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HONORS COLLABORATIONS: THE PRESIDENCY IN SPEECH AND COMPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

Typically at Penn State University, Honors English Composition (30) is offered fall semester as a pre-requisite for Honors Speech Communication 100, offered in the spring. This arrangement may reflect the intellectual shifts within these disciplines, implicitly signifying the distance that has grown between them and casting in relief the question of who “owns” rhetoric. In developing our courses in Speech and Composition, we sought to close this rift and in so doing create a community for our students in which issues in speech are explicitly recognized as issues in writing and vice versa. In addition, we wanted to create a new model for collaboration and team teaching, one that would embrace flexibility and integration, and demonstrate how teachers and students may work together toward common goals. To reinforce this sense of common investment, we decided to share a topic: both classes would focus on the presidential election. Jeff’s class would examine how the media arbitrate political discourse; Sandy’s class would explore the construction of leadership historically. This paper will describe our model in more detail, the issues such an approach raises, and our conclusions regarding its success and potential promise for teachers and students in a variety of learning contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In 1940 Speech and English became separate departments at Penn State, or as the history of Penn State puts it, Speech “was taken” from English; both, however, were still part of the Liberal Arts College, as they are today (Dunaway, 1946, p. 330). More than forty years later, another Pennsylvania University, Duquesne, experimented with a pilot project that combined Speech Communication and English Composition. Their reasoning may be said in some sense to respond to the separation of the two disciplines exemplified by Penn State’s departmentalization. In their report on the Pilot project, they explained their decision:

The turn of the century ushered in the present disjunction between speaking and writing which is bureaucratically and pedagogically perpetuated by the separate departments of Communication and English. Duquesne’s recent venture into development of a University Core Curriculum presented the opportunity to force collaborations between these now divorced disciplines. (Friday and Beranek, 1984).

Their initiative was part of a campus-wide program requiring all core courses to be interdisciplinary and, therefore, “all new courses were required.”

Neither of us wished to propose new courses in the required Penn State curriculum. To do so would have been a rather long and cumbersome process, one we saw no need in negotiating. Our aim was not to erase the disciplinary distinctions: we did not team teach in the usually understood sense. Unlike the Duquesne program, our project did not enroll the same students into one portmanteau class. Students enrolled either in Jeff’s Speech Communication

class or Sandy's English Composition class, courses that have been part of the required Penn State curriculum since 1961-1962 (The Pennsylvania State University Bulletin, May 1961). Our arrangement may be said to have anticipated Vincent Leitch's argument for post-modern interdisciplinarity, which assumes that "In this postmodern conceptualization, there is no denying the existence, necessity, and value of the disciplines or of their boundaries and struggles. Interdisciplinarity during postmodern times designates the de facto intermixture of the disciplines, new and old, plus recognition of their differences and conflicts" (Leitch, 2000). By redesigning courses already in existence we acknowledged the changes in what it means to teach an introductory English or an introductory speech class, yet we simultaneously retained disciplinary as well as individual autonomy. Rather than directly challenge the validity of disciplinary borders, our class sought, as Leitch's ideal interdisciplinary, "to increase permeabilities and deterritorialize fixed cognitive maps" (Leitch, 2000). By deterritorializing rhetoric, we also sought to create a community for our students in which issues in speech are explicitly recognized as issues in writing and vice versa. In addition, we wanted to create a new model for collaboration and team teaching, one that would embrace flexibility and integration and demonstrate how teachers and students may work together toward common goals.

This kind of collaboration, finding the interconnections between disciplines and the ways in which one discipline informs another, is, we believe, the future of higher education, if not invention itself. Other institutions have expressed a commitment to this view: for example, when Harvard announced what it was seeking in a new university president, Dr. Gray explained that "Harvard needs someone who can deal with '... the new ways in which various disciplines inform one another,' among other things" (Goldberg, 2000). Still, having a sense of what matters pedagogically and intellectually is not the same thing as knowing exactly what to do or how to do it.

SUMMARY

When Jeff agreed not only to teach the Honors section of Speech Communication 100 but to try something "new" for both of us, we were faced with another dilemma: What were we going to do? We talked about our ideas, that we both wanted to do something on the Presidency, that we wanted to work together, that we wanted a community service component or some way to reinforce civic responsibility, and that we would have a number of field experiences, though we had not identified what these would be or how we would do all these things. Throughout the summer, Jeff and I kept in touch through e-mail: he suggested we participate in Debate Watch, a nationwide, nonpartisan program sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates which aims to get more people talking about the candidates and issues; I suggested various field trip possibilities, for example, Washington, D.C. We sent each other our latest syllabus and responded to each other's plans. Finally, we decided that early in the semester we would combine our classes for a short time, so the students would gain a very basic introduction to one another and the different disciplinary approaches to the presidency we would be taking: Jeff's class, a mix of first- and second-year students, examined how the media arbitrate political discourse; Sandy's class, all first-year students, explored the construction of leadership historically. As it happened, the separate courses were composed entirely of different students. For ease of interactivity, the classes were scheduled back-to-back on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Jeff's speech class at 12:15 and Sandy's writing course at 1:40; having them at the same time would have had some advantages—for one, avoiding students' schedule conflicts when we

wanted to bring the classes together—and some disadvantages, the main one of which would have been the difficulty of visiting one another’s classes.

During the course of this journey, we discovered that the approach to teaching we developed has several benefits: faculty may work together on classes without having to engage in the politics of release time—in other words, this approach requires no extra resources. In this sense and others, our collaboration models how businesses, if not education, perform. We work together when the common intellectual threads of our courses beckon us to unite our resources as teacher-scholars. When there is a specific project to be done, the students from our classes, like units from different departments of a business, collaborate to share skills, insights, and strengths; we facilitate this community by participating in it. Our approach rejects artificial constructs that typically beleaguer conventional team-teaching arrangements, wherein faculty expend precious energy on questions of process (e.g., Who will teach what parts of class? On what days?). We exchange syllabi, share suggestions, and consider how ideas from our courses may overlap. Working together to draft relevant grant proposals and periodically attending one another’s classes, we model for our students the teamwork in which they are expected to engage and the interdisciplinary mindset to which they should aspire.

CONCLUSION

What made our experiment so rewarding was that we embraced autonomy within our respective classes and demanded intellectual accountability from one another throughout the semester. Admittedly, a dance of this sort is not easy to maintain. A more traditional team-teaching model, however, would have stifled and burdened the creativity, enthusiasm, and vision we exercised in our classes. The conventions of that traditional model, its emphasis upon logistical and procedural concerns as opposed to intellectual ones, as we have noted, would have enslaved us to material conditions and shackled the permission, and encouragement, we gave one another to experiment, to take risks, and to stretch the ideas we explored with our students. The model we advocate is not vocational or skill-driven in its focus but instead underscores, as the late Richard Weaver astutely observed, that ideas have consequences. Our model affirms the value of deliberation, reflection, and judgment, among colleagues as well as within and outside the classroom; moreover, it exemplifies the notion that so-called book-learning need not assume the form of a disembodied specter students only encounter in the dim light of the library.

The boundaries that traditionally impose themselves upon an academic arrangement like ours were absent. Our model worked because we acted as independent agents; the approach succeeded because we demanded from each other accountability predicated upon sharing ideas, perspectives, points of view, and approaches. We asked students throughout the semester to step out of their intellectual comfort zones through the vehicle of performance, written and oral. Our commitment to this assignment-centered approach served us well. Completing their various assignments was for many students akin to an intellectual reckoning. This observation, we believe, must become the central practice in honors education. Thus we maintain, and we believe the empirical and anecdotal evidence confirms, that our approach represents a compelling model for our colleagues and our students.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Jeff Kurtz is Assistant Professor of Communication at Denison University. His areas of scholarly interest include nineteenth-century American public address, the rhetoric of social movements, and political communication. His most recent publication on the antislavery discourse of Ralph Waldo Emerson appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.