

GENERAL EDUCATION NEWS

From the CSUS Office of Academic Affairs

LCOM 16 Goes Hawaiian

By *Jeanne Rodgers and Cindi SturtzSreetharan*



Learning Community Professors Cindi SturtzSreetharan and Jeanne Rodgers in front of their poster

Lucky us. While Sacramento was covered in a dismal blanket of fog in the middle of January, we were enjoying warm tropical breezes at the Third Annual Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, held this year at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu.

The conference theme of cross-disciplinary teaching and learning was reflected in the keynote speaker's address, "Towards a Critique of Violence," given by Dominick LaCapra from Cornell. Using the hard-to-ignore universal problem of violence, LaCapra discussed how such a topic that exists outside any particular discipline—yet is inherent in all of them—can be a successful focus for cross-disciplinary teaching and learning. He made

the distinction between interdisciplinary studies and cross-disciplinary studies. He said interdisciplinary studies, in which existing disciplines are joined (or one discipline is imposed upon another), usually lead to frustration for both teachers and learners. On the other hand, according to LaCapra, cross-disciplinary studies—in which problems that transverse disciplines, like violence, are examined from various angles—lead to insight beyond a mono-disciplinary approach.

A successful example of cross-disciplinary studies was evident in a session we attended during the conference entitled "Teaching Values across the Curriculum: The Bowling Green Experience." Professor Louis Katzner described Bowling Green University's fast growing freshman program that by the fall of 2005 will include all incoming freshmen. One of the goals of the program is to have students think critically about values central to the human experience, identify conflict among competing values, reflect on these, and articulate their own. One of the ways this is done is by having all students read a common book that is then discussed in their core courses through the different lenses of these disciplines. Last fall's book was Tim O'Brien's Vietnam era novel *The Things They Carried*.

Participating faculty select a new book every year.

The Bowling Green Experience seems a model for practices and goals we might consider in our Learning Communities Program here at CSUS. However, what Bowling Green is doing requires money; according to Katzner, adequate funding is the key to its success in implementing and expanding its freshman program. Most of the funding comes from Ohio's Success Challenge Program, which strives to graduate students in four years, including those from lower-income families. An additional 15% of the program's funding (2.25 million) comes from private donors. Part of this money goes to pay peer facilitators who coordinate and lead social activities as well as study groups and sessions on academic skills such as writing. Additionally, participating faculty are paid \$1,000 to attend an initial training workshop. This was all food for thought as we prepared for our own conference session on our learning community experience.

Expanding our Fall Convocation 2004 presentation entitled "Putting Our Heads Together: Collaborative Teaching in a University Learning Community," in which we discussed our classroom practices resulting from our research and trial-and-error, we added to our poster

session in Hawaii information about the Learning Communities Program at CSUS. As part of our display, we adapted and showed a power-point promotion that Lynn Tashiro, LCOM's Faculty Coordinator had created for freshman orientation and had graciously lent us for the occasion, as well as valuable information supplied by Beth Merritt Miller, Coordinator of Freshman Programs, and Sheree Meyer, Chair of the English Dept. and member of the founding LCOM task force, about the history and assessment of our Learning Communities Program.

In keeping with the international spirit of the conference, educators from not only around the country but around the world visited our poster session. Among them were instructors and professors from the College of St. Scholastica, a private Benedictine school in northern Minnesota; Clemson University in South Carolina; Iowa State University; Colorado Hilltop Resources; Alvernia College in Pennsylvania; Ming Chuan University in Taiwan; and Kamchatka State Pedagogical University in Russia. Recently we received an e-mail requesting information about our presentation from a Ph.D. candidate at Stellenbosch University in Cape Town, South Africa, who was at the conference but was unable to attend our session.

Some of those we spoke with were familiar with learning communities and had some type of program on their campus. For instance, Patience Lueth from Iowa State said that

learning communities on her campus were determined by major. The students lived together, and participating faculty visited them in their dorms once a week for discussion or extracurricular activities.

Generally, most educators we talked with were enthused about the idea of learning communities but were skeptical about the realities of funding them. One professor from CSU Bakersfield was bitter about the demise of learning communities on her campus. She said they had been part of the overall structure of the university when it opened in 1965, but lack of funding had caused the program to die. She felt that a learning communities program could not succeed on any CSU campus due to the way California's public universities are funded.

Skepticism about funding surfaced time and again as we talked with conference participants. As faculty in the Learning Communities Program here at CSUS, we see two main obstacles to expanding the program and making it an exemplary educational experience: 1) lack of compensation for faculty's time and effort above and beyond their normal teaching duties; 2) the inability of the university to dedicate our learning community classes to learning community students. Finding some way to compensate CSUS faculty for their service, according to Beth Merritt Miller, is high priority for our Learning Community Program. CSUS might want to consider that at Bowling Green, faculty are paid for the initial training

workshop at which they receive valuable preparation for teaching in the program. The second obstacle—the non-dedicated classes—is a more difficult issue to address. This is the result of the university's financial concerns about low enrollment. If our LCOM classes do not fill by the time of open registration, any students eligible for those courses are allowed to add. This results in classes that may have only fourteen LCOM students out of forty, which makes any special activities with those students, such as attending a play or a concert with the community's other instructors, difficult.

Most of us at CSUS who have been with the Learning Communities Program for some time enjoy the psychic rewards of our involvement: the cross-disciplinary approach to teaching, the collaboration and coordination with someone outside of our field, and the opportunity for professional development are all positive outcomes of our commitment. Furthermore, we appreciate that we have the freedom to explore innovative teaching methods. A conversation we had at the conference with a British-trained educator teaching at Ming Chuan University in Taiwan reminded us of this freedom. As he looked over our material and asked questions about the program, he said the concept of learning communities would never be entertained where he taught—much, he thinks, to the detriment of his students.

Freshman Seminar Makes a Difference

By Greg Wheeler

Our campus has had several small or pilot programs to initiate first-year students to campus. Through the work of many faculty and staff, the current Freshman Seminar program was initiated in fall of 1999, during which four sections were offered as General Studies 21. In fall of 2005 we will offer 50 sections and serve approximately half of our new freshman class. These sections will be offered by full and part-time faculty and some full time staff. The course is now offered by 16 academic departments and sections are taught in all Colleges.

Purpose of program:

Freshman Seminar is intended to provide students with an introduction to the nature and possible meanings of higher education, and the functions and resources of the University. The course is designed to help students develop and exercise fundamental academic success strategies and to improve their basic learning skills. The seminar also provides students with the opportunity to interact with fellow students and the seminar leader and to build a community of academic and personal support.

Target population:

The class is available to all incoming freshmen and satisfies Area E in General Education. Most Educational Opportunity Program students are required to take the class as part of a Learning Community. All athletes on scholarship take the class.

Course Text:

A custom text, with articles selected by the teaching faculty, is used by all sections. The nine text units cover a wide range of topics like, The Value of a College Education: Why Am I in College. Other units are, "What is Diversity and Why is it Important to Me" and "What About Technology."

Funding:

Funding is through Academic Affairs, EOP, Departments and Colleges.

Demonstrated Results:

All sections administer the faculty developed questionnaire which is used to assess course success in meeting the learning objectives for the class. The questions asked students to answer on a scale of 1-5 whether or not they strongly agreed (5) agreed (4) were neutral (3) disagreed (2) or strongly disagreed (1) with the statements. In 1999, the average response to the statements was above 4 on 5 of the 15 questions. In fall 2004, the average response had improved to above 4 on all 20 questions used to measure how students benefited from taking the course. The 2004 survey of students indicates that 75% are more motivated in their studies, 91% say they have a better understanding of what it means to be an educated person, 85% say they can take more responsibility for their own learning, and 79 % say that they feel more connected or comfortable with CSUS after taking this class. These are impressive results. There are many instructors that are obviously doing a superb job.

The Office of Institutional Research has been

tracking our Freshman Seminar students. 47% of the students who took the class in 1999 graduated from CSUS within 5 1/2 years compared to only 31% of those who did not have the Freshman Seminar class. 62% of the students who took Freshman Seminar (except EOP students) in fall 2000 are still at CSUS or have graduated compared to 54% retention for the freshmen who did not take Freshman Seminar. One of the most dramatic differences between students who take Freshman Seminar and those who don't is seen in the one year retention rates. 83% of students who took the Freshman Seminar (excluding EOP students) in fall 2003 returned to CSUS in fall 2004 compared to only a 78% retention rate for Freshmen who did not take the class. Although students in the EOP program tend to be underprepared for college, the retention rate for EOP students who took Freshman Seminar was 85%, seven percent higher than for freshmen who did not take the class.

The high school Grade Point Average of freshmen who take Freshman Seminar (EOP excluded) is comparable to the GPA of all freshmen, but Freshman Seminar students had a GPA of 2.91 after one year and the rest of the freshman class had a GPA of 2.71 after one year.

The freshman seminar website is, www.csus.edu/LC/fsfac/gnst21.htm. Please contact Greg Wheeler, at 278-7466 for information on how you can be part of this dynamic program.

General Education Courses In Critical Thinking Dwindling

Because the number of Critical Thinking courses (GE Area A3) has declined lately (111 fewer student seats this spring than last spring), the General Education Committee is actively seeking new course proposals in this area. In the exchange below Professors Stan Dundon (Philosophy) and Dan Melzer (English) discuss ways to teach critical thinking – perhaps their exchange will inspire you to propose a course.

Hold the “Critical” in Critical Thinking

By Stan Dundon, Philosophy

As a long-time professor of Philosophy 4 (which counts for GE credit in Area A3), I have developed specific ways of teaching students meaningful critical thinking skills which they can employ in the upper division classes and beyond. Instead of teaching students to first hone their skills at detecting fallacies and faulty reasoning, I suggest that one of our principal tasks as writing and critical thinking teachers is to teach them how to follow reasoning carefully and to require the completion of enthymemes when they seem critical.¹ We all know how commonly our students get tangled in their unspoken premises and unexamined hidden assumptions. But we make a mistake if we imagine

¹ An enthymeme is an argument with a missing premise. It is almost always the most general premise, called the major premise, which is omitted.

that they are logically challenged by habit or exposure to too-rapid pacing of TV. They more likely think and write badly because of haste and failure to think long deliberately about what they are saying.

In my intensive writing classes (which are always structured around ethical topics) no paper, no group disputation, no policy formation essay may be written without giving both premises. The “normative” or moral premise is always the major premise. By logic alone it must be universal (“All X is Y.” Or “No X is Y.”) It is the one most students tend and perhaps prefer to omit. It sounds too dogmatic about values and ethics. That it must logically be a universal claim and applicable to others besides themselves does not make it easier. Of course this makes them frame the moral premise more carefully.

Hubert Dreyfus, in *What Computers Still Can't Do* makes the point that top chess players don't think about individual moves but weigh the whole board and instinctively know what move to make.

Anyone who has argued with a bright seven year old will see them do the same thing. They marshal premises with a willful skill to escape a task (or to justify one undone) with speed and agility which leaves the parent too exhausted to contemplate the inconsistent missing premises and hidden assumptions. Our students are three times older and three times faster than these children, if we can get them to argue at all. It is when we try to get them to dig out the missing premises that we meet with resistance.

“What is the point of this?” they may think. “Is this worth the time it takes?” And my answer is: “You will never know why you believe what you believe or why you think what you think, unless you know and examine all the reasons.”

When I teach the arts of definition and classification (taxonomy/division) and forms of categorical and hypothetical arguments, I make students trace out the entire argument tree of tightly woven editorials with usually only one main conclusion. If there are 30 relevant sentences or clauses, there will be at least 10 enthymematic omissions, not logical errors, just Dreyfus-like leaps over critical premises and conclusions, some too boring to mention, some stunningly relevant. Because I have devised a way students can translate their argument-tree analysis into a machine graded (scantron) form, I can have them do six editorials during the semester and two during the final. I will be glad to show interested groups how that is done (you can contact me at dundons@csus.edu).

In conclusion, Dan Melzer (CSUS Reading & Writing Coordinator) made excellent points in the Fall 2004 *GE Newsletter* about how writing is aimed at promoting better thinking. However, I wish to say that there is a bit of danger in how Melzer sees the inculcation of students into the patterns of discourse of their discipline as untroubling. Digging out boring missing premises will look bad, asking about critical ones will look good and will help the students

advance quickly. Publicly wondering about those which the profession would like to leave unspoken may make one unpopular, but it may help the student decide whether the moral tone of the profession is all it should be. Consider the following: “Procedures which reverse the evidence of aging are procedures typically requiring medical training. Therefore doctors should do them.” Or “This array of hardware and a massive software program will enable almost total automation. Therefore it is *prima facie* superior to one requiring human intervention.” Or even more simply: “After all, agriculture is just a business.” As the Faculty Senate begins their discussion of moving all intensive writing courses into the majors, we need to be particularly careful that we do not develop writing programs which embody forms of discourse and analysis which obscure its normative premises. Critical thinking will enable non-specialists to understand the unspoken commitments and convictions which are critical to the disciplines.

Response to “Hold the ‘Critical’ in Critical Thinking”

By Dan Melzer, CSUS
Reading & Writing Coordinator

My response to Stan Dundan’s “Hold the ‘Critical’ in Critical Thinking” is less an

argument than a clarification. I agree with Dundan that unthinking inculcation of students into the patterns of discourse of their discipline should not be the ultimate goal of a course or of a writing program. I used the word “initiation” in my original essay, but initiating students to the ways of thinking of a discipline is only part of what writing can and should do. My own major premise, that writing is meaning-making, could perhaps be clarified by one more premise: that making meaning requires critical thinking. In my essay I argued that “writing is one of the most effective ways to engage students in critical thinking about a subject or discipline,” and I agree with Dundan that one goal of critical thinking is to challenge premises and tacitly accepted conventions. Writing is used in limited ways when instructors see it only as a tool for recalling information or mindlessly parroting discourse conventions. Although it’s important that students learn how to enter the discourse community of their discipline (to learn the key terms, the seminal research, what counts as evidence, what forms that written discourse takes in the field), it’s equally important that students have a voice in the discourse community of a field and space to challenge the conventions and logic of their field. At its best, writing is used

to create knowledge, to think critically, to encourage students to reflect on their own assumptions and the assumptions of their discipline.

Dundan’s writing intensive philosophy course is an example of just the kind of meaning-making and critical thinking approach I advocate. In his course, Dundan uses writing to encourage students to think like philosophers—to practice the kinds of rhetorical ways of thinking that are valued in the discipline of philosophy. Dundan’s philosophy students learn key terms (major premise, minor premise, enthymeme) and rhetorical strategies (definition, classification, categorical and hypothetical argumentation). At the same time, Dundan asks students to use writing to think critically about discourse. Dundan encourages students to challenge dogma, question unspoken premises, and carve out their own positions as philosophers. Dundan treats his students as writers with something to say and critical thinkers with ideas to contribute to his field—and since that’s the case, I think we’re both working under the same premise.

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