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Designing a First-Year Honors Seminar with A Whole New Mind

Ellen J. Goldberger
Mount Ida College

. . . Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

—John Keats,
"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"

The book that swam into my ken was Daniel Pink's *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. It was fall of 2008, and I had been appointed director of the newly created Mount Ida College Honor Scholars Program (HSP). The mission of the HSP is to promote creative thinking, interdisciplinary study, and close mentoring relationships with faculty. Program requirements include a first-year honors seminar (for academic credit) and three honors "contracts" (independent studies completed in addition to degree requirements, for honors credit but not academic credit) supervised by faculty mentors. Honor Scholars are required to present at least one completed contract to the college community at an annual reception and poster session. Students also upload the contracts, along with accompanying reflection papers, faculty assessments, and other student achievements, to a customized honors e-portfolio that can be shown to graduate schools or future employers. Honor Scholars can also live in an honors living/learning community that creates opportunities for student mentoring, honors co-curricular programming, and social activities.

My appointment included teaching the honors section of the required first-year seminar. Previous first-year seminars had focused primarily on research and study skills, "college knowledge," and critical thinking. Reading Pink's introduction, I realized that, using the book as an anchor (or rocket booster), the first-year honors seminar could create something different: a focus on whole-brain thinking, academic curiosity and playfulness, interdisciplinary connections and—especially important for first-year college students—the

search for identity and meaning. The book could also serve as a gateway into the HSP and the honors contract process by connecting students to their work, showing them how to value process as well as product and to design honors contracts that were interesting and meaningful to them.

Pink's general thesis is that, in a competitive and left-brain world focused on information intake and analysis, creative and whole-brain thinkers will enjoy a professional advantage because their abilities cannot readily be duplicated, outsourced, or computerized. Pink devotes the greater part of *A Whole New Mind* to describing and activating what he calls the Six Senses: human aptitudes—Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play, and Meaning—essential for personal enrichment and professional success in the twenty-first century. The book has resonated with many readers and provoked widespread discussion; for me it was a game-changer. Pink's whole-brain approach to professional success validated many of my ideas about the purpose of higher education and caused me to revisit my approach to student-centered learning. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that, for any endeavor, a high level of success requires ten thousand hours of practice or experience (40). Like most experienced faculty, I had put in my ten thousand hours, but the honors seminar required a whole new framework for thinking about what teaching and learning could be.

Most teachers have favorite literary quotations. My current favorite is from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: chasing the elusive vampire and his minions, Dr. Van Helsing turns to his terrified comrades and warns that there is "work—wild work to be done" (359). In fall 2009, the first-year honors seminar was open for business, and I was ready for some wild work, despite feeling that I was building the bridge as I crossed it.

We spent the first two weeks of classes getting to know each other and completing the basic requirements of the first-year seminar, including an introduction to college orientation information; MLA format and style; library resources and staff; online databases; and the Angel course website. I added an introduction to the goals and requirements of the HSP and a workshop on the honors e-portfolio. My work/study classroom assistant provided information on co-curricular and leadership opportunities and mentored the new Honor Scholars, creating an HSP Facebook page and offering practical support and information on all aspects of college life.

Then we switched into high gear. Students read *A Whole New Mind* and supporting materials on their own; we discussed key concepts in class but mostly engaged in whole-brain exercises and group activities that illustrated the ideas we were exploring. As we worked our way through the book, we all found and contributed articles, poems, artwork, short stories, films, videos, and online resources that illustrated each of the Six Senses. We read poems by Wordsworth, Frost, Hopkins, and Dickinson; listened to classical and popular music; read letters on the creative process written by Picasso, Mozart, Freud,

and Einstein; and identified the right-brain vision and left-brain decisions that were the foundation for the works we examined.

We discussed an article in a medical journal that described a study in which medical students improved their visual diagnostic skills by studying works of art. We watched a NOVA program ("Fractals: Hunting the Hidden Dimension") about the influence of fractal geometry on our understanding of nature and on everything from the stock market to ECG tracings, from cell phone technology to weather prediction and textile design; then we read about Benoît Mandelbrot, the godfather of fractals.

As an exercise in one of the Six Senses, Symphony (recognizing patterns or relationships in unexpected places or creating new combinations of objects or ideas), students created metaphors for the All College Curriculum (Mount Ida's holistic general education program, which links courses in and outside the major). In doing so, they answered students' perennial question about courses outside the major: "Why do I have to take that course?" Some student metaphors:

- The All College Curriculum is your cell phone with apps, instead of a boring landline with just one function.
- The ACC is a car, fully loaded!
- The ACC gives you many moves, like a basketball player who needs to succeed from any position.
- It's like having a refrigerator full of foods that can be combined to make many different meals.
- It's the ocean versus the aquarium; you never know what will wash up on the beach.

Exploring Pink's emphasis on Play, we read studies of how babies and toddlers learn and spent an hour at the Longfellow Preschool on Mount Ida's campus, where we could observe the connection between work and play, witnessing hands-on learning that used all of the senses. The ensuing discussion explored the following questions: why is college learning so different from preschool learning? Why are our classrooms squared off and face-forward, the antithesis of the colorful, free-flowing environment enjoyed by these joyful three-year-olds? Can a preschool atmosphere be recreated at the college level? How can we bring spontaneity and playful discovery back into the classroom? If Pink is correct and creativity and invention are the touchstones of professional success in the future, how can we nurture whole-brain thinking in higher education?

We read J.K. Rowling's 2008 Harvard commencement address, "The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of Imagination," and dozens of articles that emphasized whole-brain thinking, including articles on cutting-edge culinary physics at Harvard; the art and science of facial prosthetics; twenty-first-century playgrounds; laughter yoga; a Nintendo game that helps treat children with diabetes; and a lawyer who left practice and achieved fame building

intricate Lego sculptures. We viewed the films "Billy Elliot" and "The Illusionist," discussing the transformative power of art and the right- and left-brain aspects of magic. We also read a summary of the "Secret CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception," stranger than fiction.

Mount Ida's first-year summer reading, *Listening Is an Act of Love*, reinforced Pink's emphasis on the power of Story, Empathy and Meaning; both texts framed an often poignant assignment in which students recorded oral histories with family members and presented them to the class; some interviews were captured via audio recordings, some as YouTube videos, and others using print, family treasures, or photography.

Another assignment that emphasized symphonic thinking was an interdisciplinary research paper on a topic of personal interest. Cross-disciplinary research was a new concept to most of the students, but they seemed to appreciate the synergy created when a topic is approached from different perspectives and academic disciplines. Their paper topics included: the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh as seen from artistic and medical perspectives; horses in history and myth; the effect of music on the brain; and depression as a psychological and literary phenomenon.

To challenge their skills in Design, we held an HSP logo contest, with students working in small groups; the three winning entries were posted on the HSP webpage. Building skills in Empathy and Story, one exercise asked students to choose a photograph from an exhibit on women in the Middle East, step into the photograph, and write a fifty-word short story. Another exercise asked for a short story, monologue, or poem based on an Edward Hopper painting. Students shared their work with the class and discussed the right- and left-brain decisions that are the counterpoint of the creative process.

The class completed an autobiography arc in a cluster of assignments and in-class exercises that focused on Story and Meaning, including a traditional essay about the students' backgrounds, interests, and goals; a list of six things, tangible and intangible, that they always carry with them; a six-word "memoir"; and a personal "still life" portrait—e.g., a collage, drawing, or collection—that used their talents in Design and expressed their identity without using words.

After viewing a Mount Ida Gallery exhibit on design, architecture and the green movement, instead of writing a typical reflection paper students collaborated on a work of "green" art that applied their aptitudes for Design and Play: I gave them a large branch, and they created "The Tree of (Daily) Life," decorating the branch and building a base from found objects and castaways collected around campus. The tree found a permanent home outside my office in the School of Arts and Sciences.

The seminar's focus on whole-brain thinking also called for whole-brain exams. I couldn't rely on traditional left-brain assessment if I wanted to promote left- and right-brain thinking. All exams were take-home; I believe that, if we ask students to produce creative ideas and thoughtful analysis, we should

provide time and space for their work to take root and flower. The following is a brief sampling of exam questions from 2009 and 2010:

1. We recently visited Longfellow Preschool and their redesigned playground and saw the creative learning environment enjoyed by its mini-students.
   A) How does Longfellow Preschool promote the use of Pink's Six Senses? Which of the Six Senses does it nurture, and how?
   B) Design the ideal classroom for our honors seminar. Describe what it should look like and contain, and explain why you chose these features. Please attach a drawing, blueprint or diagram of your design.
2. How can faculty challenge and stimulate students' whole brains in the classroom? Choose a course and create a whole-brain in-class exercise for that course. Then design a detailed, whole-brain take-home assignment or exam for the course, explaining why it calls upon whole-brain thinking (R-brain vision and L-brain decision), and why it would be a valuable addition to the course. (Be sure to identify the course.)
3. Looking at the projects or papers you have completed this past semester, can you think of ways you could have added a whole-brain dimension to an assignment that was purely left- or right-brain? Give one example of a purely left- or right-brain assignment you completed, and describe how you (or the professor) could have transformed it into a whole-brain assignment.
4. Most colleges emphasize students' high-school grades and SAT scores in their admissions decisions. Both of these criteria are heavily weighted toward left-brain aptitudes, as we learned in *A Whole New Mind*. What kind of exam could students take instead of the traditional SAT? In other words, what would a WBAT—Whole-Brain Aptitude Test—include? Design at least three components or types of questions, and explain why you are including them in your exam.

The last day of class was devoted to Play: we watched inventive YouTube videos; listened to movie soundtracks; decorated our classroom with drawings, quotations about creativity, and cut-paper designs; and created holiday cards, bead jewelry, crafts, and gifts for our families. One student remarked how good it felt to be laughing with friends and working on arts and crafts when exams loomed in the next few days.

The first-year honors seminar prompted many Honor Scholars to design whole-brain or interdisciplinary projects for their honors contracts. Honors contracts completed in our first year included: a photographic essay about animals and their caretakers in the Veterinary Technology Program; an original children's book on Boston Harbor; the Dust Bowl migration as seen through history and fiction; animal abuse and the work of Andrew Vachss; a portfolio of graffiti as emblematic of popular culture; a psychological analysis of a fictional serial killer; a study, with intricate paper models, of famous doors; and the

effect of music on the human brain. My hope is that our Honor Scholars will find ways to retain their natural curiosity and creativity and to use their Six Senses to find playfulness, joy, and meaning in all of their academic and professional endeavors.

In fall 2010, the first-year honors seminar became the model for teaching whole-brain thinking in all twenty sections of Mount Ida's first-year seminar. For the faculty teaching the seminar, crafting a whole-brain pedagogy that "walks the talk" has been a fascinating and challenging exercise; it is a work in progress. I have been experimenting with whole-brain exercises and assignments in my non-honors courses with good results. The question of how to assess whole-brain thinking (whole-brain assessment?) continues to occupy my interest and that of the HSP Advisory Board, but that, as they say, is a Story for another day.

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