

Senior Humanities Seminar: Dual Enrollment through a Different Lens

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Abstract

The author describes a dual-enrollment seminar that links high schools and community colleges across multiple disciplines.

Cross-curricular instruction, multi-disciplinary study, interdisciplinary learning, reading and writing across the curriculum, thematic instruction, integrated learning – are these just the latest buzz words, more education-speak, the latest trend? Or are they more than that?

In Botetourt County at the Greenfield Education Center, these words have specific meaning. Through a cooperative effort among two community colleges and a public school system, we have put concepts of interdisciplinary instruction into practice in a dual-enrollment offering called Senior Humanities Seminar. Seniors from James River High School and Lord Botetourt High School (both in Botetourt County) take six courses over the school year, earning a total of eighteen college credits before graduating from high school. Political Science I and II (PLS 211 and 212), College Composition I and II (ENG 111 and 112), Introduction to Philosophy (PHI 101), and Principles of Economics: Macroeconomics (ECO 201) were planned and taught to show the connections among the courses. Seminar has required that the instructors look through a different lens at their respective disciplines to determine where the content of the various courses naturally intersects.

Seminar Roots

Seminar, as it has been tagged, combines the service areas of Virginia Western Community College (VWCC) and Dabney S. Lancaster Community College (DSLCC) and offers students the opportunity to create meaning among the different humanities offerings through an integrated curriculum. Bill Salyers, coordinator of academic programs for dual enrollment and an associate professor at VWCC, manages the program for the college. Dr. Diana Dixon, director of instruction for Botetourt County Public Schools, administers the program for the public school system. And as an English teacher at Lord Botetourt High School, I coordinate the curriculum for the Seminar program and teach ENG 111 and 112.

Seminar is the product of discussions that began between Botetourt County and Franklin County Public Schools (no longer participating), Virginia Western, and Dabney S. Lancaster. The mission of the program was to offer seniors more dual enrollment opportunities and to present content in an integrated format. Botetourt County already had interdisciplinary classes at Lord Botetourt High school for grades 9 and 10, known as Center classes, which integrated English 9 with World History I (Center 9) and English 10 with World History II (Center 10). These classes are taught by an English teacher and social studies teacher and are blocked for two periods. Building on this concept for dual enrollment seniors has been a natural development in the county's overall program of studies.

In the fall of 2005, Senior Humanities Seminar began its fourth year with twenty-nine seniors from the two high schools. ENG 111 served as the bond between PLS 211 and PHI 101 for the fall term, and ENG 112 created an intersection for PLS 212 and ECO 201 in the spring. The staff was composed of two adjunct instructors from VWCC (Randy Leftwich, political science, and Ken Redheffer, philosophy), one full-time instructor from DSLCC (Ralph Sass, economics), and one full-time teacher from Lord Botetourt who also instructs for DSLCC (me, English).

Throughout the year, students completed assignments that met the requirements of each course, yet brought together their common elements. The assignments were graded and weighted by each instructor according to his or her own preference, allowing the instructors to maintain as much academic freedom as possible.

Everyone involved in the program realized early on that clear expectations for both the students and instructors were vital to the program's success, but that there were several factors that could not be manipulated, such as the required number of hours for each class, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) requirements for the content of each course, the class schedule at Greenfield, and the individual high schools' schedules. With these constants in mind, the expectations for

the program's content and operation were set at its inception.

For the fall of 2005, Salyers and I established that students would submit a minimum of three common assignments among the classes during each semester and a final interdisciplinary research paper. Attendance and grading policies were revised based on the idea that the classes had to be regarded as college classes by both the county schools and the students to maintain the integrity needed to meet SACS standards. This meant that the work had to be rigorous, that students had to complete the required number of classroom hours, and that consequences had to be enforceable.

The most radical changes for Seminar students are the policies governing attendance. As students drive to the Seminar classes, they have more opportunities to make choices concerning attendance, so we set the following guidelines:

(1) Attendance is the greatest contributor to student success or failure. Attendance is reported to the home school daily and parents are notified of an absence through the Botetourt County parent notification system. Students should schedule appointments for days that Greenfield classes are not in session.

(2) Attendance records are maintained by each instructor, and attendance will affect the student's progress. The following attendance policies are followed in all Humanities Seminar classes:

- No parent notes are accepted for any absence.
- Students are allowed three (3) unexcused absences per semester. Three absences equal 20 percent of the total instructional time for each class.
- On the fourth absence, students will receive an F for the semester in that class.
- Excused absences are limited to those absences that are verified as official business by the school, including court appearances, medical appointments covered by a note from a doctor, and verified school activities. It is the student's responsibility to bring a note from the high school attendance office showing the reason for the absence and if it was excused or not. No absences, including those for school activities, are counted as excused without a note from the school attendance office.
- Students are allowed two tardies per semester. Points are deducted from the final grade for each tardy after the first two. The number of points deducted will be determined by each instructor. The course syllabus explains the instructors' individual policies.

As a result of establishing these guidelines, student attendance has been excellent this year, with few absences. Unity among the staff has eliminated what was expected to be the greatest area of weakness for the program, and as a result, the students have shown personal responsibility for their own behavior and grades.

The second area of discussion, the interdisciplinary assignments, was essentially my responsibility for the first semester. In August 2005, we instructors met for a half-day session of planning for the 2005-06 school year. We brought copies of course outlines to share and were ready to take some risks with assignments and content. Most importantly, we came with an attitude of compromise and a focus on what had to be accomplished.

I invested about 40 hours in the process of reading the material that would be covered in political science and philosophy and designing assignments that we could share without compromising our individual content. The ENG 111 course outline served as the centerpiece for the program and was evidence that the assignments were crossing disciplines. We used the traditional approach to interdisciplinary teaching: the creation and development of a central theme. I proposed "Defining Ourselves as Individuals and as a Nation" as a theme that would guide our readings and assignments for the fall term. Each instructor received a copy of my draft and made suggestions to make the program more seamless.

First Semester Seminar

We began the year in ENG 111 using our summer reading selections: *1984* by George Orwell, *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder, and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. Summer reading is a Botetourt County requirement for each grade level, and these particular texts should have prepared students for the interdisciplinary focus of the program. While I graded the actual summer reading assignments and counted the grade in ENG 111, the other instructors used these books in their classes from the first day. For example, Leftwich began PLS 211 with an in-class writing response to *1984* as a discussion starter. I used Dillard's text as a means of learning the students' writing voices and styles, testing their understanding of literary elements, and connecting them to concepts in philosophy. In ENG 111, students responded to the following journal prompts that were also accepted for credit in philosophy:

Reader's Journal #3: This book [*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*] is more than just a rambling journal about nature. It also gives insight into the writer and her philosophy about life. What is your philosophy of life? What aspect of nature can help you explain your philosophy? Use an aspect of nature as an extended metaphor for your philosophy of life (Walton).

Reader's Journal #6: Do you see a connection between Dillard's text and your introductory chapters in philosophy when writing Journals 3 and 4? Print out and complete a graphic organizer from this link to illustrate your thoughts -- <http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer> ("Graphic Organizers").

Each journal assignment counted toward 40 percent of each student's semester grade in English, but the other instructors weighted the journals within their own grading systems.

As the semester progressed, we continued to share assignments. When Leftwich was examining the Bill of Rights in PLS 211, students took a satirical look at free speech in ENG 111 by reading "Doublespeak" by William Lutz (256) and examining the Doublespeak Awards given annually by the National Council of Teachers of English. The related assignment was as follows:

Reader's Journal #9: The National Council of Teachers of English awards an ironic tribute, the Doublespeak Award, to public speakers who have perpetuated language that is grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-centered. The list of winners is at the NCTE site:

<http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/council/jrnl/106868.htm> .

After reading the article and visiting the NCTE site, choose a past winner of the award and show in which category their use of doublespeak best fits. ("Doublespeak Award")

This assignment was used as a prompt for a division/classification response in ENG 111 and counted as a journal in PLS 211. To build in the concept further, students discussed the article in PLS 211 using the following prompt:

Discussion Prompt: In weeks 7 and 8, we are examining the political culture in the U.S. today. How does Lutz' essay relate to today's political culture? How does "doublespeak" influence voters and their perceptions of the government?

Leftwich and I each graded a copy of the journal on the Doublespeak Awards, but weighted them according to our individual grade systems. I visited his class during the discussion on the political culture prompt and participated in the discussion.

The greatest point of integration in the first term was the final research paper, which is a requirement for ENG 111. We chose to direct the students toward social topics that integrated both philosophy and political science, and to count the paper substantially in the final grade for each course. To complete this project, Leftwich and I team taught for one class period to review students' topics, and then later team taught four class periods (two per course) to guide students through the process of writing the research paper. While we recognized that it is not the norm to take college students to a computer lab to complete the research paper, we felt that the project was unique in perspective and required a unified presentation on our parts for the students to meet our objectives.

Second Semester Seminar

For the second semester, students enrolled in ENG 112, PLS 212, and ECO 201. We instructors chose the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller as the centerpiece for the interdisciplinary focus, and each of us taught the play during weeks seven and eight. The end product was a literary analysis that examined the economic and political forces involved in Willy Loman's life and death. As the economics instructor, Sass wrote the essay prompts for the analysis. Later in the semester, concepts of economics and political science crossed paths through a joint project on the Federal Reserve, and students also participated in campus life by attending a presentation by the Tuskegee Airmen at the VWCC auditorium.

The spring semester project for political science and English was a multigenre Alternative Research Assignment (ARP) that integrated political science and English. I suggested the ARP after attending Carl Young's presentation "Many Voices, Multiple Perspectives: The Multigenre Research Project as a 21st Century Alternative to the Traditional Research Paper" at the 2005 Virginia Association of Teachers of English annual conference in Roanoke. Young and his teacher candidates demonstrated how to incorporate Tom Romano's work *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers* into secondary English classes. The project includes a traditional research component, but students write creatively in other genres about the research topic. One important component of the ARP that ties the various genres together is the repetend, which is a phrase or word that is repeated throughout the work, much like a refrain in a poem; however, the repetend can be repeated through visual images or in language.

Students chose social topics for the final project that illustrated how we as citizens visualize the American Dream or the loss of that dream. Students worked on the ARP throughout the semester and submitted drafts of their work in three stages. The final product ranged from ten to fifteen pages and included a documented research essay and a poetry explication. Students received the following guidelines for the alternative research project:

- The entire project must be in MLA format.
- The project must include at least ten genres total (but you may include more).
- Six "free-choice" genres must come from the attached list.
- Only one of the six may be a graphic or visual work.
- Each project must use a repetend that unifies the project.
- The project must be all original work that expresses at least three different points of view.
- The project must have a title page and table of contents.
- The project must include an annotated bibliography that accurately lists the sources you consulted (minimum of five) and

states specifically how the sources inspired the creative works or relate to the project.

- The project must use correct grammar and punctuation.
- Required Genre 1 is a two-page (full) preface to explain your topic, arrangement, focus, theme, etc.
- Required Genre 2 is a formal research essay of three full pages (no more, no less) that provides the factual background for the project and has its own Works Cited page.
- Required Genre 3 is an epilogue, minimum of two pages.
- Required Genre 4 is a two-page, documented literary analysis of a poem from the period of your topic or that represents a political view of your topic and focuses on how the poem is representative of the event or topic.
- The project must be accompanied by a folder of drafts and sources that will be turned in with the final project.

For this project, students explored topics such as women's rights, homelessness, the Great Depression, Civil Rights, 9/11, and heroism. Leftwich and I again chose to use a common rubric to grade the project, but weighted it individually for our classes.

Updates to the Seminar Structure

The fall of 2006 brought changes to the Senior Humanities Seminar. We replaced philosophy with public speaking, as public speaking is required for most college majors. We also felt that public speaking was an integral part of both politics and rhetoric, and that instruction in the art of speaking would help students achieve even more success in their overall academic programs. We are using *A Patriot's Handbook: Songs, Poems, Stories, and Speeches Celebrating the Land We Love*, edited by Caroline Kennedy, as the summer reading connection for the course. We also used the text throughout the year to make connections to the speech curriculum and to the world at large.

Evaluation

An instructor's evaluation of a class is not always proof of success. Whether we want to admit it or not, student success is one measure of our instruction. For the final exam in ENG 111, each student was asked to write a two-page essay evaluating what he or she had learned in Seminar. Students had to review their portfolios and comment on what had worked or not worked, what insights they had gained as students from the classes, and what they felt would help them in the future.

One student wrote:

This class has been directed as close to a college class as possible, and I have learned different strategies from all of the teachers on how to succeed in college classes. . . . I learned how to manage my time better, gained more responsibility, and have a better work ethic. (Hawley)

Another student felt that Seminar had created a new perspective on the college experience:

My idea of college was to be away from my parents, have fun, do whatever I wanted, and of course, I would have to do some work, but it wouldn't take up a lot of my time. Well, after just one semester of 'pretend college' I learned that college isn't all play and you have a lot of work . . . you can't get by without studying and reading. (Thurman)

Perhaps the most rewarding realization for a student was that she was in control of her own success:

I mapped out a schedule to follow when doing my homework and I gave myself rewards, like so much television or a new outfit for completing the assignments on time With this new system, I finally got an A on my second six weeks report card. (Brogan)

As we can see in this remark, by developing independence and self-discipline before leaving high school, these Seminar students can better visualize their success in college.

Senior Humanities Seminar has provided a new focus for dual-enrollment for students, the college system, and public schools. It allows the instructors more opportunities to share ideas and work as a team, which creates a stronger collegial working environment. It has opened up communications between the public school system and the college and paved the way for more dual offerings. The program allows students more opportunities to make connections among courses, thus creating stronger students overall. But above all, it provides students with a personal experience that bridges the gap between high school and college, allowing students to become independent learners who are responsible for their own success.

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