

Review of the Critical Investigations Cohort
2009-2010

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1 September 2010

I. Origins, 2006-2007

The idea for a cohort—a group of faculty committed to teaching first year students over a period of several consecutive years—originated with the First-Year Experience Disappearing Task Force (DTF), which recommended that the Academic Division:

- Develop ongoing faculty cohorts to teach Core [freshmen-only programs] for 2-4 years.
- Provide incentives for faculty who are part of the Core cohort in order to adequately compensate faculty for the extra work involved in this assignment. (FYE DTF, “Recommendations”)

The DTF also recommended that the provost augment the level of institutional support for instruction in writing and quantitative reasoning, as well as general college readiness and diversity work. Throughout its report, the DTF emphasized the need for increased collaboration between faculty and student support services in each of these areas.

The potential advantages of the cohort, as defined by the DTF, were as follows:

Having a cohort of Core faculty will provide continuity that will lead to a cumulatively more savvy, satisfying, and successful experience. There is the potential for overlapping faculty cohorts, which would increase or ensure the likelihood of teams that consist entirely or mostly of faculty with recent experience teaching first-year students. There would also be greater opportunity to share and re-employ proven best practices, and develop and sustain relationships with support staff, thus strengthening cross-divisional ties and collaboration. This continuity model has been used successfully at other institutions, in part by offering faculty incentives such as sabbaticals or stipends at the end of their tenure teaching first-year students. (FYE DTF, “Recommendations”)

The provost accepted the DTF’s recommendations and passed them on to the faculty responsible for overseeing governance assignments.¹ The Governance Groups DTF in turn recommended that the faculty interested in carrying out the experiment should be the ones to define its parameters.

II. Initial planning, 2007-2008

Accordingly, a group of faculty met in the summer of 2007 to talk about what a cohort could look like at Evergreen and what its goals might be. The challenge was to apply a set of practices that had been successful at other institutions to our existing pedagogical structures.

¹ Evergreen functions on the model of shared governance, meaning that faculty, staff, and students are expected to participate equally in the deliberative work that leads to policy recommendations.

Several questions arose from these early discussions:

- 1) What incentives could we give faculty willing to focus intensively on first-year teaching?
- 2) How would we ensure that additional planning time would not significantly increase faculty workload?

In respect to the first question, the provost's office was only able to provide minor incentives to faculty in the form of increased compensation for planning time, rather than the sabbatical and stipend options mentioned in the First-Year Experience DTF report. As a result, the definition of the cohort soon shifted from "a group of faculty committed to first year teaching over an extended period of time" to "a group of faculty committed to delivering shared content across multiple academic programs during a given academic year." While the idea of teaching a greater than average number of first-year students was not particularly appealing to faculty, the prospect of co-teaching a 4-credit "unit" was compelling because it meant that both faculty and students would have a chance to learn from individuals outside their "home" program.²

Accordingly, a small group—2 faculty members from the science and math planning unit, 2 from the humanities—met in April of 2008 at the Washington Center's Curriculum Planning retreat to discuss our options. The group arrived at the following proposal, which focused on providing intensive instruction in writing and quantitative reasoning (henceforth referred to as the "satellite faculty" proposal):

We propose 4 credits of inter-program activities. Our model includes a two-hour per week lecture/seminar series around a common set of texts. We envision using three texts per quarter. The lectures would be whole-cohort lectures and each faculty cohort member would facilitate a seminar with student members from throughout the entire cohort. (The distribution of students would be such so that any given student would not have the same cohort faculty facilitator as their program seminar.) We also envision that each program would complete a set of writing and quantitative reasoning workshops for the other two credits. The inter-program workshops (or inshops) would be taught by "satellite" faculty members, one of whom teaches writing workshops and the other teaches quantitative and symbolic reasoning workshops. Satellite faculty would not be associated with a particular program.

² Although most Evergreen faculty strive to create learning communities that support a significant number of students' social and academic needs, they are also aware that the all-consuming nature of the 16-credit program can prevent both students and faculty from taking advantage of other learning opportunities on campus. The idea of a cohort was appealing as a way of facilitating learning outside the boundaries of the program.

The proposal ensured that a larger number of students would be learning from highly skilled satellite faculty while providing an opportunity for a group of other faculty members to learn the satellite faculty's techniques. This model directly addressed the Northwest Commission's recommendation that the College provide more focused instruction in science and mathematics, while continuing our commitment to writing across the curriculum (NWCCU, Recommendations from Comprehensive Evaluation Report, Fall 2008). The proposal also provided a natural framework for regular interaction between faculty teams and the directors of the Writing and Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning Centers. The provost praised the proposal but was unable to fund the reduced faculty-student ratio necessary to make the job of the satellite faculty members doable.

III. Implementation, 2009-2010

A group of three programs had now fully committed to implementing something called a "cohort" in the 2009-2010 academic year, but due to the lack of funding for the "satellite faculty" proposal they had not yet settled on a model for delivering shared content.

What remained, for the faculty involved, was a shared interest in providing a rigorously interdisciplinary experience for the students while learning more about each others' areas of expertise and teaching styles. The programs committed to this set of shared goals were:

- Acts of Translation (Creative Writing, Dance, Music)
- Forensics and Criminal Behavior (Chemistry, Sociology)
- Social Dilemmas (Mathematics, Philosophy)

All three teams were highly interdisciplinary, and the cohort represented a grand total of seven academic disciplines, not including the faculty members' sub specialties. During our final planning sessions in the summer of 2009 the members of the cohort decided on a plan that would keep faculty workload relatively stable while providing a solidly interdisciplinary experience for students.

Anchored in this collegial exploration, the team (henceforth referred to simply as the Cohort) came up with a title and a description of our shared work:

Critical investigations: evidence, fairness, truth and creativity

The First-Year Cohort is a group of Core programs that offers an integrated first-year experience to incoming freshmen. The cohort is committed to interdisciplinary teaching that facilitates the transition to college, and empowers students to direct their own education in the classroom and beyond. Participating programs share a four-credit component designed to help new students learn to practice the habits of

mind that foster and sustain a liberal arts education. Lectures, seminars, and workshops on basic skills such as reading, writing, and quantitative and symbolic reasoning will strengthen college-level abilities that help students to be effective as inquirers and change-makers. In addition, First-Year Cohort programs are a community of learners that stretches well beyond the scope of individual programs. Students will have opportunities to interact with a broad range of faculty from multiple disciplines, and with students in other programs from across the curriculum.

The team decided that we would devote one morning per week to an all-cohort activity (usually a lecture). These activities would be preceded by short readings and followed by an assignment that was to be turned in to the student's program faculty.

The faculty eventually implemented this model, but with one significant change. When it came time for students to enroll in programs in the spring and summer of 2009, the College found that it had a larger number of juniors and seniors to accommodate than it had anticipated. Some programs designed for freshmen—including 2 of the 3 cohort programs—were asked to take on sophomores, juniors, and seniors to help address the shifting demographic picture. Thus, more or less overnight, the Cohort ceased being an interdisciplinary experiment for an all freshmen group. The faculty did their best to adapt, but this change did undermine our attempts to maintain a clear set of goals for improving the first year experience.

The Cohort was implemented in Fall 2009 and Winter 2010—with a stronger focus on writing and seminar during the second quarter. The experiment was not continued into the spring because two of the three teams were committed to forming new programs.

IV. Outcomes

Successes

Interdisciplinary exposure. The Cohort was successful in introducing students to a variety of academic disciplines. Students who might not have signed up for a science class were surprised by how much they enjoyed activities such as the “bucket dig”: a large scale experiential activity involving the analysis of evidence from a fake crime scene. Students who were generally uninterested in art and humanities coursework were impressed by a lecture on the musicality of language, which taught them that *how* we speak is every bit as important as *what* we are attempting to say. In this sense the experiment spoke directly to the Northwest Commission's recommendation that the College “strengthen the teaching and documentation of the natural sciences, mathematics, and fine arts” (NWCCU, Recommendations from Comprehensive Evaluation Report, Fall 2008). Several students noted on their surveys that they appreciated learning from multiple professors, and being introduced to different teaching styles.

Integration. The Cohort was successful in helping students begin to integrate their work

in different disciplines, as demonstrated by a synthesis assignment (Appendix 1) that asked them to draw connections between two of the fall quarter activities that were least familiar to them. Faculty modeled this kind of synthesis work in front of students during our final fall quarter session by describing what we had learned about each other's disciplines and how they related to our own. The Cohort thus provides one model for how faculty can, as the Re-Modeling Teaching and Learning at Evergreen DTF has recommended, pay "more deliberate attention to the integration of student learning across different courses and programs" (RTaLE, Feb. 17 Faculty Meeting Handout). A majority of students surveyed, both freshmen and non-freshmen students, described the Cohort as improving their understanding of the various disciplines represented, and the differences between them.

Seminar. During winter quarter, the cohort team provided more time for small, mixed program seminars. Together with the writing assignment, the seminar seemed to be the place where students were best able to identify the theme linking different Cohort sessions. A majority of freshmen students surveyed noted that their comfort level with seminar increased, and several noted that they developed a better appreciation for alternative points of view. They also praised these discussions and other interactive workshops as the most useful part of the Cohort experience. Non-freshman students, on the whole, seemed more willing to sit through lectures, especially if the material was sufficiently challenging, but a large number of students in both groups noted a marked improvement from the fall quarter to winter in terms of the level of interactivity.

Writing. During winter quarter, the Cohort team also devoted extra time to supporting student writing. In the spirit of the "satellite faculty" proposal, one team member created a series of workshops intended to support the students in writing a short research paper. If fall quarter was spent introducing students to a broad range of disciplinary tools and methods, winter quarter was focused on the "real world" applications of these academic disciplines, and the research paper (Appendix 2) was designed to help students begin to "apply qualitative, quantitative and creative modes of inquiry appropriately to practical and theoretical problems across disciplines" ("Six Expectations of an Evergreen Graduate"). All but one of the non-freshman students in the cohort described the writing assignment as a helpful process, and all but five of the freshman students said the same. Students appreciated being given the freedom to choose their own topic, together with the support of a detailed brainstorming and peer review process.

Challenges

Student expectations. Although the teaching team had developed a common description of the Critical Investigations Cohort to help students understand the purpose of the experiment, it was never published in the online catalog, and many students were unaware that in signing up for their program they had also committed to 4 credits' worth of interdisciplinary work (several mentioned this in their surveys). On the whole, students were initially resistant to the idea of the Cohort, though many of their responses to individual presentations were positive.

Logistics. During fall quarter, the Cohort included a total of 175 students (25 per faculty member). Finding a space large enough to house the students in one room was difficult, and though we were eventually given permission to use the Recital Hall in the Communications Building, the acoustics meant that students sitting in the back row often had a difficult time hearing faculty presenters. We used microphones, and eventually moved to Lecture Hall 1, which had better sight lines and acoustics but had the additional disadvantage of placing some students in “nosebleed” seats at a significant physical distance from the presenters. Several students made the compelling argument that they did not come to Evergreen to attend 175-person lectures; it turned out that the most “efficient” model in terms of faculty workload was not necessarily the best pedagogical model for students. Changes made to the program in winter quarter went a long way toward addressing this problem, but we were still lecturing to a large number of students during a majority of the sessions. More experiential activities such as the bucket dig required too much work to organize on a weekly basis.

Co-teaching, co-learning. Members of the Cohort team had originally asked for a week’s worth of planning time in the summer of 2009 to teach each other some of the material from our individual presentations so that all of us could be more active facilitators during each others’ sessions (this request sprang from the same faculty development priorities as the “satellite faculty” proposal). This extended planning time was not funded, however, and as a consequence we found ourselves interacting more passively with each other’s material than we would have liked. We did maintain a weekly faculty seminar that added to our enjoyment of the lectures and activities—as well as our workload.

V. Conclusions

Overall, the Critical Investigations Cohort was successful in meeting the shared goal set by the team members—that of creating a rigorous interdisciplinary experience for both students and faculty—and in responding to student suggestions for improving the learning experience during winter quarter. The Cohort was hampered, however, by the logistical challenges of working with 175 students and by last minute changes to the individual program demographics. On a broader level, it failed to set the stage for the kind of continuity called for by the First Year Experience DTF, and it was not particularly transformative in terms of individual faculty members’ pedagogy: we experienced the great pleasure of being co-learners with our students, but did not have sufficient time together to become better co-teachers, capable of incorporating more interdisciplinary activities into our programs on a regular basis.

VI. Suggestions for future work

The Cohort is currently defunct due to lack of faculty interest; the benefits to students were not sufficient to outweigh the additional workload, and there was no explicit commitment to the experiment on the part of the Academic Division.

It is important to remember that there were at least two different goals identified during the planning process for the Cohort:

- 1) Provide more opportunities for students to learn across disciplines, especially in their first year or two at Evergreen.
- 2) Develop a more consistent set of best practices for teaching first year students, not by mandating them but by allowing faculty to focus more deliberately on what is already working well in their own pedagogy and by providing regular opportunities to learn from the best practices at other institutions.

The first goal was primarily faculty-driven; the second came from the leaders of the academic division via the First-Year Experience DTF. If, as an institution, we want to prioritize the first goal, I would recommend one of the following options:

Return to the “satellite faculty” proposal

Implementation of this model would require a significant financial commitment on the part of the institution, but it is my belief that instruction in the areas identified by the Northwest Commission (fine arts, math, and science) could be systematically improved by providing enhanced development opportunities that enable individual faculty to devote themselves to coaching their colleagues in these modes of instruction (i.e. by temporarily relieving them of the responsibility for delivering content and writing evaluations). The Danforth Visitor’s program, first developed at Evergreen by Peter Elbow, provides a sound precedent for this kind of experiment. As Danforth visitors, experienced faculty provided feedback about their colleagues’ teaching by spending significant amounts of time with them in their academic programs.

Re-label the lecture series

Alternatively, we could return to the model of the shared lecture series along the lines of what was offered in 2009-10; if so, it should be more clearly advertised to students, and perhaps advertised as a stand-alone course (several students suggested this in their survey responses). We cannot expect students to achieve a broad liberal arts education if we do not provide more “curricular opportunities for students to attain interdisciplinary breadth” (RTaLE, “Issues and Proposals”). I suspect that we need to build such opportunities and make them visibly attractive to students rather than provide them surreptitiously as part of more “traditional” 16-credit programs.

If we want to prioritize the second, I would recommend a separate option (though none of these proposals are mutually exclusive):

Return to the First Year Experience DTF’s original recommendation

I would strongly support the idea of providing significant incentives (e.g. paid leave, summer salary) to faculty willing to commit to multiple years of teaching freshmen-only programs and believe that a sustained commitment would, as the DTF suggested, encourage faculty to develop a more robust set of best practices

informed by development opportunities both on and off campus. This kind of continuity would go a long way towards helping help faculty gain greater confidence in—and thus enthusiasm for—teaching first-year students.

* * *

For the past several years, I have served as the lead faculty on a 2-credit academic support class that was also part of the First Year Experience DTF's original recommendations. In that context, I have been able to witness the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to directly import best practices from other institutions. It is my belief that faculty need to be more aware of structural barriers—and given more aggressive support in navigating them—before we can truly benefit from the lessons learned by our colleagues at other institutions. It is also vital, of course, that we pay attention to the history of such experiments here at Evergreen, and I hope that this report will be useful to my colleagues in future iterations of a cohort model.

Sources cited:

First Year Experience DTF

Recommendations

<http://www.evergreen.edu/committee/firstyearexperiencedtf/>

Re-Modeling Teaching and Learning at Evergreen

“Issues and Proposals”

<http://blogs.evergreen.edu/rtaledtf/>

Feb. 17 Faculty Meeting Handout
(courtesy of Julia Zay)

Appendix 1

Fall Synthesis Assignment Due: Week 9 to your seminar leader

Critical Investigations Cohort

This assignment is designed to help you draw connections among the presentations you've attended this quarter. We as a faculty have developed some ideas about how they fit together, but we also want to give you a chance to make sense of the cohort work on your own terms.

What we're looking for: **3-5 pages** dealing with at least **two presentations by faculty not in your program**. You may also discuss presentations by your program faculty as a third point of comparison. You need not write this in the style of the classic "five paragraph essay," but your paper should be **thesis-driven**: that is, it should present evidence so as to build up an argument. We hope that the presentations this quarter have given you new ways of thinking about the kinds of evidence you're using, and that one of your "genuine questions" will provide a starting point for a thesis statement.

You may address this assignment in one of two ways.

Option 1: Discuss at least two presentations by addressing their take on "truth and lying." Here are some ideas that have occurred to us that may spark your own thought process:

- Sociology attempts to provide scientific explanations for why we lie to each other in everyday conversation (even in small ways, as when we conform to conversational norms by telling someone that we're "fine" even when we're not) and thus helps to reveal ways in which we construct our own social realities through manipulating "the truth."
- Philosophy is also interested in the sources of the lies we tell, but provides slightly more general and conceptual answers. Adrienne Rich points out that: "The possibilities that exist between two people, or among a group of people, are a kind of alchemy . . . The liar is someone who keeps losing sight of these possibilities."
- Mathematics and science both seek theories about "truth" that can be tested and proved—though in the examples we've considered, forensics science and game theory, these disciplines are applied to more dynamic social situations where the human factors affecting experimental outcomes multiply quickly.
- Art, as Errol Morris shows us, makes its own kind of truth apart from the social reality from which it emerges. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, art takes a lie and creates a context wherein it becomes temporarily true—the audience then takes that lie, and, by giving it a social life, makes it permanently true.

In addition to the presentations themselves, you may want to consider the readings that were most interesting to you. What kind of argument is Rich making in her essay on

women and honor? How does it differ from the arguments made the authors of our other texts? How do the disciplines represented in the cohort help sort *truth* from *lies* (by means of various kinds of evidence)? How do they explore the boundary between those two terms? What are some of the reasons human beings lie to one another, and what you have you learned about those reasons from the presentations you've attended this quarter? Why do people put so much effort into distinguishing between truth and lies?

Option 2: Find another theme or centering question that allows you to draw connections between the presentations in a way that may not have occurred to us. This may be as broad as the topic of "truth and lying" but your paper should still be anchored in a careful analysis of the two or three presentations you've selected. We encourage you draw on your own areas of experience and expertise that illuminate the concepts and questions introduced in Critical Investigations presentations.

Appendix 2

Final Writing Assignment **Due: Week 9 to your seminar leader**

Critical Investigations Cohort

Rationale

Faculty presentations this quarter will be focusing on a set of shared questions relating to one of Evergreen's "Five Foci," a list faculty and staff use to describe our shared interests in promoting student learning. Specifically, your CIC faculty want to help you "link theory with practical applications."

<http://www.evergreen.edu/about/fivefoci.htm>

Here, then, are our questions:

- 1) How are the skills associated with our academic disciplines applied in the world beyond academia?
- 2) How are our disciplines presented in popular culture or in the mass media?
- 3) What are the gaps between our perception of how that discipline works and how it functions in practice?

So, for instance, Rebecca's lecture addressed the historical development of blood identification and characterization as an example of chemistry technology that fuels the divide between science and society. She also encouraged us to consider the ways in which our popular perception of forensic science is mediated by the mass media, as in the "CSI effect."

Description

For your final essay, we want you to apply these same critical thinking skills to a topic of your own choosing. This may be a topic that relates to your work within your "home" program, or something you know about from your previous academic study.

In this paper, which should be 3-5 pages (typed and double-spaced) in length, and should have a clear thesis or argument, we would like you to address the following questions:

- 1) What are some common perceptions around your topic?
- 2) What are some of the realities about this topic, and what evidence do we have that these are demonstrable facts?
- 3) What are the gaps between perception and reality when it comes to this topic?
- 4) Why do you think these differences exist? How might the faulty perceptions surrounding this topic serve their own function within mainstream American culture?
- 5) How does this gap between perception and reality figure in your own life? Why were you interested in the topic to begin with, and how might your own experiences have affected your analysis?

Example:

So, for instance, you might consider the popular perception that works of art dealing with sexually explicit subjects provoke sexual behaviors among individuals who encounter those works of art. perception that “human beings only ever use 10% of their brains.”

- 1) You would describe this misperception and some places (in the mass media, in surveys and studies) in which it has been documented.
- 2) You would then summarize some of the most recent research on the brain, and you might find that while not every neuron is firing at the same time, most of them do not go “unused.”
- 3) You would then explain, without restating your earlier points too much, that there’s a difference between not *using* large chunks of your brain and not using them *all at once*.
- 4) In rounding out your argument, you might look at some psychological or sociological surveys that describe popular attitudes toward human intelligence. You might hypothesize that we live in a profoundly anti-intellectual culture in which not using all of one’s brain is often a point of pride. Or you might hypothesize that we as Americans always like to believe that something better is on the horizon – that we’ll just keep improving and getting smarter and someday we’ll be able to figure out solutions to all the horrible problems we’ve caused each other over the last couple thousand years. *Note:* You might not have hard and fast evidence for this claim (it would take a whole book to explore) but you should reference steps 1-3, and make sure that your own logic is internally consistent with itself. We want you to take a mental leap here, but not without seeing the implications of where you’re headed.
- 5) Finally, you might talk about how your own desire to maximize your brain capacity has helped drive your work as a college student – your desire to become a neuroscientist, perhaps. Or, you might talk about how adults in your life have consistently attempted to convince you that you could “do better” – and talk about what effect their comments have had on your learning, for better or for worse.

You might then discuss psychological research on this topic to examine whether or not this is in fact the case. If there is a demonstrable gap between perception and reality in this case, we would then ask you to think a little bit about why we might be inclined to give art this kind of power over us as viewers.

A note on research for this paper

You should choose a topic for which you do not have to do a significant amount of library research, i.e. a topic in which you are confident that you already have a good handle on the facts. We are primarily interested in your analysis of the gap between perception and reality, and how well your writing analyzes that gap. We are less interested in having you demonstrate your research skills (or overextend yourself by attempting to develop a new area of expertise). That said, if you are using internet resources, you should always know something about who is publishing the information, and cross-check each piece of data with at least one other source. You may use whatever format you choose to reference your sources as long as you are consistent, and make a genuine effort to attribute data and ideas to the proper authors.

Timeline

Week 5: In-class workshop. Bring a one-page outline and any other notes on your topic that you have so far.

Week 6-8: Create a draft and take it to the Writing Center. Depending on your particular writing process, you may wish to meet with a tutor once you think you have a nearly polished draft, or you may wish to come to them with your early-stage ideas: tutors are often as good at helping you *begin* the writing process as they are at helping you *complete* it.

Week 9: Turn in final draft, with accompanying materials (see below).

Checklist

By the end of Week 9, you should turn the following materials in to your seminar/workshop leader:

- a) your materials from the week 5 workshop
- b) your first draft or drafts
- c) your completed final draft, with page numbers and references
- d) an author's note, describing any difficulties you had with the essay, the things you like best about it, and the things you changed from the first draft to the second or third

Questions? Please don't be shy about asking either Elizabeth (williame@evergreen.edu) or your program faculty as you work through this prompt.

1. Class standing (please circle one):

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

2. “Home” program (please circle one):

Forensics and Criminal Behavior

Performing Meaning/Translating Thought

Social Dilemmas

2. Is this your first year at Evergreen? Y / N

3. If you have a major field of study or academic interest, please list it here:

4. Rate your comfort level with the following (please circle one):

Seminar discussion:

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

Writing:

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

Quantitative Reasoning:

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

5. Did your comfort level with any of these learning modes increase through your participation in the cohort?

6. Did participating in the cohort improve your critical thinking abilities, or give you new tools for thinking critically?

7. Did the cohort enhance your understanding of the modes of inquiry represented by the faculty (chemistry, music composition, philosophy, mathematics, sociology, literary analysis) and the differences between them?

8. Do you feel that you got to know students and faculty outside your “home” program?

9. Has the experience of participating in the cohort influenced your ideas about what you want to study at Evergreen?

10. Did you complete the writing assignment due last week? What aspects of this process were helpful to you?

11. What were the most worthwhile activities you participated in as part of the cohort, either this quarter or last quarter? Why?

12. The Critical Investigations Cohort was an experiment. If we were to run it again, what would you suggest changing? What would you recommend doing again?

13. What other feedback would you like to give us?