What does liberal/general education mean, in promise and practice? Debate about what a college degree *should* be is as relevant today as it was two hundred years ago. This book respects the complexities and concepts of *liberal* and *general*, pushing at their historical and rhetorical legacies to redefine and reaffirm their potential in a new age. Faculty and administrators from across the seventeen colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY), the nation's largest urban public university, re-examine these critical issues. Through recollection, vision, debate, and disagreement, the contributors state what the public university needs to be in the new century.

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RECLAIMING THE Public University

Conversations on General & Liberal Education

Summerfield & Benedicks, eds.

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Conversations on General & Liberal Education

Questions about the Purpose(s) of Colleges & Universities

Norm Denzin, Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg
General Editors

Vol. 18

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Putting It Together

General Education at LaGuardia Community College

PAUL ARCARIO AND JAMES WILSON

LaGuardia Community College

DOT BY DOT: SETTING THE SCENE[1]

In his masterwork painting, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886), Georges Seurat experimented with a form of painting called *pointillism*, which he believed would establish a whole new way of creating art. Rather than melding the colors and lines on the canvas, he argued that the viewer's eyes would connect the painted dots, as it were, and generate a fully integrated and vibrant image. Standing at some distance from the painting, which hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago, one can almost feel the warmth of the sun mixed with the cool breeze blowing off the Seine as the twenty-odd subjects of the painting relax in the still, natural beauty of the park. However, on closer look, we see the smooth texture of a woman's dress has not been created with long brush strokes, but with a series of painted dots. The gentle curves of the landscape are created from sharp, jagged specks of light and dark colors. The cool, still water is made up of thousands of brusquely applied blues and whites that practically vibrate when scrutinized. Out of the thousands upon thousands of individually applied dabs of paint used to produce the work of art, Seurat has created a harmonious, coherent whole.

When a group of faculty and administrators set out to create a general education program at LaGuardia Community College, we also sought to create a coherent whole out of a myriad assortment of individual parts. In its contradictory complexity

and sense of harmony, Seurat's painting is an apt metaphor for our program. On the surface, LaGuardia's general education program may not seem to have much in common with *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. LaGuardia is not far from a river, but ours, the East River, does not have the romantic connotations of the Seine. The surroundings of our college would never be described as pastoral. The college is in the heart of industrialized Long Island City, Queens, and its tranquility is disrupted every thirty seconds with the passing of a 7 or N/R elevated train. Whereas the subjects populating Seurat's painting are a generally homogeneous group, LaGuardia is one of the most ethnically and racially diverse colleges in the country: Among our 13,000 degree students, approximately two-thirds are foreign born, and of these, almost half have been in the United States less than five years, representing over 150 countries and speaking over 110 different languages. Seventy-nine percent of our students are minorities; 60% are first-generation college students; two-thirds of entering students report a family income of $25,000 or less. In fact, if one were to capture an image of LaGuardia, it would not be reflected by stillness and relaxation, but of a swirl of movement and bustle produced by the energy of thousands of students negotiating the demands of school, work, and family.

There are, however, a number of similarities between the painting and our general education initiative. Our students, courses, activities, and programs are as diverse as the varied, individual dots of color on the canvas; nonetheless we have been able to bring an order to the whole. Perhaps most importantly, just as Seurat's technique has the viewer connect the dots rather than the artist doing so himself, we have striven to provide opportunities for our students themselves to connect the dots: to make meaningful connections among their different courses, between their curricular and co-curricular experiences, and between their school work and their lives.

In this essay, we invite the viewer to step forward and take a close look at our program. Examining the work up close raises questions about the pedagogical choices that were made and the ways in which they contribute to the unifying goals and outcomes. These are questions with which we are still grappling. In addition, different from Seurat's painting, our program is neither a completed, unchanging work, nor was it created by a single artisan. Each dot and brush stroke in LaGuardia's general education program reflects the diligent work of a college administrator, faculty, student, or academic support personnel. We, the authors of this essay, are just two of the hundreds of individuals involved in the creation of the general education program at LaGuardia. We represent two different perspectives, and the main body of the essay reveals our two different viewpoints, voices, and academic experiences. Paul Arcario, Dean of Academic Affairs and formerly a professor of English as a Second Language, took the lead in the original design and administrative implementation of the program. James Wilson, an English faculty member with background in theatre and African American literature, created and taught a curriculum applying the various components of the program objectives. Of course, our own perspectives are influenced by all of the people with whom we have worked, and their work is intricately connected with our analyses and narratives. Our essay shows the methods we use to create a program with assorted elements and components, and how we are, individually and collectively, putting it together.

INTO THE WOODS: ENTERING THE GENERAL EDUCATION CONVERSATION

In the opening sections, Dean Paul Arcario discusses the issues facing the college as it began to pull together various initiatives into a comprehensive program.

> What creates the common experience in general education? Is it that all students must experience the same courses (that is, the core)? Is it that all students must achieve the same aims (common outcomes)? Is it that students must share the same college experience regardless of major (learning communities, clusters, or something else)? What should students experience in common through general education has been asked philosophically (mission and goals), substantively (great books, core curriculum), structurally (distributional requirements, articulation agreements), and experientially (learning communities, freshman seminars). The issue of commonality begs the larger one: What makes for a coherent curriculum and a meaningful experience in general education?" (Johnson and Ratcliff 2004)

The above quote touches upon many of the questions that confronted us as one of the first community colleges to join the CUNY General Education Project. Were we to focus on the "what" of liberal, or general, education: deciding upon a body of knowledge and specific courses for all students? Certainly the issue of whether students should all experience the same courses was paramount in those initial CUNY conversations. Moreover, would this mean ending up in the thicket of academic "turf" battles over distribution requirements? Would the whole project play out at the level of arguing whether we should require students to take World History or American History? Alternatively, were we more interested in the "how" of liberal education: facilitating particular approaches to teaching and learning? There was also much talk at the CUNY-wide meetings of general education being fragmented, and a consequent call for more integrative learning. However, what exactly did that mean? Of particular concern for the community colleges, how were we to provide general education for all of our students, particularly given that core or distribution requirements derive from a senior college model not always applicable to all of our degree programs? In dialogue with our CUNY colleagues, we began to frame our answers to these questions.

At LaGuardia, we first reconsidered the definition of general education as it applies to the community college. While it is the community college "Liberal Arts"

degree programs (our AA in Liberal Arts: Humanities and Social Sciences and AS in Liberal Arts: Mathematics and Science) that correspond most closely to what has been traditionally defined as general education at the senior colleges, we did not want to equate "general education" with only these Liberal Arts majors. Rather we wanted a model that would provide each and every major with a common general education experience. Could we achieve this goal through uniform general education course requirements across all majors? Although such a distributional system is the norm at 90% of senior colleges (Astin 1993), it is difficult to accomplish at a community college. Associate's degrees (at least at CUNY) are generally capped at 60 credits, and each major needs to include general education courses appropriate for the discipline, and these often vary by major. In fact, designating general education courses on a program-by-program basis is a typical pattern among community colleges (Zeszotarski 1999). As a result, if we try to define general education at a community college as a set of specific courses that all students have to take across all majors, the number of such courses tends to be small indeed. With this difficulty in mind, we began thinking it would make more sense for us to design a comprehensive general education program around a series of competencies or proficiencies required across all majors, rather than around such a limited number of required courses—but what would be key was developing those competencies tightly linked to discipline-area content, as the last thing we wanted was to work on competencies in isolation.

At the same time, other issues, demands, and projects were coming into play. We were grappling with designing and implementing an outcomes assessment plan as mandated by our accrediting agency; a major Title V grant enabled us to adopt electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) as the basis for the plan. A Task Force was re-examining our developmental education programs with the goal of improving student learning outcomes; simultaneously, we were designing a comprehensive first-year experience program as a collaboration between the divisions of Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management & Student Development. In fact, we were selected as one of ten colleges nationally to participate in the "Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect" project sponsored by AAC&U and the Carnegie Foundation. As work on these initiatives progressed, the pieces of our general education program began coming together. Conceiving of general education as competencies across the curriculum would allow for a uniform outcomes assessment process in each major: Each and every program would take responsibility for graduating students proficient in those competencies. Perhaps more importantly, an across-the-curriculum approach would support broad-based faculty exploration of how competency development could at the same time facilitate discipline-area learning, for example, through such pedagogies as "writing to learn." Aspects of our definition of "integrative learning" thus began to emerge: Writing, we told our students, was not something just done in English class, and making oral presentations was not just for speech class, but rather these skills

also needed to be developed in the context of the disciplines. As LaGuardia graduates, students should be well on the path toward writing and speaking as members of their chosen field. By the same token, faculty teaching business or computer courses, for example, would not leave writing instruction solely to the English faculty, nor speaking solely to the Speech Communication faculty. We wanted this kind of integration to extend to developmental education as well. With the majority of students at LaGuardia—and most community colleges—needing developmental education, we felt that linking skills and the disciplines should become a key element in our general education program.

HOW DO I KNOW: OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT AND CORE COMPETENCIES

As LaGuardia's outcomes assessment plan was being thought out, a number of goals emerged. We wanted a plan that would first and foremost help us improve student learning and that would designate common outcomes we would strive to achieve across all programs so that all of our students would benefit. We wanted to capture the student learning and development that in our heart of hearts we knew was occurring, but that was not always revealed by standard measures such as graduation rates. Moreover, we wondered if we could design, in Lee Knefelkamp's (1989) words, assessment that would be "transformative":

> . . . assessment is transformative, and whether or not we're comfortable with it, assessment is about revolution. If we really listen to students and take them seriously, then our teaching and learning methodologies will change . . . Finely tuned assessment efforts help keep us from being self-satisfied or complacent about the workplace we love . . . Through assessment we challenge ourselves to rethink our ways of teaching, structuring the curriculum, working together, and even knowing itself. It provides a means for self-correcting action and for the continual expansion of our thinking about the idea and purpose of higher education. (22)

We began by deciding with the department chairpersons upon a list of general education core competencies required in each and every major:

- written communication
- critical thinking
- critical reading
- quantitative reasoning
- oral communication
- research and information literacy
- technological literacy.

In establishing these general education core competencies, and approving them through college governance, the faculty members have taken responsibility for reinforcing these competencies within each particular discipline as part of an across-the-curriculum approach. For each competency, faculty members would be supported through professional development seminars offered by our Center for Teaching and Learning. It is precisely this sort of experimenting and assessing on the part of faculty—engaging students in the kinds of writing, speaking, quantitative reasoning, or research skills necessary in their respective disciplines and exploring pedagogies that might better promote these skills—that can refine and deepen our thinking about teaching and curricula. In addition, the "productive" nature of many of these competencies meant that faculty in all the disciplines would end up designing many more opportunities for students to actively (re-)produce knowledge whether through writing, speaking, or project-based work. This approach is potentially transformative given the so-called "generation effect," namely, that "having to produce information leads to better learning than being presented with information" (deWinstanley and Bjork 2002, 22).

Using ePortfolios for assessment would allow us to achieve another of our goals: that of capturing a rich, longitudinal picture of student development and learning. As faculty worked to enhance learning through assignments calling for more extensive writing, critical reading, quantitative reasoning, and discipline-based research, we would collect and evaluate this work through electronic portfolios. We therefore specified a minimum number of "ePortfolio courses" in all curricula where student work would be put into their ePortfolios: basic skills and introductory courses to capture baseline data; the urban studies course (a requirement in all majors) as a mid-point; and a capstone course as the end-point. These ePortfolio courses require that students' assignments be deposited in their portfolios; this work is used to assess student mastery of competencies required in the major, as well as selected general education core competencies. Thus, the urban studies ePortfolio course has been designated as an official point in the curricula where writing, critical thinking, and critical reading (we ultimately combined these into one "critical literacy" competency) is to be reinforced and assessed; all urban studies courses are therefore now running as "writing intensive" courses. The capstone ePortfolio course includes at least one assignment or project designed to reinforce and assess the critical literacy and the research and information literacy competencies (again serving as a designated writing intensive course). At this point, we are still in the process of deciding upon other designated courses in which the remaining core competencies will be incorporated into the portfolio and assessed. As a major comes up for program review, faculty will be able to collect a sample of student work from their portfolios, affording a record of student learning from the first semester through graduation. Assessing an actual body of student work against the faculty-developed rubrics for each core competency tells a program whether or not students

are achieving the required levels and if not, where improvement is needed. Recommendations from these program reviews can then become part of a program's strategic plan goals.

SHOW ME: STUDENTS BUILD THEIR ePORTFOLIOS

To get students started with their ePortfolios, a template was designed guiding students to put a Welcome page, an About Me section, educational goals, and course work into their portfolios. As they progress, students add to and refine their portfolios, developing exactly the kind of complex, rich record of learning we are seeking to document. Faculty can look at a portfolio such as the one done by Charles Mak, a Fine Arts major, and assess the development of artistic technique based on the digital photos he includes of his portraits, anatomical drawings, and still-life paintings. In addition, in collecting his work Charles engages in the kind of analysis that supports learning by posting his own self-assessment of his growth in his portfolio. Lee Shulman's restating of this process is very much to the point:

> As Dewey observed many years ago, we do not learn by doing; we learn by thinking about what we are doing. Successful students spend considerable time, as Bruner calls it, "going meta," that is, thinking about what they are doing and why. (2004, 559)

Thus, ePortfolios not only serve as the mechanism for collecting student work and making it accessible to faculty for assessment purposes, but they are also designed to guide students themselves in the process of reflection and self-assessment of their learning, as Charles does in assessing his growth as an artist:

> During fall of 2004, I've noticed various improvements in my drawings because of constant practice. My whole perception of subject matter changed, seeing subjects more abstractly rather than figuratively. As a result, a transition in my style formed, from a naturalistic to a combination of realistic and abstract. Subsequently, my technique also altered using more of a painterly approach in drawing.

With each iteration of his ePortfolio, Charles is able to document his growth further—concurrently providing faculty with greater insight into, and a rich record of, his development:

> This year [2005] I strive to try something different. Last year was interesting with development in style and technique, but a time comes when all must change. Since I've gained a better understanding in composition, my next goal is to improve in contrast. Because I possess a sensitive touch, my work leans more on the bright side. Achieving a higher level of contrast will be enjoyable for me, especially when it involves manipulating materials. Smudging, rubbing the medium through physical contact, and other rendering of material is a new technique for me, which I've always wanted to develop.

At the same time, the reflective writing assignments called for in the ePortfolio provide Charles with additional practice engaging in the discourse of his profession, as his use of terminology demonstrates (e.g., "abstractly," "realistic," "painterly approach," "contrast"). For all students, and in particular nonnative English speakers, mastering discipline-specific and academic discourse is a challenging, and essential, part of their education.

We have also found that ePortfolios engage students in making personally meaningful connections between their academic and life experiences. In her welcome page, Sandra Rios reflects back upon the construction of her portfolio over the course of several iterations. Like many students, she begins her portfolio with what she knows, that is, personal experiences, not yet relating them to academic experiences:

> In that first ePortfolio I wrote about Palmira (Valle), the city where I was born in Colombia, and I wrote about Medellin, where I used to spend my vacations of school. Also, I wrote about my family who were already here when I came to this country, and I wrote about the cultural assimilation process I was going through. At that time, I included a lot of pictures of my beautiful country Colombia, and some of myself.

As Sandra progressed, she started including course work in her portfolio and began to connect her academic life with life outside of school: In this case, the first connections are to her family. We have found this to be very common: Students initially are most excited about using their ePortfolios to show their families what they are doing in college—perhaps not surprisingly given that the majority of our students are first-generation college-goers:

> The second time I was asked to develop my ePortfolio, I decided to include my academic work and goals that would make my family proud of me. In my second ePortfolio, my priority was to focus on my personal growth in my school work and what I was learning at LaGuardia.

For her next version, Sandra reports on a favorite project—one that allowed her to connect what she learned in college with a friend's real-world business. She then writes about how the process of collecting and presenting her work has helped forge her identity as an emerging professional:

> I decided to use my ePortfolio as an opportunity to show and demonstrate all the skills that I have learned throughout my journey at LaGuardia Community College. I decided to post some of my essays and multimedia projects that I have completed in some of my classes. One of my favorite projects is this web page I did for my friend's computer repair business to use on the World Wide Web. All together, my third ePortfolio demonstrates me as a professional who is looking toward her future and who has many goals to reach.

Encouraging reflection and integration through the ePortfolio process is not always easy. While students such as Charles Mak are moving in the right direction, many

others need more structure and guidance. As we move forward with our ePortfolio project, it remains a challenge for us to develop the portfolio pedagogies and assignments that will assist students in thinking more deeply about their own learning. In fact, the ePortfolio project also represents an opportunity for us—faculty and administrators—to conduct an inquiry into the notion of reflection (which has become a rather loose and hazy term in education): Can we articulate a clearer definition? How exactly does reflection facilitate learning? What types of reflection best assist learning? How can reflective learning be taught through ePortfolios and other means?

In the meantime, we are encouraged by some of the early outcomes of our ePortfolio initiative. Last year, five thousand students engaged in actively building their ePortfolios (with the eventual goal of reaching all students). Feedback shows that students are highly enthusiastic about their ePortfolios:

- Students who have developed an ePortfolio score higher than both the LaGuardia and national means on a number of key indicators on the nationally benchmarked Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), including synthesizing ideas, writing, working effectively with others, and making judgments about the soundness of information, arguments or methods.
- Students who have developed their ePortfolios rank the College higher on a number of indicators on the ACT Opinion Survey, including quality of instruction, whether they would advise a friend to attend LaGuardia, and whether they would choose to attend LaGuardia if they could start college over.
- Pass rates in ePortfolio courses exceed non-portfolio courses by almost 6%.

ALL ABOARD: THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

As an entry point to higher education for many students who might not otherwise have access—with the majority being first-time college-goers—we felt that the creation of common, shared experiences that foster a greater sense of community and connectedness to the college was a central aspect of general education. Establishing a common reading (in fact, seldom done at community colleges) would create a shared intellectual experience that would immediately establish an academic tone for our new students, setting a particular expectation for them upon their entry: that the ability to read critically is a key to their academic success. A faculty committee selects the book each year, chosen to be accessible to students in basic skills and rich enough in content to exploit in discipline-area classes as well (selections have included *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York*, *The Laramie Project* by

Moises Kaufman and Members of the Tectonic Theatre Project, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*). All incoming students receive the book free of charge at registration, and faculty members are given a gratis copy as well. A small faculty team is compensated each year to create a Web site and study guide for the book, with links, ancillary resources, suggested assignments, and essay topics. A series of common reading events is also held each year, ranging from a field trip to El Museo del Barrio to a multimedia and dance presentation on Afghanistan and the Islamic Diaspora. In addition, students have had book discussions over lunch with the college president, entered our annual essay contest, and had the opportunity to meet and question the authors on campus.

The common reading is also used as the basis for faculty-led discussions during Opening Sessions for New Students. This event is designed to give new students a feel for what college will be like. Indeed, the essence of what college is "like" is their engaging with faculty in the world of ideas. To create this intellectual tone, the day is set up as an academic conference with a plenary session, concurrent workshops, and small-group colloquia with faculty members. Workshops are led by LaGuardia faculty and students on topics such as leadership, women's issues, communication, student clubs, student success stories, community activism, and diversity. Each year thirty to forty faculty members have volunteered to lead the colloquia, which are small-group discussion sessions on the common reading. Students consistently rate these faculty-led discussions as the most significant part of the day.

Professor James Wilson is among many faculty members who incorporate the Common Reading selection into their freshman classes. In the following section, he describes how he integrated The Laramie Project *into a first-year learning community linking his developmental writing class with General Psychology and a freshman seminar.*

In 2004–2005, the common reading was *The Laramie Project*[2] by Moises Kaufman and Members of the Tectonic Theatre Project, and it is based on the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. The play's examination of a community struggling with the impact of an act of horrific violence on its collective consciousness, as well as its focus on diversity and acceptance were perfectly suited to the main themes and motifs of the learning community. The text served as a lynchpin for the learning community I was teaching, as it provided the basis for textual analysis and expository writing assignments in basic writing, and in the Freshman Seminar, the play served to initiate conversations around hate speech and social acceptance. In General Psychology, the play also led to an examination of research methodologies. (The members of the theatre company completed their own extensive research on Laramie, Wyoming, in the aftermath of Shepard's murder.) The play also provided the jumping-off point for a semester-long course research project in which students focused on a community and college issue, such as racial profiling, homophobia on campus, and respect for religious diversity.

As a way of connecting the students to the larger college community and their own academic pursuits, I invited a former student, who had completed basic writing the year before, to perform selections from the play in my class. In addition to representing characters from the play, the student, who was close to graduating and transferring to a prestigious New York City four-year college, represented to the beginning college students in the learning community the potential for success at LaGuardia. In the question-and-answer period that followed the performance, for instance, many of the students asked him about his ability to juggle work, family, and school responsibilities. Candidly, he informed the class that being a full-time student had been particularly difficult as he came from a working-class Caribbean family whose other members did not completely understand what it meant to be in college and did not always provide the emotional support he needed. Furthermore, they did not fully approve of his desire to pursue acting, especially when it meant that he would be playing "a gay" in the college's fall 2004 production of *The Laramie Project*. The student's commitment to his learning, as well as the palpable pride he took from acknowledging his placement in basic skills courses to successfully completing several honors-level courses, demonstrated that these were mere obstacles that he handily overcame.

All that said, when the learning community instructors began planning the courses, we knew there would be many ways in which the common reading could help integrate the curriculum, but we were concerned about the reactions the students might have over the issue of homosexuality, which is a major component in the play. However, our emphasis on the text as an academic object of study seemed to diffuse any adverse reactions. The responses to the play reflected the range of the students' racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, but we were impressed with the ways in which the students maintained a respectful and intellectual approach to the subject matter. Their responses, which often lacked polish because they had not yet fully developed their ideas, were often sophisticated, moving, and honest. In a BlackBoard discussion thread, for example, one student focused on the impact that words and language may have on the eruption of physical violence. He explained:

> Sometimes, [words] may be stronger and more cruel than physical [violence]. Using of offending words about gays have affected and built many people the wrong and bad ideas about gay people unconsciously. It's like [the] influence of TV. For instance, many TV shows are showing only thin and tall [girls] all the time, and fixing audience's point of view about the [beauty], tall, blonde, and buxom. Words and languages also work like that unconsciously.[3]

For many students, popular culture and gender images, areas in which they were far more comfortable, provided access to the text and its themes. The play, which is a hybrid ethnography, living-newspaper, and drama about a community's response to homophobia, was unlike any other assigned reading the students had encountered

in their high school English classes. The relative openness of the BlackBoard forums allowed them to apply their own experiences and backgrounds in a safe arena.

In another interesting exchange, a young Muslim woman countered her classmate, who, she thought, had implied that Matthew Shepard somehow deserved what he got because of his "sinful lifestyle." Framing her points in her religious faith, she wrote:

> The only person [sic] that can decide that [homosexuality is a sin] is Allah. You can't just say it is WRONG the way you did, because it will hurt other people. I dunno maybe i don't get what you are saying, or maybe you won't get what i am saying either.

Discussions focused on religious beliefs tend to be one-sided and can shut down dialogue, but the student's posting notably demonstrates her willingness to acknowledge that she misunderstood her classmate while also recognizing that her own words may be misinterpreted as well. Rather than cutting the discussion thread, the student allows possibilities for further conversation. (The first student did not, however, take her up on this.)

As these responses show, the play proved to be an ideal starting point for the semester. Although Laramie, Wyoming, is seemingly in a different universe from Queens, New York, the text opened spaces for an important discussion about highly sensitive social issues in an academic context. The play's presentation of various viewpoints allowed the students to draw upon and interrogate their own cultural, religious, and personal responses to the play while weighing these against the responses of their classmates.

SIDE BY SIDE BY SIDE: BASIC SKILLS, GENERAL EDUCATION, AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Mention of Professor Wilson's learning community brings us to a central issue in community college education: A large part of who we are and what we do at LaGuardia has been defined by our basic skills courses—typical of the function of community colleges on the whole. In fact, according to LaGuardia's most recent institutional profile, over 80% of the students require basic skills instruction in at least one academic area (i.e., writing, reading, math) with 25% placing into ESL courses (LaGuardia Community College 2006). How could basic skills instruction therefore not be a part of what we consider general education? However, basic skills and general education are not typically discussed in the same academic milieu. Basic skills tend to reside in the outskirts of a college curriculum and are taught in a set of "pre-college" courses that students must successfully complete before moving through a selection of discipline-specific major courses—which is also the case at LaGuardia. Basic writing, basic reading, and ESL are taught as no-credit courses and are prerequisite for many

introductory courses in the social sciences, humanities, and allied health programs. They also serve as the prerequisite for the foundational freshman composition course, or as it is typically called, "College Composition." This designation itself implies that students in basic skills are not yet freshmen and are *pre*-college students, leading to the traditional attitude that, as Bruce Horner argues, such instruction occupies "the province of teachers and students placed at the bottom of the academic institutional hierarchy" (1996, 199).

Basic skills are often taught in isolation using a "skill-and-drill" methodology, which detaches them from the students' career and academic aspirations. Hence, students do not see how the skills are relevant to their own learning. Not surprisingly, many students regard these pre-college level courses as fillers. It is no wonder that retention is at its most precarious at this time in a student's college career—at the moment when students should be most strongly connecting to their college life, they are made to feel not quite a part of it. Barbara Gleason articulates quite succinctly the challenges students face in being both literally and figuratively "college students" while in the process of fulfilling their basic skills requirements. In "Remediation Phase-Out at CUNY: The 'Equity versus Excellence' Controversy," Gleason writes:

> Students who had failed the reading and/or writing skills tests were barred from enrolling in many core curriculum courses at most CUNY colleges. These students often found it difficult to enroll in enough classes to achieve full-time status and thus qualify for financial aid, and even when they did enroll in enough class hours to be considered "full-time," they were often accumulating very few credits during their first and second semesters of college because remedial classes carried only partial credit or, especially since 1995, no credit. (2000, 490)

Indeed, first-year basic skills students often complain that their course work is simply a rehash of their high school or equivalency courses, and they do not feel connected to the college, their classes, or their academic aspirations. As one of our students put it, "I left the college because all the courses were wasting my time. I was doing remedial classes."[4]

General or liberal education, on the other hand, may be defined not only by the mastery of a set of discrete skills or knowledge sets, but by the individual student's ability to make connections between courses, disciplines, and college experiences. On its Web site, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) explains, "Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, a liberal education prepares graduates both for socially valued work and for civic leadership in their society. It usually includes a general education curriculum that provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and ways of knowing, along with more in-depth study in at least one field or area of concentration" (2006). However, in what sense could basic skills fit this definition of general education? How could we incorporate multiple disciplines, challenge students, and foster connection-making

in the arena of basic skills, and, of course, ensure that the basic proficiencies were being acquired? Our answer has been to contextualize skills development within disciplines. We believe that academic skills are best acquired in a college setting in which students can apply their developing skills to the academic subject matter at hand, rather than in the framework of a model that assumes skills instruction in all cases occurs separately from and prior to discipline-area instruction. In fact, this argument has been supported by researchers who have conducted "meta-analyses" of the literature (Boylan and Saxon 2002). Thus, Grubb argues strongly for "differentiated forms of developmental education," that is, differentiated in the sense of being specifically connected to different discipline areas. Advocating for the creation of "developmental courses that are hybrids" of basic skills and discipline-area perspectives, or learning communities that link the two, Grubb further argues that such differentiated approaches also "address the motivational issue of students coming to colleges, intending to pursue some academic or occupational program, and then finding themselves in developmental courses with no obvious connection to their intended goals" (2001, 14).

In fact, LaGuardia has a long and successful record of integrating basic skills and discipline-area instruction—albeit for limited numbers of students—through our first-year learning communities. We do not think the teaching of basic skills has to be (nor should it be) separate from general education or major-area objectives. Moreover, without disregarding the importance of proficiency in writing, reading, and math, we argue for an integrated approach so the students may have meaningful opportunities to apply basic skills as they develop them. The College's Department of Education and Language Acquisition has taken the lead in expanding this approach, typically offering twenty or more sections each semester, pairing ESL with courses such as Accounting, Introduction to Business, Introduction to Computers, Introduction to Sociology, and Biochemistry. For non-ESL students, the College's "New Student House" model—our earliest basic skills learning community model—creates a full-time program linking two developmental courses with a discipline-area course as well as the New Student Seminar, taught by a counselor. Faculty members collaborate to produce an integrated curriculum that includes joint projects, library instruction provided by one of the college librarians, a library project, and field trips. A unified curriculum is constructed through themes, such as Immigrants in the United States and The Women's Rights Movement in Early Nineteenth Century America. First-year learning communities also serve non-basic skills students: Liberal Arts majors are required to participate in a "Liberal Arts Cluster." These learning communities also use a theme to integrate English Composition, a research paper course, and an Integrating Seminar hour with two courses from various disciplines in the humanities or social sciences.

Nevertheless, despite the success of this approach, our learning community offerings have been, in fact, limited, serving a relatively small percentage of our incoming

students. Expanding learning communities would thus indeed be an experiment in merging general education with basic skills. In addition to growing the learning communities, we also knew that a first-year general education program could be improved in other ways: Some elements of the first year were still fragmented (e.g., extra-curricular activities are not well-integrated with the curriculum), and most students were still not receiving enough information about career development as indicated by their freshman survey responses. To address these issues the College has instituted a "First Year Academy" model in order to create a cohesive and comprehensive first-year experience for students. Linking student development services with curricular offerings, the Academies center the first-year experience around the major, while at the same time initiating development of the general education core competencies as well as fostering interdisciplinary connections between basic skills, the major, and liberal arts courses. Based on their major, all incoming students are placed in one of three Academies (Business/Technology; Allied Health; Liberal Arts). Functioning as a "school-within-a-school," each Academy offers a discipline-specific New Student Seminar; a newly developed career development course for each Academy in the second semester; and an array of co-curricular activities that contribute to student success and development, all centered around the disciplines in each Academy (e.g., career orientation events in health fields; study skills workshops utilizing health-related materials; speakers from the health professions).

Each Academy also offers learning communities that link developmental courses with credit-bearing courses in the disciplines. In addition to embracing existing ESL, New Student House, and Liberal Arts Clusters, the Academies created new learning communities with a particular focus on basic (non-ESL) reading and writing. These communities are currently offered to potential majors in business/technology, liberal arts, and allied health, and are designed to put students who require basic skills courses in contact with their majors upon entering college and give them the opportunity to satisfy at least one major or general education requirement in their curriculum. In addition to linking a basic skills requirement with a course in the student's intended major, the learning communities also include a freshman seminar that offers academic and career-choice guidance, and the ePortfolio studio hour. The faculty within each learning community work together to make explicit and implicit connections between the class sections ensuring that basic skill development evolves from discipline-based themes and issues rather than through discrete skill-directed classes. Most importantly, these learning communities can provide the basic skills students with the opportunity to be college students, both in name and through meaningful intellectual and social experiences.

We have been pleased with the success of our first-year programs. In fact, LaGuardia is one of only 13 colleges nationwide to be recognized as an "Institution

of Excellence in the First College Year" by the *Policy Center on the First Year of College,* in recognition of some of the outcomes we have been able to achieve:

- In 2004, the College conducted a massive quantitative study of over ten years of data on ESL learning communities. The data showed ESL students in pairs (in which students are "mainstreamed" into discipline-area courses earlier than usual in their academic careers) overall do as well as or better than non-ESL students and ESL students taking those discipline-area courses in a non-paired mode later in their academic careers. In addition to higher grades, there was a statistically significant relationship between passing and participating in a learning community course; that is to say, students were more likely to pass a particular course (whether a content, basic skills, or ESL course) when the course was in a learning community.
- Recent assessments of New Student House and Liberal Arts clusters, which analyzed data collected over an eight-year period, demonstrated improved outcomes in these communities. Students in New Student House passed the basic reading and basic writing courses at higher rates than students who took both courses in the same semester, but not in the House setting. Passing rates for Freshman Composition offered in Liberal Arts clusters were ten percent higher than in stand-alone sections. In addition, data collected since 1996 show that pass rates for the ESL course offered in ESL New Student House on average have exceeded those for the same level ESL course not offered in the House by 10%.
- For the newer learning communities developed in conjunction with moving to the Academy model, data are preliminary, but encouraging at this point: the FY Academy reduced the failure rate by 9%, the course attrition rate by 6%, and the semester-to-semester attrition rate by 6%. In addition, student ratings of their Academy experience on key questions from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) exceeded both the LaGuardia and national means.

MOVE ON: A FACULTY PERSPECTIVE ON BASIC WRITING AND GENERAL EDUCATION

In the following sections, Professor James Wilson describes his experience developing and teaching a First-Year Academy learning community.

In the spring semester of 2005, I taught Basic Writing in a new Academy learning community, which also included General Psychology, a Freshman Seminar, and an ePortfolio Studio, a weekly one-hour workshop that introduced students to the rudiments of the electronic portfolio system and assisted them in developing their own ePortfolios. One morning, not long after the students had read excerpts from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* in my class and discussed elements of psychoanalytical theory in their psychology course, I introduced a collaborative learning activity that asked the students to apply concepts of Freudian theory to practical situations. Subsequently, they would write an essay of about 300 words using the ideas they generated in their small groups.

In preparation for the activity, I asked the students to arrange the desks into small clusters. I lent a hand and made sure there were no more than four desks per cluster; I helped students align the desks so that the front edge of each faced the others and just barely touched; and I was sure to distribute the clusters throughout the entire classroom, making certain there was sufficient space between them so I could move easily from group to group. Truthfully, my meticulousness that spring morning was no different from any other as the class prepared for the group work.

We were just about ready to commence with the activity when I noticed that one cluster of desks did not seem quite right: It was off by just a hair. I asked the students sitting in the group to move the offending desks a little bit closer to the wall. Really, just a fraction of an inch if they didn't mind. They complied, and as they did, one of the students in the group looked up at me with an expression of pained sincerity borne of tragic epiphany. "Professor," he said drawing upon his recently acquired knowledge of psychoanalysis, "you haven't moved out of the anal stage."

The moment was, as those credit card commercials say, priceless. Not only had the student applied the concept correctly and brilliantly to the particular situation (as well as to my own psychic development—which must remain the subject of another essay), but in his single utterance, he encapsulated the central point of learning communities in general and LaGuardia's general education program in particular. That is, the philosophical foundation of both programs at LaGuardia is grounded on the position that students should demonstrate the ability to make connections between courses, disciplines, and their own college experiences. At the same time, the instance also reflected the possibility of successfully linking complex disciplinary content within the context of a basic skills course.

Heretofore the English Department had linked only a relative handful of basic writing courses with discipline-area courses, mostly in the New Student House model, which offered only two or three sections a semester. The challenge of expanding our learning community offerings has to be seen in the light of other concerns that emerged just prior to this initiative. A CUNY mandate in 2000 declared that students could only exit out of the basic skills courses upon passing a CUNY ACT retest in each remedial course in which they were enrolled. This requirement has had a tremendous impact on the Basic Writing curriculum in LaGuardia's English Department, whose philosophy has been analogous to the AAC&U's definition of

general education. The CUNY ACT Writing exam, for instance, is a one-hour, timed, standardized writing exam (and graded by normed faculty on another CUNY campus). LaGuardia's English program, however, emphasizes the process of writing, integration of various viewpoints, a student's engagement with a topic, and clarity of expression over a student's ability to demonstrate "minimal competency" in a sixty-minute, non-course related writing test. Faculty members in the English Department were rightly concerned that the implementation of the ACT Writing Exam as an exit requirement would force them to "teach to the test" and focus on grammar and mechanics at the expense of the writing process. Indeed, it seemed that the department was revisiting familiar pedagogical squabbles.

Historically, both at LaGuardia and elsewhere, the skills-versus-process debate has been central to the basic writing discourse and is directly related to the role of general education in a community college. I would argue, based on the research of the last thirty years, the two programs do not need to be mutually exclusive. In fact, Mina Shaughnessy, who is regarded as one of the principal architects in the development of the basic writing movement, proposed building an integrative, process-oriented approach rather than a program focused entirely on "skills" and language "correctness." She did not claim, however, that grammar and mechanics had no place in the basic writing curriculum. She wrote, "I am not of course suggesting that it is debasing education to help a student gain control of Standard English and the mechanics of formal writing but only that the effort to do this quickly can lead to it exclusively, which means almost inevitably the neglect, at a crucial point, of the deeper and ultimately more important resources our students bring to the classroom."[5] One way to tap into the "more important resources" that the students bring to their basic writing classes in the age of the ACT might be to connect the course explicitly to their interest in a particular discipline. At any rate, I would soon find out.

YOU COULD DRIVE A PERSON CRAZY: CREATING A BASIC WRITING AND GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY COORDINATED SYLLABUS

The title of the learning community I taught was "Beyond Dr. Phil: Psychology and Communication in the 21st Century," and the focus of the linked courses was on developing students' analytical, organizational, and communication proficiencies, using introductory psychology material as the basis for writing and class discussion. The merging of Basic Writing: English 099 with a science-based, highly analytical course (and one which normally has a basic writing prerequisite) was not at first sight an impossible partnership, but it was certainly fraught with difficulties. First,

the English Department at LaGuardia has very specific guidelines and goals for the Basic Writing curriculum. In particular, these include the following:

- The creation of a body of well-written and revised college-level work that reflects students' development as writers (based on the development of a thesis using specific examples, logical organization, and clear, correct written English) over the course of the semester.
- Successful completion of the CUNY ACT Writing Exam, which demonstrates students' abilities to write an argumentative essay in one hour.
- Successful completion of the departmental Exit Exam, in which students write a 300 (minimum)-word essay in response to a text that is cross-graded by other Basic Writing instructors.

Although the course as defined by the English Department is not intended to be a traditional "skill-and-drill" course, there is not much room in the curriculum for discipline-specific exploration and analysis. Critical thinking and reading are important components of the course, but faculty are asked to give students a great deal of support in the writing process, including pre-writing strategies, drafting, and revising in addition to the requirements stated above. For this reason, integrating themes from psychology and topics from the allied health sciences offered a unique set of challenges in designing the course. The CUNY ACT writing exam, for example, is based on a hypothetical community issue and asks students to demonstrate writing proficiency using fully developed reasons and examples from personal and/or observed experiences. Writing in the social and applied sciences tends to be more theoretical and text-based. Could the courses teach to both writing aims?

The next main challenge was finding ways to integrate the goals of Basic Writing with General Psychology. Because this course has a Basic Writing prerequisite (which is waived for students taking the course in an academy learning community), instructors of General Psychology expect the students to already have proficiency in topic development, essay organization, and language fluency, the three main areas of consideration in a semester-long basic writing class. The students in that course are expected to read and respond to articles in professional journals and are required to write a ten-page research paper. Furthermore, the course textbook is, to say the least, daunting in both heft and reading-level, and the authors of that text could never be accused of pandering to their readers as evidenced by the depth of analysis and range of examples they provide. I was not being facetious when I, who took several psychology courses as an undergraduate, told my teaching compatriot, "I'm glad I didn't have to take this course. I would have been lucky to get a 'C-.' "

At the same time, the psychology instructor was rightly concerned about "watering down" the curriculum to accommodate the needs of the basic writing students.

She argued convincingly that the grade on the students' transcripts would have to reflect the academic equivalence of students who did not take the course in an academy learning community. So, in the preceding semester, we, along with the freshman seminar instructor (a college counselor), spent many hours exploring ways to successfully integrate the learning objectives and course outcomes while also assuring the students would have a level of success and academic gratification. We did not want to build either the students (or ourselves) up for failure, but we also knew that the linked courses would require academic commitment, intellectual rigor, and endless amounts of energy. The endeavor looked like it could be a tremendous success or a spectacular failure.

In our fall meetings, we created a title, "Beyond Dr. Phil," which we hoped would be catchy enough to attract students, and one that would also allude to the academic, non-pop cultural approach to psychology. We then wrote a common statement that gave an overview of the academy learning community and the goals of the linked courses. Because this was the first time the academy would be offered, we were not sure what kind of response it would get, and we participated in a great deal of course-promotion. We reprinted our statement (with a photo of a smug, shrugging Dr. Phil prominently displayed) along with the chief "selling points." These included:

- Linked courses for greater understanding
- Greater likelihood of passing exit exams
- Closer relationship with peers
- More individualized attention
- Greater access to technology instruction
- Improved retention

We hoped we were not peddling a bill of goods.

Next, we began building the courses themselves, focusing on the explicit intersections in the content and assignments, and discussing how the linkages could enhance the students' chances for success across the learning community. The three main junctures were the college's common reading that semester; community health concerns; and an introduction to Freudian theory of psychoanalysis.

MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG: MOVING BEYOND THE PERSONAL AND INTO THE PUBLIC

Building on the links that my use of the Common Reading (*The Laramie Project*, described earlier) formed between the students and the main courses in the learning

community, I chose a text that would provide a foundation for the exit requirements of English 099, including the CUNY ACT re-test, which asks students to respond to a community issue, and the Department Exit Exam, which requires that students write a 300-word analytical response to a text. The collection of essays contained in *Health Views*, edited by Marjorie and Jon Ford (1998), offered a mechanism for preparing the students for these requirements and also maintaining a connection to the interdisciplinary focus of the learning community. *Health Views* includes essays on a range of topics such as anorexia, depression, effects of sports on young girls, and the ways in which women doctors are changing the medical field. These worked quite well with the psychology curriculum because in that class, the students examined personality traits, body image concerns, and neurological imbalances. In addition, whereas the online and class discussions encouraged the students to explore their personal reactions to *The Laramie Project* based on their own experiences and perspectives, the assignments connected with the articles in *Health Views* asked the students to engage with the material as psychological cases and as research findings.

In "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year," Nancy Somers and Laura Saltz argue for the importance of allowing students to write about their own lives and identities in relation to particular assignments. They also conclude, however, that "when students only use writing to study themselves, they become stuck as writers, unable to move forward. Only those students who were able to find a way to connect their interests with those of a discipline, to look beyond the personal to the public, were able to move from being a novice to an expert" (2004, 148). Basic writers in particular tend to have a harder time moving from writing about their own experiences and reflections to critically engaging with texts.

My intention was to help familiarize students with the ACT structure and prompt guidelines while also asking the students to engage with the class readings. At the same time, the issues pertained directly to the topics that the students were discussing in their Psychology and Freshman Seminar classes. At this point in the semester, the students began to make their own organic connections between the courses. That is, when I asked them to respond to an essay by William Styron on coping with depression, many of them injected their essays with information they had learned in their psychology course. In an online peer critique activity, for instance, two students drew upon their knowledge of the physiological basis of depression, which, they argued, could have something to do with a person's level of serotonin. Offering feedback on her classmate's essay, one of the students advised her partner to reconsider the diagnosis that might lower a depressed person's serotonin. She wrote:

> you make a good point but diagnois [sic] cannot cause a drop in sertioin [sic] levels lol. only gentics [sic] can do that . . . REMEMBER THAT FOR PSYCH CLASS!!!!!!

By the middle of the semester, we were encouraged by the fact that the students themselves were forging the links between the courses. In the beginning of the term we made intentional connections, but as we hoped would happen, the disciplinary bridges were gradually constructed by the students themselves.

AH, BUT UNDERNEATH: FREUD'S *INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS* AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL THEORIES

Near the end of the semester, I created a unit that concretely linked the work students did around Sigmund Freud's theories in their Psychology class. Building on their exploration of psychoanalysis, I asked the students to read two chapters from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. The text was particularly challenging because it was very different from the kinds of work they had read up to that time in the basic writing class. Freud's language tends to be rather ornate and filled with specialized vocabulary, and the students claimed that it required a wholly different way of reading from how they had done it previously. Immediately after reading the excerpts, the class showed a great deal of resistance through a chorus of "I don't understand," a litany of "this is stupid," and worse, the dreaded silence originating from fear of saying something wrong. As the three-week unit progressed, however, the class discussions and writing became livelier and self-assured as the students came to terms with Freud's language and ideas.

For the first writing activity in the unit, I asked the students to interpret one of their own dreams using Freudian theory. While some of the students were not willing to fully accept Freud's theories as "truth," they were willing to engage with them. One student, for instance, shared her interpretation of a dream in a BlackBoard discussion thread. She wrote:

> In my journal I described a dream that I have for many years, me standing on the top of the stairs and wanting to jump. I eventually jump, but I feel scared and afraid, and while I'm in the air it feels like I'm flying. Freud would probably say that I have sexuals [sic] frustrations and that it has to do with someting [sic] that happened to me when I was little, but in my opinion this dream presents [my] confronting my fear of hights [sic], which I'm consciousely [sic] not aware of.

This student, along with many others in the class, demonstrated an impressive ability to show that they understood the theories (e.g., the dream rooted in subconscious sexual desires and childhood experience), even if they maintained a critical distance from them.

The next activity in the unit asked the students to reflect outward and apply their analytical expertise to hypothetical scenarios. In order to facilitate this activity, I asked the students to imagine they were in a Parisian *café*, which for our purposes, was represented by several small clusters of desks with large newsprint. Dubbed the *Café*

Sigmund Freud, the room's layout was supposed to evoke the setting of a French restaurant or coffee shop where early twentieth-century philosophers, poets, and mathematicians scrawled their own work and ideas on the paper covering the tables. Each "*café* table" in the classroom included a question or problem about which the students brainstormed their responses on the newsprint. In the rotating groups, the students responded to the different topics as well as to the responses of the previous group(s).

The inquiry-based prompts I posed were both text-based, requiring the students to support their arguments with quotes and examples from Freud, and ACT-like, asking the students to consider a specific audience. For example, two of the questions included:

- Your friend Dora has been extremely anxious lately, and she is having bad dreams that have caused her many sleepless nights. She is considering seeing her doctor to get a prescription for sleeping pills. You, however, recommend that she see a Freudian psychoanalyst to help her analyze her dreams and find out what's causing them. *What reasons, supported by specific examples from Freud's* Interpretation of Dreams, *would you give Dora for going to the psychoanalyst instead of getting the sleeping-pill prescription?*
- Using his analytical tools for interpreting dreams, how might Freud explain the following dream:

> Fritz, a 53 year-old teacher, dreams that he is teaching his math class wearing only his glasses and skimpy, red jockey shorts. The students don't seem to notice and take attentive notes during the class. Fritz, however, is deeply embarrassed and desperately tries to hide behind a lectern, which keeps moving away from him across the floor.

In the subsequent class, I posted the students' responses to the questions on the classroom walls. They (and I) were impressed with the sheer number of ideas they generated, and they agreed that the activity was a productive way to wrestle with the topics and to get multiple perspectives before approaching the intimidating first draft of an essay. Their next essay assignment asked them to deal with one of these questions in depth. Because they had already grappled with Freudian psychoanalysis in several different contexts, the students' responses reflected an impressive authority and genuine engagement with the assignment.

WITH SO LITTLE TO BE SURE OF: CONCLUSIONS AND HYPOTHESES

If the story of this Allied Health basic skills learning community were to be reimagined as a Broadway musical or Hollywood film, it would probably conclude with

a ragtag group of racially and ethnically diverse students singing a moving anthem along the lines of "To Sir, With Love." Another possibility would be that the ragtag group of racially and ethnically diverse students would make a dramatic and tearful goodbye to the teacher, who, of course, is leaving to help another ragtag group of racially and ethnically diverse students. However, the semester did not end in this fashion at all. Although I cannot quite dispel this dramatic narrative form completely, the ending was indeed a happy one.

I find that it is always difficult to gauge the effectiveness of one's teaching because there are so many factors that play a part in the development (or lack thereof) in a student's academic progress. Chemistry, the indefinable element that forms a cohesive bond between the students and the instructor, certainly plays a major role. The skills the students bring with them to the classroom and that are nurtured in other classes simultaneously also cannot be ignored. Of course, the methodology that works brilliantly with one class could fail spectacularly with another. All that said, at the end of the term, the course appeared to be a huge success.

This assessment is supported by the following anecdotal and statistical evidence:

- The students developed a great deal of camaraderie, and in their end-of-semester reflections, every student reported how much he or she enjoyed and benefited from the class. Most commented on the challenges of the class, but they felt more confident about writing than they did at the beginning of the class. A number of students reported that the cross-course links in assignments and instruction helped them become stronger readers and writers.
- The writing produced by the end of the semester was the finest I have seen in my five years of teaching English 099. This is not to say that all of the sentence and word-level errors magically disappeared, but several students were writing at a level way past English 101.
- Approximately 80% of the students, more than I have had in any previous class, attended the Writing Center on his or her own at least once for additional writing support. Several students attended on a weekly basis. In addition, nearly 70% of the class attended one or more extra-curricular ACT workshops offered by me and other English Departmental instructors. These figures indicate that the students took a great deal of personal responsibility in developing their writing abilities and recognized the importance of meeting the course performance objectives.
- Over 60% of the students who took the ACT exam at the end of the semester passed. That was over 100% the departmental average pass rate that semester, which was 29%.
- Nearly 70% of the students who took the Departmental Exit Exam passed. This is 30% higher than the typical English 099 pass rate of 40%.

Most gratifying, however, was that for more than a few of the students in the learning community, the experience represented the ultimate goal (and one might argue, the underlying purpose) of general education: student empowerment. Because most of the students were second-language learners, their progress as writers will, if recent studies are accurate, fluctuate. Sentence-boundary issues, word-form errors, and essay-structure concerns probably plagued them through English 101: College Composition. However, in that basic skills learning community, many of the students showed an impressive desire to enter into academic discourse and actively participated in it.

This engagement is powerfully reflected by an email I received from one of the students after he took the final exam, which included an essay prompt similar to the ones I created for the *Café* Sigmund Freud activity. In a letter with the subject heading, "The Essay Was Contradictive," the student took me to task for writing a misleading and seemingly impossible-to-answer writing problem. He wrote:

> Just wanted to let you know that the Essay Question on Interpretation of Dreams was not a good question. You made it tricky because in Freud theory when one dreams [about] a love one['s] death, it is cause by the suppressed memory the individual had during his childhood. On the other hand when one experience the embarrassing dreams of nakedness, this individual is going through a present situation where he/she feels powerless or scared. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say. I try not to change my argument but separated the two conditions on the same dreams. One couldn't put it together without contradicting Freud theory.

The student shows a solid understanding of the material, but more impressively, he demonstrates a willingness to enter into a dialogue about Freudian analysis with a perceived expert (which I am certainly not). He also reflected on his own choices in responding to the prompt and explained why he answered as he did.

In the same letter, the student showed his ability to focus on his own learning and simultaneously developed an awareness of the crucial concerns facing a democratic society.

> It's been a pleasure being your student, you help me not only with my English flaws but you open my eyes a little on the struggles that occur in this world.

Finally, the student concluded his email message to me by recognizing me as someone who, like him, is struggling with issues of writing, research, and sharing one's work with a public audience. Offering me a few pointers on my own book project, he wrote:

> Well good luck in your future success on your book. I have an advice don't make it [too] structure[d] let the pen roll, be yourself. Good luck and God Bless.

Aloi, Gardner, and Lusher outline the principal goals of a general education, and among these include, "higher-order applied problem-solving skills; enthusiasm for

learning on a continuous basis; sense of responsibility for action, both personal and collective; and ability to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers" (2003, 241). My experience teaching in the Allied Health and Science learning community confirmed my belief that general education and basic skills do not have to be mutually exclusive. First-year students, especially those fulfilling basic skills requirements need more than just skill-and-drill activities and standardized tests. Meaningful experiences with disciplinary knowledge and inquiry-based problems can help incorporate them into the academy upon entrance to the college and go a long way to instill a respect, zeal, and love for learning from the outset.

EVER AFTER: WHAT'S NEXT?

We entered the "woods" of general education with a question: What creates the meaningful common experience in general education? LaGuardia's recent efforts have certainly been in the domain of "common aims" (core competencies) and "experiences" (learning communities, ePortfolio, Academies and first-year activities). In addition, we have developed a perhaps somewhat unorthodox definition of general education by including and integrating basic skills. We are striving to create common intellectual experiences for all students—acquiring basic skills and core competencies in the context of a discipline, engaging with a common reading, taking an urban studies and capstone writing intensive course, as well as becoming more self-reflective and taking ownership of the learning process through building an ePortfolio. Most of these initiatives are in various stages of implementation: attempting to bring ePortfolios or learning communities "up-to-scale" for the entire student body remains daunting. While all of the urban studies courses are now writing intensives—with all urban studies faculty having participated in our Writing-in-the-Disciplines faculty development seminars—we have only begun the process with capstone courses. Faculty development for the other competencies is just getting underway as well.

All that said, what about the "what" of general education? We have also questioned whether our approach was giving short shrift to knowledge and content—the actual courses students take. Certainly we continue to review and update our curricula—recently adding, for example, a more rigorous mathematics course to several programs—but should we be spending more time trying to create a common set of courses for all students? We want to consider the answer in light of a few points. First, Adelman's recent data show "nearly 60 percent of undergraduates attending more than one institution" (2006, xvi). Thus, even if a set of general education distribution requirements is agreed upon, how many students are actually completing the entire package? Second, while Adelman states that the best indicator of college degree attainment is the "academic intensity" of the individual student's high school

curriculum, arguing that "the principal story line leading to degrees is that of content," he also acknowledges that "counting Carnegie units in English or science is not the same as describing and validating what students have learned" (xvii). Our contention is that "academic intensity" does not necessarily equate with specific content courses (even if one wants to grant that some subjects may be inherently more difficult than others), but that it has as much to do with the degree to which students are challenged and engaged in those courses. It is this kind of active learning and engagement with content that we have been most interested in stimulating through our general education efforts—agreeing with the principle that "the primary cause of genuine learning is the activity of the learner's own mind" (Paedeia Group 1991).

Finally, it is sobering to keep in mind that even the best constructed core curriculum or set of distribution requirements is subject to what Lee Shulman calls the "problem of amnesia," observing that "in liberal learning, one of the ubiquitous problems we face is the fragility of what is learned. . . . Students seldom remember much of what they've read or heard beyond their last high-stakes exam on the material" (557). The answer, he posits, is to promote active learning, writing, dialogue, reflection, integration, and opportunities for students to "go meta" about their learning and connect it to their goals—to have students "connect the dots" and create their own "La Grande Jatte," if you will. These are the aims of general education at LaGuardia, which in fact end up focusing us on content in the most important way: keeping us engaged in the hard work of empowering our students as learners, helping them understand more deeply whatever academic content they encounter and connect it more meaningfully to their lives.

NOTES

1. The musical-theatre oriented reader will notice immediately that the essay and section titles derive from song lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Not only is Sondheim the quintessential New York City composer, he is also known for his seamless integration of music, lyrics, and character. The songs originally appeared in the following shows: "Putting It Together" and "Move On," *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984); "Into the Woods" and "Ever After," *Into the Woods* (1988); "How Do I Know," *Phinney's Rainbow* (1948); "Show Me," *Hotspot* (1963); "All Aboard," *The Frogs* (2004); "Side by Side by Side," and "You Could Drive a Person Crazy," *Company* (1970); "Merrily We Roll Along," *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981); "Ah, But Underneath," *Follies* (London, 1987); "With So Little to Be Sure Of," *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964).
2. The play was first presented in New York in the spring of 2000 and was subsequently published by Vintage Books in 2001.
3. The sample student responses are used with permission from the writers. They have been edited only when a student's meaning may not have been clear. In general, spelling and grammatical errors have been retained to reflect the developmental elements in the writing.
4. Written comment from the ACT Withdrawing/Nonreturning Survey, administered at LaGuardia in the spring, 2002 semester.
5. Qtd. in Horner (1996, 209).

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