

GENERAL EDUCATION NEWS

From the California State University, Sacramento Office of Academic Affairs

Something New and Different: Culture Wars, An Upper-Division Learning Community

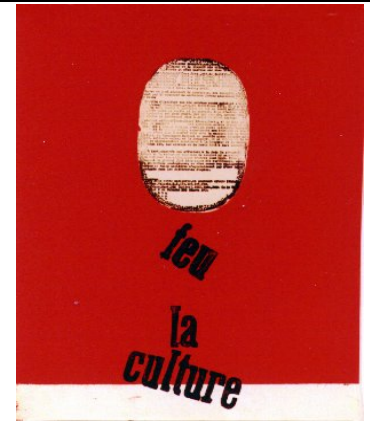
by Dr. Chauncey Ridley
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Spring semester 2007, we are launching *Culture Wars*, the only upper division G.E. learning community: two courses (six units) functioning collaboratively throughout a single semester, offering students the chance to fulfill both C1 and C4 requirements and the writing intensive requirement simultaneously (with the added advantage that the 5,000 word writing requirement is split between the two courses). The general idea of upper division learning communities was conceived to offer a special service to transfer students. Nevertheless, *Culture Wars* welcomes all interested in an introduction to some of the more current and rigorous tools for thinking critically about culture and cultural difference.

The brain-child of Dr. Arnaud, our learning community's emphasis upon conflict as the object of study is ideal for observing the birth of what

we call cultures' "crisis mode of identity construction": the frequent and, often, politically expedient reduction of the latest "them" to an imaginary homogeneity in polar opposition to a homogeneous "us" that, once propagated by the arts, news media, and academic programs, evolves into a peculiar and stubbornly resilient cultural knowledge.

Our goal is not to substitute our own crisis mode of identity construction but to provide a structure and forum for the rigorous, critical interrogation of that "knowledge." Can it possibly constitute an accurate description of any living culture? If not, then can we dismiss it as false? Or, if Serbian nationalism and Rwandan civil war expose the inevitable outcome of unchecked homogenizing impulses, then can we dismiss that knowledge as unhealthy? Or, does its emergence as a factor in all intra-cultural conflicts disclose another kind of truth, that of all living cultures' healthy diversity—hence their innate tendency not only to conflict but also to change? If so, then what transforms that healthy trait into genocide and, globally speaking, how does any



Degottex, *Fire...Culture is dead*,
1968

culture, ceaselessly at war with itself, come to fear a monolithic, foreign "other" nursing a grudge against a homogeneous "us?"

The efficiency of our six unit collaboration affords ample time to unhurriedly analyze the genesis of that crisis mode of identity construction and that knowledge both in intra- and in intercultural contexts. Dr. Arnaud's French 130, *Culture Wars: From Knighthood to Revolution*, surveys centuries of French *intra-cultural wars*, highlighting young "upstarts" who challenge their own culture's older, status quo. Dr. Ridley's English 175H, *Culture Wars: 19th Century to the Present*, surveys world literature pertinent to intercultural wars, local resistance to the "barbarous" cultures of immigrants and colonizers. Free of the three unit time constraint that can limit

cultural study to a single, dominant influence, *Culture Wars* accounts for cultures' boundless diversity in detail, while fully conceding the truth of their homogenizing impulses.

Writing as a Tool for Learning in any Discipline: The 2006 Writing Across the Curriculum Faculty Development Retreat
By Dan Melzer, Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator



Dan Melzer leading faculty in a discussion on how to grade writing effectively

"How can I teach writing in my course? I'm not a writing teacher, and I already have too much content to cover!"

This is a common refrain from faculty who are trying to meet the writing requirements of General Education courses or Writing Intensive classes. As academics, all of us are writers, and all of us use writing to communicate ideas and create new knowledge in our discipline. We all want students to retain information from readings and lectures and think critically about our subject-area content, but very few of us have had training in how to use writing to accomplish these

goals. Sometimes we see writing as a "skill" that's separate from the "content" of our discipline, when the truth is that when we teach students how to write in the disciplines, what we are really teaching them is how to think in the disciplines.

The notion that writing is one of the best tools for learning a discipline was the key theme of the 2006 Writing Across the Curriculum faculty development retreat, "Assigning, Responding, and Grading: Writing as a Tool for Learning in any Discipline." Thirty faculty from across disciplines at Sacramento State and local community colleges spent a day at the Alumni Center sharing techniques for designing writing assignments and responding to student writing, and heard from campus writing specialists Amy Heckathorn, Cherryll Smith, Dana Ferris, Cathy Gabor, Fiona Glade, and Dan Melzer. Some of the faculty were trying to integrate more writing into GE courses without increasing instructor workload, some faculty were designing a Writing Intensive course, and others were hoping to find ways to use writing to help students learn the content of courses in their major. Drawing on teaching ideas from Barbara Walvoord's book *Effective Grading*, retreat participants learned that not only could they learn to teach writing in their content-area courses,

but as content-area experts they were the ones best equipped to teach students how to use writing to communicate and think critically in their discipline.

Profile of a Department: The History Department and Its Role in GE

By Candace Gregory-Abbott, Assistant Professor of History and Chris Castaneda, Chair of the History Department

General Education, both formally and pedagogically, is at the heart of the discipline of history. Moreover, a basic knowledge of history is essential to being an educated and productive member of modern society. As George Santayana's famous saying reminds us, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Simply knowing how different cultures and societies through time have dealt with common challenges and issues educates us about the diversity of the human experience; familiarity with the past helps us to understand the origins of complex current situations.

The History Department has played a very active role in Sacramento State's General Education program. We currently offer 54 GE courses (primarily in areas C and D) along with seven "Race and Ethnicity in American Society" and seven "Writing Intensive"

courses. In GE Area C1 and D1B, the history department offers a very wide variety of courses that cover the peoples and civilizations of Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and the Near and Far East. In Area D2 and Area D3, we offer upper-division courses that examine the historical development of cities in the U.S. (Hist 163), the environment (Hist 165), foreign relations (Hist 159), and American women (Hist 167), among many other topics. Perhaps the greatest advantage to our close relationship with the General Education program is that it allows the history department to interact with students from a variety of different colleges and majors across the university.



Professor Chloe Burke teaching GE course History 17B

As a discipline, history is both writing and research intensive and offers students the opportunity to improve their skills in these areas. Our GE Writing Intensive courses span a wide range of topical areas, from women in western civilization (Hist 122A/B) to

the great ideas and issues of Europe (Hist 105) and the history of Latin America (Hist 138A/B). Whether a history course is formally designated writing intensive or not, students will be expected to do a large amount of writing. In Hist 122A, for example, students are expected to write analyses of primary source documents, two book reviews on secondary sources, and a research paper.

Having a basic understanding of history generally is important and enlightening, but historians have the opportunity to really dig deeply into areas of special interest, for any reason – personal or professional. With a good general education intact, the fun really begins!

The Civic Learning Institute

By Mimi Coughlin, Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education

The Civic Learning Institute (CLI) is an emerging initiative on campus that has roots in both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. In June a team from Sacramento State, (Mary Kirilin, Shelia Macias, Beth Merritt-Miller, and Greg Wheeler) attended a workshop sponsored by the CSU Chancellor's Office to design a plan for promoting civic learning on our campus. This plan is now being piloted and is evolving. One focus has

been to highlight opportunities for students to develop the skills of engagement within the context of the Freshman Seminar. The Freshman Seminar is a particularly appropriate place to emphasize the following aspects of civic learning:

- Student and faculty **involvement** in curricular and co-curricular activities
- The building of helpful **academic and social networks**
- **Communication skills** (oral, written, digital etc.)
- **Organizing** (self and others for effective completion of tasks)
- **Collective decision making** (making consequential group decisions)
- **Critical thinking** about values as they relate to educational goals

The Office of Community Collaboration (OCC) has provided a home-base for the CLI and is supporting efforts to build stronger relationships between our students, faculty, campus, and surrounding community. To support this we have begun a series of informal breakfast meetings that allow faculty to share strategies for getting students out of the classroom for learning experiences. The most exciting part of the breakfasts has been the development of collegiality across disciplines and

between individual faculty members and staff members in a variety of positions on campus.

Other CLI efforts include Constitution Week events during September -- a voter registration drive, a student run forum on immigration, and screenings of the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which drew nearly 3000 people. The film provided an opening for our Freshman Seminar faculty to discuss issues such as the responsibility of an

educated person, what it means to serve others, and how to get one's voice heard.

Faculty and Staff interested in the work of the CLI can:

Search "co-curricular" connections on the One Calendar www.calendar.csus.edu for activities to use in your courses and programs.

Use curricular ideas circulated via the Freshman Listserv in your courses (if

you teach a Freshman Seminar).

Join the (very informal) CLI group and become part of the conversation. Contact Mimi Coughlin at 278-4080 or coughlin@csus.edu for details about upcoming events.

GE NEWSLETTER

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