between the topic of the seminar and faculty research. Seventy-five percent of respondents identified the ability to offer a seminar in their chosen area of research to be an important motivation for participation (Likert levels 4 or 5). Faculty members' desire to share their passion with first-year students was reinforced by the third highest motivation to offer a seminar, the opportunity for "first-year students to learn the topics/outcomes of this course." Indeed, some faculty indicated that offering a seminar in their research area, at a foundational level, helped further their own skills at knowledge mobilization and knowledge transfer. Seminars also encouraged some participants to open new areas of research. As one instructor observed, "it provided me with a space to immerse myself into a new research area ... I was reading alongside students and we all explored our understandings and opinions together." In this way, far from weakening or inhibiting research, the first-year seminars provide a means to reinforce or expand a research program. Given that the First-Year Seminar curriculum is not in the least prescriptive, and any potential instructor may propose any topic, the research-teaching link is particularly noticeable. Indeed, the integration of research and teaching, within the context of multi-disciplinary learning communities, has been identified as holding the potential to transform postsecondary education (Brew, 2003; Healey, 2005; Summerlee & Murray, 2008).

Wills & Allegetti (2013) noted that the more heavily an individual was involved in a program, the greater his/her satisfaction. While all Guelph participants were positive about their involvement in the program, the survey confirmed that the more frequent and consistent a person's participation, the greater his/her personal and professional satisfaction. Twenty survey respondents (48%) had taught a seminar on a single occasion. Some of these individuals had only just begun to teach in the program at the time of the survey, so they had not yet had opportunity to repeat. There were some instructors, however, who seemed to have drifted away despite positive experiences, or they self-selected out, or they were instructed by their departments to limit their activities. Thus, there is a correlation between ongoing participation in the seminar program and the professional benefits and personal satisfaction that accrues to the educator.

Previous Research: Pedagogy

Previous research suggests that faculty frequently find that the teaching techniques that characterize first-year seminars are transferable to large classes³ (Dion, 1996). As early as the 1970s, one university mandated a weeklong educational development workshop for faculty teaching in their University 101 program. The workshop was intended to expose instructors to new teaching strategies, with the explicit goal that they would also be transferable into discipline-based courses, in a manner similar to the transferability of skills that students acquire in seminars. Fidler et al. (1999) asked respondents to identify how the pedagogies they employed in seminars differed from those in their disciplinary courses. Many identified the workshops as providing critical preparation for them to meet the unique needs of first-year students. Instructors were also asked if they taught students differently in other courses as a result of their experience in a seminar. Almost half of the respondents (47%) indicated that they used a greater variety of teaching techniques in other courses, ranging from icebreakers and increased discussion to more writing and additional technologies. Faculty also found that teaching small groups of first-year students led them to have a greater appreciation for students' abilities and what they were able

³ Interestingly, Dion did not actually teach first-year seminars but consciously borrowed and applied various aspects of problem-based learning to enliven and enrich large classes.

to achieve. Consequently, they made their other courses more challenging and increased the stress on critical thinking (Barefoot et al., 1998).

McClure et al. (2008) identified a number of positive results of pedagogical transferability from seminars to larger, mainstream, discipline-based courses. These include four particular areas of transferability: increased reflection on teaching methods, deliberate measures to assess critical thinking, discussions of critical thinking during class time, and engagement and self-reflection as instructors. Some respondents indicated that they began to slow down the learning process in large classes and to focus on fewer topics in greater depth. Moreover, an appreciation of first-year students and their abilities led some faculty to move away from content delivery and examinations, in favour of greater focus on knowledge acquisition and critical thinking (McClure et al., 2008).

Some studies suggest that if faculty members are freed from the constraints of discipline-based, content-focused lectures, they are better able to “unleash their creative energies, fuel their desire to learn new instructional technologies, and become actualizing teachers” (Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002, p. 25). This energy underlies the motivation to implement innovative and non-traditional active learning strategies in small seminars, and to reflect upon their transferability to larger disciplinary courses. Moreover, interdisciplinary first-year seminar programs encourage greater faculty engagement with pedagogy and learning outcomes than discipline-based seminars in which content overshadows process and outcomes (Brent, 2005; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004; McClure, 2008; Wills & Allegretti, 2008).

The Guelph Context: Pedagogy

The combination of small class size (18 students maximum), the instructor’s ability to devise his/her own topics, and students who freely self-select into a seminar together provide fertile ground for pedagogical experimentation, especially with respect to active learning. The majority of survey respondents (68%) reported that they used multiple integrated approaches featuring interactive, experiential, and/or enquiry-based learning. The pedagogical approaches used most frequently were self-directed exercises, field or lab experiences, and online and face-to-face discussion. One respondent provided a detailed summary of a seminar that reflects Weimer’s (2003) observations about the importance of the redistribution of power and respect to students as autonomous learners:

I gave the students almost full control over the content (with guidance at all times and some more leading direction in the choice of one major topic). We started with a research scavenger hunt to identify the breadth of topics that might be included under the course title. Topics that were subsequently pursued in depth were chosen from that list. The course objectives stressed skills and attitudes almost as strongly as knowledge, and this is reflected in the marking scheme (which included graded reflections, a debate, peer-evaluation of participation, and an ePortfolio presentation). Instruction and discussion of the assessments of skills and attitudes were included. Assignments were designed in a formative-summative format, and marked with rubrics and written comments. The students gave each other feedback on their participation in every seminar, and in a rubric at the end of the course that counted towards their grade.

While not all survey respondents were so fulsome their descriptions of course activities and assessment strategies, they offered similar reflections on active learning and multiple and diverse assessment strategies. This is reflective of earlier studies, which suggest that when a first-year seminar program has

an interdisciplinary thrust, it fosters an atmosphere that foregrounds pedagogical discussion that can sometimes be overshadowed in disciplinary-based seminars (Brent, 2005; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004; McClure, 2008). The instructors in Guelph's First-Year Seminars, then, address Weimer's contention that active learning requires more than a compilation of new learning techniques but also that the central elements of course design need to be structured so that students take responsibility for their own learning (Weimer, 2003). Indeed, this is a major factor why, when instructors apply to the program, their course outlines are assessed to ensure they meet the First-Year Seminar Program's pedagogical goals.

Participants saw the First-Year Seminar Program as a key opportunity for educational development. One respondent noted that the seminar experience had permitted, "me to broaden my perspective on contemporary issues of importance to society [and] to get a small 'taste' of other scholarly fields . . . completely outside my other teaching duties and the focus of my research program." Almost all participants indicated that, as a result of teaching a seminar, they were better able to experiment with a variety of teaching and learning approaches. As one person noted, "I find that the First-Year Seminar is sort of a laboratory for teaching methods." Another reported that, "I very much enjoyed being able to 'play in the sandbox' with first-year students . . . It gave me the chance to try a number of learning strategies I would not otherwise have had the chance to pursue." Moreover, as Weimer (2003) anticipated, what instructors learned from teaching in the program was transferable and had a positive impact on their other courses. One respondent, who piloted providing feedback on drafts, implemented this in other courses. Another now makes time for personal interaction with students in other courses. One faculty member delivered a version of his/her first-year seminar at the graduate level and reported that, "I was surprised (and pleased) at how well the basic philosophy translated to a class of graduate students as opposed to first-year undergrads." Yet another reported implementing the first-year seminar model into teaching in China. The first-year seminars, then, allow for educational experimentation, including enhanced student engagement, especially in the design and delivery of courses, augmented student self-direction, and enhanced active learning strategies. As one respondent stated, "I have suggested to colleagues that they teach in the [First-Year Seminar] program as a means of enhancing their teaching skills and contributing to their professional development in this regard."

Although instructors identified the broad transfer of teaching approaches from seminars to other undergraduate courses, in the main, they benefitted most from the transfer of pedagogical strategies from first-year seminars to lower-enrollment capstone courses, such as senior undergraduate seminars and graduate courses, all with more comparable class sizes. As one participant summarized, "Certainly, I have taken some techniques over into my graduate seminar courses." Class size was a key variable for determining pedagogical choices. When classes were of similar size, the first-year seminar experience was considered to be an opportunity for instructors to broaden their repertoire of teaching and learning strategies. In this way, first-year seminars have a perhaps unanticipated impact on the delivery of senior, discipline-based courses.

Previous Research: Relationships

Teaching a first-year seminar can influence an individual's sense of self as a teacher and the overall role of faculty in the university. For example, in previous research, some faculty became sensitive to the fact their activities as teachers were expanding to include providing advice and addressing student issues. One person reported moving from, "being the fountain of all information to functioning as a facilitator," a sentiment that was widely shared (Fidler et al., 1999; McClure et al., 2008; Wills & Allegretti, 2013). Initially, some instructors reported being uncomfortable to relinquish their control in the classroom and

found surrendering control to be intimidating. Somewhat more intimidating was the explicit expectation that, through their seminar experience, faculty would become campus-wide change agents (Stassen, 2000; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). Thus, first-year seminar teaching was different from other teaching contexts and brought with it a leadership role.

Despite the challenges of a new situation, many instructors, even those who were already experienced teachers, reported feeling more confident and relaxed about teaching and more focused on teaching excellence. Both experienced teachers and neophytes developed new skills, and many identified an increased confidence to teach outside their discipline. Although many faculty anticipated it would be challenging to prepare and deliver a first-year seminar, many also found it to be rejuvenating. Instructors also reported gaining a wider sense of commitment to their university and a deeper, more complex understanding of the role and responsibilities of a faculty member (Fidler et al., 1999; Stassen, 2000; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002; Wills & Allegretti, 2013).

Research reveals that one of the positive outcomes of teaching in a first-year seminar program was the opportunity to develop broader collegial bonds across disciplines. Mandatory teaching workshops and team or program meetings, in particular, provided participants with the opportunity to meet with colleagues from different backgrounds and to forge both professional and personal relationships that might otherwise not have been possible. Respondents agreed that discussion across disciplines was particularly enriching and facilitated the development of a teaching community. Moreover, first-year seminars helped to increase the value of teaching across the disciplines generally (McClure et al., 2008; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002; Wills & Allegretti, 2013).

The opportunity to get to know their students was one of the major reasons instructors valued their participation in a first-year seminar program. For example, they were able to write more personalized letters of reference because they had meaningful knowledge about each student (Fidler et al., 1999). Faculty were more concerned that their students participate actively in class. In other words, the collaborative experience of first-year seminars, which is frequently accompanied by a flattening of the conventional hierarchical relationships and distance between instructors and students, led to deeper interpersonal relationships.

The ability to know students better could also lead to disappointment. First-year students were sometimes under prepared or disinterested. This was particularly the case in seminars that moved from topic to topic, without deliberate integration or scaffolding of material. Indeed, the small class size was identified as the context that allowed faculty to become aware when students were inadequately prepared. Other instructors lamented the tendency for some students to coast or be disruptive (Stassen, 2000; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002). While these behaviours occur in large lecture courses, they are less noticeable to the instructor, due to the size and the distance, physical and personal, between faculty and students.

The Guelph Context: Relationships

Fidler et al. (1999) found that participation in first-year seminar programs led to enhanced relationships between instructors, stretching across departments and disciplines. Guelph's First-Year Seminar Program is decentralized and less structured than many programs. Consequently, there are no mandatory teaching workshops or required meetings. There are two or three team meetings every semester: an orientation session prior to the beginning of classes, a check-in session after the first month to encourage the exchange of ideas, and an administrative meeting towards the end of semester to clarify grade submission and similar matters. Because teaching schedules are so varied, such meetings cannot be mandatory. The Director, however, frequently meets with individuals who cannot attend. From time to

time, the Director also facilitates pedagogical workshops, and there are many opportunities through the Educational Development office for instructors to investigate teaching and build collegial networks. In sum, the decentralized nature of the First-Year Seminar Program has not permitted the active cultivation of the collegial teaching communities found in more centralized and directive programs. Even so, once they are divested of disciplinary constraints, and despite the distributed nature of the program, there is a camaraderie among instructors from across the university.

Many seminar instructors identified the opportunity to connect with first-year students as the primary reason to participate in the program. A significant number had not taught early undergraduate students previously or with any regularity. Others believed it was important to expose first-year students to the subject matter and/or learning objectives of their particular seminar. The most important reason for participating in the First-Year Seminar Program was the unique opportunity to connect with first-year students, in small groups. Representative responses to the survey question, “Why did you choose to offer a [First-Year Seminar]?” included: “I wanted to teach a small undergraduate class” and “I wanted to better get to know first-year students.” The desire to connect with students continued as a theme in the focus groups. One instructor eloquently expressed his/her enthusiasm:

I learned that first-year students are capable of developing probing questions which they present to community members in an open conversation. Also I learned that they will, given the opportunity and some encouragement, challenge visiting speakers on fundamental beliefs and values. In a nutshell, they are more capable of more than I would have expected.

Another stated, “I really like teaching undergraduate students and feel more prepared to tackle lower year courses with more confidence.” Thus, instructors developed an increased respect for first-year students, just as they were developing new and individual ways to relate to them. This was considered to be a particularly enriching aspect of facilitating a first-year seminar. Perhaps the most dramatic statement comes from one seminar instructor, reflecting on the impact of the program on other instructors:

I have witnessed an almost transformational experience in the way they view themselves and their profession. A single offering of [first-year seminars] can change a faculty member for the rest of their career! It can solidify their understanding that the primary mission of their profession and the university is teaching, even in a research-intensive university.

Thus, the experience of teaching a first-year seminar was considered to be sufficiently powerful that it could lead to transformational change, not only in individual instructors but across the institution as a whole. Indeed, it appears that teaching in a first-year seminar program can narrow the misunderstanding about educational expectations that separates first-year students’ experience and the perceptions of those who teach them (Mancuso, Desmarais, Parkinson, & Pettigrew, 2010).

Previous Research: Impediments to Participation

First-year seminars have not met with unqualified support, even among those who teach in a seminar program. At one institution, respondents resented the small classes and individual attention received by students in a University 101-style seminar. The seminars were “not internally perceived as institutional priorities, although externally... citizens and political leaders [consider] such teaching and concern for students ... exactly what is perceived as most needed.” Nor was the experience always perceived as beneficial for instructors. While some faculty found teaching in a seminar program empowering, one reported feeling less valued as a professor and suggested that, in a research intensive university, participation in first-year seminars could actually damage one’s reputation (Fidler et al., 1999). In contrast, one of Stassen’s (2000) participants noted that being at a research intensive university had left him/her wondering if it would ever be possible to have a wider repertoire of activities. The first-year seminars gave that faculty member a broader sense of academic identity. Significantly, she/he noted that teaching a first-year seminar did not take time away from research so it should not be perceived to be an impediment. Other studies found that faculty were concerned about the time lost from research and departmental commitments. Participation needed to be valued as a positive career step or a source of greater visibility or faculty would be less likely to participate (Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002).

Both administrative support and individual commitment to the goals of the seminars contributed to faculty participation and program success. Although the recruitment processes for seminar facilitators generally implies active administrative support, there were multiple instances of passive rather than active support. On some campuses, requests to participate or to provide faculty to the program were met with ambivalence rather than definitive roadblocks. Dedicating the human and financial resources necessary to support a robust seminar program can be a challenge, depending on an institution’s structure. Centralized hierarchal administrations are better able to mandate support from departments. In more decentralized institutions, it is more challenging to assemble faculty facilitators in a context in which the departments, or the faculty member personally, expects remuneration (Brent, 2005; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004; Wanca-Thibault et al., 2002).

The Guelph Context: Impediments to Participation

Few institutional or administrative barriers were identified that inhibited instructors’ ability to participate in the First-Year Seminar Program. Faculty did not view offering a seminar to be antithetical to their position at a research-intensive university, as was reported in other studies. Only three respondents identified lack of departmental or college support for continued participation. Several others, however, described only passive or neutral support from colleagues and departmental leaders. Given that the current research is based only on those who had already offered a seminar at least once, there are no data available for the number or frequency of faculty being denied permission to offer a first-year seminar in the first place. Information about refusals of permission to teach, and real or perceived negative pressures, would enhance our understanding of the staffing challenges confronting the First-Year Seminar Program.

Several instructors indicated that, because of departmental pressures, especially around teaching assignments, they had not sought additional opportunities to offer a seminar, despite having had a positive experience and appreciating the important contribution of seminars to student learning. As one respondent noted, “It would be nice to see people embrace the program as a strategic move in their teaching career rather than as a ‘luxury’ or special treatment used to get out of regular departmental teaching duties.” Another noted that she/he did not even seek an additional opportunity to teach in the seminar program; “I

have held back subsequent requests given my desire to be a ‘team player’,” suggesting a perception that participation in the First-Year Seminar Program somehow challenged a person’s loyalty to his/her department and discipline. The perception that teaching a seminar is a luxury rests fundamentally on the notion that smaller classes are “easier” and that faculty and students are receiving special privileges. Significantly, this view is based both on self-perception and concern about colleagues and department leaders. Although the First-Year Seminar Program frequently provides financial compensation to departments, if a faculty member’s participation weakens a department’s teaching capacity, departments do not always consider this to be beneficial, especially if they judge that there is already too much reliance on casual or sessional instructors.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the experience of faculty teaching in the First-Year Seminar Program at the University of Guelph, along with the various ways in which participation provided faculty with professional development and personal satisfaction. The experience of the faculty surveyed here need not be viewed as unique to this program and university. Rather, these experiences would be easily replicable at other universities were they to develop a first-year seminar program with similar characteristics, for example, interdisciplinary, instructor-driven topics, and flexible pedagogies.

It is noteworthy that faculty in this study indicated that teaching a first-year seminar allowed them to know their students and to work with them in ways that were professionally gratifying. Certainly, professor/student relationships are forged in various academic contexts, but those developed in a first-year seminar can endure over the course of a degree program and beyond. Knowing a student over a number of years, perhaps teaching him/her in other courses, introducing her/him to lab research, or serving as a multipurpose mentor, enhanced the educator’s experience and professional satisfaction. As one respondent noted, “It was enriching for me and it made connections with students that were not possible in larger classes I have taught. I am still in contact with many of the students ... some now graduating from grad school at other institutions.” Thus, faculty who interacted with first-year seminar students and followed their educational paths, found the experience more integrated than the more conventional experience of coming to know students as they approach the end of their degree. The alienation between first-year students and faculty was dispelled to the benefit of both.

Anecdotally, many critics or skeptics of first-year seminars reduce them to little more than small classes which are presumed “easier” to teach than large lectures, but the experience of this program would challenge this reductive view of small versus large classes. Small group teaching requires considerable skill and attention to pedagogy, class activities, and group dynamics. It is not the case, at all, that small classes are easier than large ones based only on numbers. They are simply two different approaches to education. Small classes require different skills, sophisticated pedagogy, flexibility, and room for innovation. Just as students receive more ongoing and personal feedback in the first-year seminar, so, too, instructors receive ongoing feedback far in excess of end of semester, generic course evaluations.

The rewards of teaching a first-year seminar were summarized eloquently by one respondent in this study:

First, it helped me re-connect with first-year students following a hiatus (many of my courses are upper year and graduate level). Second, it allowed me to try out some new teaching techniques and provide “experiential” learning opportunities to students without major constraints. Third, it provided me an opportunity to reach out to colleagues across the university; colleagues helped me

think through topics and assignments, and in some instances generously provided guest lectures and/or tours for the students. Fourth, it allowed me to teach out of a disciplinary 'box' and focus on a large range of topics related to animals (definitely an interdisciplinary survey course with a range of assignments).

Thus, seminars provide multiple opportunities to reflect upon and adapt one's teaching. The size of the seminar proved particularly valuable for individuals who wished to pilot new subject matter or experiment with innovative pedagogies. To do this, they often found support from fellow First-Year Seminar Program instructors, from across the university. Communities of practice, communities of teaching, were extended beyond the department and discipline, which proved to be a fruitful source of cross-fertilization. Indeed, some faculty indicated they felt more connection with the university as a whole as a result of their First-Year Seminar experience.

Deans, department chairs, and directors need to be allies for programs like the First-Year Seminars to flourish, but they should be cognizant that the benefits do not flow in one direction alone. There are multiple ways in which faculty participation can directly or indirectly benefit departments. Those topics and pedagogies that faculty test out or pilot in seminars in turn are implemented in their disciplinary teaching, which enhances student experience and learning, along with the department-based curriculum. Thus, departments benefit from a process of innovation and renewal that may originate in teaching a first-year seminar and may not happen spontaneously in disciplinary and/or foundational courses. Ninety-five percent of respondents reported that their experience teaching a first-year seminar was positive. One instructor summarized, "Teaching in the [First-Year Seminar] program was one of the most rewarding and inspired experiences of my undergraduate teaching career to date." There are imperceptible ways in which this kind of teaching experience can enhance morale, enrich professional experience, and ignite a process of rejuvenation. One respondent observed that participation in the program was a "transformational experience." This alone should persuade deans, chairs, and directors to actively facilitate the participation of their faculty in first-year seminar programs. Those transformational experiences will enhance departments in diverse ways.

For senior administration, first-year seminars provide multiple benefits to universities. In an era of large classes and distance education, in which students, especially first-year students, feel alienated, there are fewer opportunities for them to develop transferable skills and to benefit from continuous individual feedback. Research on student learning outcomes reveals that students who have taken a first-year seminar have better research and analytical skills (Murray & Summerlee, 2007). Most of the issues surveyed by the National Survey of Student Engagement are addressed through first-year seminars, especially those focussing on student experience and student learning. Overall, the educational experience and learning outcomes for a first-year student are significantly enhanced by a single first-year seminar. For administrators, the question does not have to be one of funding and faculty-student ratios versus quality learning. In fact, costs could be reduced if the credit weighting of first-year seminars were increased to reflect more accurately the quality and quantity of learning that occurs. This strategy could be implemented at large or small institutions, in order to provide students with the benefits of first-year seminars.

As this research demonstrates, the benefits of a first-year seminar extend beyond the walls of the seminar room. Educators benefit from facilitating a first-year seminar, both in terms of their own professional satisfaction and also from the opportunity to develop new areas of teaching and research, and to expand their pedagogical repertoire. All of these innovations and experiences indirectly and directly

benefit their departments and disciplines. Thus, the impact of a modest first-year seminar program can extend across an institution and serve as a catalyst for educational transformation.

At Guelph, first-year seminars are a valuable resource. They not only enhance student learning and experience, but they also support research and provide professional and educational development opportunities for faculty. Departments and programs and disciplines benefit directly and indirectly from the pedagogical innovations piloted in first-year seminars and expanded into the broader departmental and disciplinary curriculum. The First-Year Seminar Program provides an important impetus to widening and deepening campus-wide discussions around teaching and learning, while providing an incentive and validation to individual instructors as they strive become better teachers and to enhance their student's learning. Thus, far from being mere "small classes," first-year seminars function as an educational incubator that benefits students, faculty, and all levels of the university. First-year seminar programs are flexible and can take on the character and learning culture of any university. Their transferability and universal applicability hold promise for a struggling postsecondary sector

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Appendix A

Experience and impact survey of First-Year Seminar (FYS) Program facilitators

There are 17 questions in this survey

* Indicates a required question

Basic Information

1. Current Position at the University of Guelph

Please choose only one of the following:

Assistant Professor - with tenure
Assistant Professor - pre-tenure
Associate Professor - with tenure
Associate Professor - pre-tenure
Full Professor
Librarian
Professional Staff
Administration
Other

2. Department/Unit: *

Please insert your answer here:

3. For how many years have you worked at the University of Guelph?

Please choose only one of the following:

0-4 years
5-9 years
10-14 years
15+ years

4. How many times have you facilitated a First Year Seminar?

Please choose only one of the following:

Once
Twice
Thrice
Four or more times

5. In what year(s) and semester(s)?

6. What were the titles of your First Year Seminars? *

Background

7. How well did the main themes, topics and outcomes facilitated in your First-Year Seminar(s) relate to your research/areas of interest? (1 - low; 5 - high)

Please choose only one of the following:

1 2 3 4 5

8. Why did you choose to offer a FYS? (Check all that apply)

Please choose all that apply:

I wanted to teach a small undergraduate class

I wanted to better get to know first-year students

I wanted to support the FYS program by participating

I wanted first year students to learn the topics/outcomes of this course

Other:

9. Were there any obstacles/challenges to teaching a FYS?

10. Was your participation supported and recognized by your department and college? Please comment on perceptions of your colleagues, chairs, promotion and tenure processes, etc.

Experience and Impact

11. How would you describe your experience of teaching a FYS?

12. What pedagogical innovation(s) or well-grounded teaching and learning approach(es) did you use in this course?

13. What did you learn as a result of teaching a FYS? How has teaching a FYS influenced your perspectives and approaches to undergraduate teaching and learning?

14. How have/will you use innovations that you experimented with in an FYS to other courses you teach?

15. Would you consider teaching a FYS again in the future? Please explain.

Comments & Focus Group Participation

16. Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up focus group? Please provide contact info.

Participate in Focus Group? Yes/No

Name:

Phone Number:

Email:

17. General Comments

Thank you for completing this survey.

Appendix B

First-Year Seminar Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you teach an FYS? Why did you want to be involved?
2. How did you design and select pedagogical approaches for the FYS? Consult with anyone?
3. How did your approach work for students in the FYS? For your own development? What was the impact?
4. Did you think teaching an FYS would benefit colleagues?
5. How did your college/department/colleagues perceive your involvement in FYS?
6. Was your FYS involvement formally recognized (Promotion & Tenure, Distribution of Effort, etc.)
7. Is there anything else you want to tell us?