Searching for Community and Common Ground in General Education

Background Material

These essays are background material for the closing panel session, "What Are We Trying to Accomplish in General Education?"

They describe instructors’ aims and purposes in Statistics, World History, English Composition, and Essentials of Oral Communication—general education courses taken by nearly every UWL student.
The Role of Statistics in General Education

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The New England Journal of Medicine reports "people who eat ten or more servings of pizza per week have a reduced risk of dying of cancer." What does this mean? Should you start eating pizza every night? What further information do you need to properly evaluate this study? I hope that after taking MTH 205, students will be able to critically evaluate claims based on statistical evidence.

MTH 205, Elementary Statistics, is the most commonly chosen course in the skills section I.B.1 of the General Education Program. Last fall, approximately 950 students began MTH 205 in 26 sections of 36-40 students each. Fifteen different instructors taught these courses. These numbers are approximately the same for spring semester. All instructors use the same textbook and have the same basic course outline, but each instructor is individually responsible for choosing which topics to emphasize and how to evaluate student performance. Because of the diverse approaches taken by different instructors, I will discuss only my personal goals for MTH 205 and the obstacles I see impeding progress toward those goals.

Ideally, MTH 205 serves two purposes. First, we cover basic skills in statistics: collecting good data, interpreting data that have been collected, and making sound inferences based on the data. I emphasize the second and third skills. We try to answer the questions "What kind of statistical test is appropriate in this situation?" and "What kind of conclusions can we draw from the test and how reliable are these conclusions?". I do not spend as much time as I would like on experimental design or sampling techniques; details of how to collect reliable data are left for follow-up courses that require statistics. Second, and perhaps more important, we would like to prepare students to intelligently evaluate claims based on statistical tests. In the example above, I would hope MTH 205 students would ask questions such as "How were the data obtained?" "Was there a control group for this study?" "Is there an attempt to establish cause-and-effect through an experiment, or is this an observed correlation based on random search?" "How large were the samples?" "What is the p-value, or the margin of error and the confidence level?"

The discouraging part of teaching is that it is hard to get students to transfer what they learn in class to other classes or work outside the classroom. I expect that students will forget specific skills, but my hope is that they will remember big ideas and be able to relearn skills quickly when they are needed. We have found through our assessment tests the past two years that students do forget much of what they learn in MTH 205 by the time they reach follow-up courses that require MTH 205. We have not yet found a way to measure the rate at which they relearn statistical ideas.

Of course, to be able to transfer learning you must learn something in the first place, so I tend to concentrate on skills mastery because it is easier to evaluate and gives students who work hard a chance to succeed. Also, specific skills are needed for work in courses in other departments that require MTH 205 as a prerequisite. Some of the problems in teaching MTH 205 come from the tension between the need to cover material and the need to slow down and emphasize understanding.
What Are We Trying To Accomplish In General Education?

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After teaching the general education courses, World History 151 and 152, for several years, one certainty stands out--my initial goals have changed considerably. I began teaching world history fresh from reading numerous articles on developing critical thinking skills, and the goals and logistics of covering all human history, from prehistory to the present, in twenty-eight weeks. While all of this academic prose served a purpose, and remains a goal, it now seems far removed from classroom realities.

In general education courses, most students are freshmen, eighteen and nineteen years old. Further, the student population at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse is predominantly rural from an agricultural-based economy in western Wisconsin and homogeneous in ethnic, religious and racial composition. Their backgrounds are often limited and their knowledge of an increasingly complex and interrelated world is incomplete. How do you capture and keep the attention of this group and still impart an understanding of the global past?

For instance, when students hear of events such as the U.S. war with Iraq, I hope by completing the world history course, they will realize that the enmity the Mideast holds toward the West is not a recent phenomenon, but has a long history, deriving from hundreds of years of western imperialism. In addition to this historical perspective, I wanted students to experience the universality of human emotions. Despite the distance of five thousand years, students learn that people in Egyptian civilization also experienced love, hate, fear, ambition, and despair. Or in the example of the Holocaust, one of humanity’s darkest hours, the capacity for evil, and in that same period, humans’ capacity for good and all that lies in between, is brought into stark relief. Too, what insight reveals the reasons for the Chinese decision to cease oceanic explorations less than 50 years before Vasco DeGama sailed around the tip of Africa. The answer to this question requires an understanding of Confucianism, and the inescapable role it played in the policy decisions of the Chinese in the 15th century.

Put another way, the goals of acquiring a historical perspective and a deeper sense of what it means to be human can be translated into life-long learning skills. World history is an introduction to a global society, in which students will be expected to participate. The first premise of a world history curriculum is that people in the twentieth century live in a global society, interconnected by technology, ideologies, and economies. The world is shrinking. As the population of the United States reflects this through an increasingly culturally diverse community, it becomes imperative to teach a history that recognizes the contributions of past civilizations. Furthermore, as the United States continues to engage in global politics and rely on foreign resources, a working knowledge of the world and its many cultures is necessary. Finally, if this is the world our students are entering it is imperative for them to meet the challenges of a changing environment. For example, an American businessman in Southeast Asia is at a disadvantage without an understanding of Southeast Asian culture. Students who learn about the interactions of the human community gain a sense of historical perspective which will not only enrich their lives but aid them in meeting the challenges of a complex world.
The Purpose of Writing Courses in the General Education Program

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English 110 (freshman composition), a block of 300-level writing courses, and various writing emphasis courses help students meet the general education requirement for the skills component in literacy. In particular, English 110 and the 300-level courses might be considered the generative core for the General Education program. In fact, their purpose is exactly the same as the general purpose of the Gen Ed program: "to cultivate knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for independent learning and thinking."

In these writing courses, students learn to use writing not only as an instrument for communication but also as a tool of learning. Because the arts of composing and communicating are much more than mere sets of skills, but are, indeed, fundamental capacities and dimensions of being human, to learn to compose well is—at least in the realm of the intellect—to become a well-rounded human being. Specifically, students are led to develop dispositions

* to inquire,
* to think imaginatively, critically, holistically, heuristically,
* to work systematically, imaginatively, and arduously alone or in collaborative settings,
* to learn from mistakes and remain open to paradox and confusion, and
* to comprehend and synthesize multiple perspectives.

To facilitate and extend these dispositions, students are guided to develop the practical, intellectual skills (and the concomitant knowledge-base that those skills require) that allow them to:

* think and write rhetorically (i.e., to be consciously aware of various audiences, purposes, genres, and writer/speaker strategies and techniques),
* read and research to explore and develop concepts and information,
* organize their developing intellectual work,
* construct well-developed lines of analysis and reasoning,
* create coherent, efficient, and appropriate prose, and
* co-operate in both the analysis and construction of intellectual products.

Or, to put the entire matter in another way, the goal of these writing courses is to help students come to both intellectual and practical understandings of literacy. They should come to understand how texts are socially constructed—and what that means in terms of interpreting and constructing them. Ideally, the result is a student who knows when and how to apply rhetorical analysis and strategies in order to construct a meaningful, complex line of thought; to conduct research to develop and support the thinking; and to express that thinking in clear, coherent prose.

This is, admittedly, a tall order—particularly when it needs to be filled in 15 weeks. Consider two things:

1. Most UWL students are required to take only one writing course, English 110, (writing emphasis courses differ considerably from writing courses).
Essentials of Oral Communication (SPC 110) is a General Education course designed to develop four skills basic to success in the University setting and later in life. These are research skills, critical thinking skills, presentational skills, and listening skills.

The research skills taught in SPC 110 are library-based, not experimental. Students are taught how to locate information and evidence form a variety of sources. Murphy Library can be frightening to many entering freshmen. SPC 110 introduces them to the building and its resources, and starts them on the road to overcoming their fears of computers and microfilm. Being at ease with library resources is necessary to a meaningful University experience.

Critical thinking skills are taught in various ways. Students must create an oral message from the earliest states of analyzing an audience and considering audience needs and selecting a topic all the way through rehearsal and final presentation. They must make decisions concerning the quality and impact of possible forms of support and evidence, select and follow a pattern of organization, and institute various types of appeals. Through the use of peer critiques and critical listening, students have an opportunity to learn and respond appropriately to the various communicative attempts of others.

Presentational skills used in SPC 110 are transferable to various areas of University and later life. Experience in presenting one’s ideas to an audience addresses a very relevant human need. It has been estimated that seventy percent of the human population suffers from communication anxiety in the area of public speaking. The most recognized instrument used to measure this phenomenon is the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety. The results from thousands of college students over the years break down into the following percentages: low anxiety, 5%; moderately low, 5%; moderate, 20%; moderately high, 30%; and high, 40%. (Richmond, Virginia P. and James C. McCroskey. Communication: Apprehension, Avoidance, and Effectiveness, 4th ed. Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Scottsdale, AZ.: 1995, Pp. 45-6) This means that the numerically average college student suffers from a degree of anxiety that is strong enough for them to significantly alter their behavior or avoid speaking altogether. By being able to expose their ideas in a quasi-public but relatively non-threatening setting, students can gain a perspective into their own very natural feelings. As a result, a potential personal burden can be lifted.

Listening is the most widely used but least taught communication skill. We all spend more time as consumers of oral messages than we spend as senders. Through the use of critiques and peer evaluation, students learn from one another. When students know what they are looking for, they can pick up speaking techniques from other speakers. Effective listening is directly related to critical thinking. We become more discriminating consumers of messages when we can recognize, identify, and evaluate oral communication techniques.

SPC 110 is designed to help students begin to become more effective communicators. Their road to full confidence and mastery is obviously longer than a single semester. But no journey is ever completed if it is never begun.