

Subcommittee Notes: Writing, Information & Creativity

Writing & Information

Based upon anecdotal reports as well as an internal study conducted by CAS, we believe that the basic writing requirements of WR100 and WR150 are effective and should be preserved as we rethink general education at BU. We would also stress, however, that writing should be a skill honed and developed throughout the undergraduate years. This means that faculty should be expected not only to incorporate writing into their coursework, but also to evaluate that writing critically, both in terms of content and craft.

We are particularly enthusiastic about the notion that good writing is intrinsically connected to substance. It is our understanding that the writing assignments in WR150 are structured around in-depth research on a specific topic. Whether our notions about this course are accurate or not, we endorse the concept of linking writing to the passionate and thorough exploration of narrowly defined subjects.

Along these lines, when possible, we endorse integrating the fundamental writing and research courses into major disciplines. Prof. Abrams has already done this with success in the Chemistry Department. In such cases, a course can serve as both a writing course and as another step in a departmental major. Such a practice is an efficient use of credits, in that it satisfies a general education goal without impeding progress in a major.

Creativity

We make a distinction between art and creativity. All art is creative, but not all creativity is art. The ability to think creatively is a practical skill that is fundamental to any discipline. Taking inspiration from Dave Blakely's presentation on teamwork and design thinking, we conceived of a fundamental course that would require students to work creatively in a team environment to solve a design problem. Some examples of problems that might be assigned to student teams:

- Design an affordable in-ear monitor system for musicians. When musicians perform on stage with amplification, they need a monitor system that allows them to hear themselves. Conventional monitor speakers produce feedback. In-ear monitor systems that send the music back to the musicians via low-power radio transmission are very expensive— well beyond the budget of the casual performer. In an era when there are apps for everything and walkie-talkies can be purchased for the price of a haircut, what stands in the way of making an affordable in-ear monitor system?
- Come up with a press kit to market the release of a Blu-Ray edition of *Birth of a Nation*. D.W. Griffith's 1915 feature transformed the way stories were told through the motion picture medium. It also played a role in reestablishing the Ku Klux Klan as movement (the film was based on a novel titled *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*). How can the film be made relevant to 21st Century audiences?
- Images from the Hubble space telescope are initially nothing more than a string of numbers. Images are created from these data using algorithms. Color is assigned

according to a complex system that takes into account various differentials such as density and distance. Is this system optimal, or is there a more informative or more scientifically sound way to interpret the Hubble data in visual terms?

All the members of our subcommittee were present at a meeting with students from across the university on April 10th. A central theme of that discussion was the desire for more cross-pollination between students from different disciplines. With that aim in mind— and with the understanding that solving the challenges posed in this course requires interdisciplinary skills— we propose that enrollment in the sections of this course operate on a quota system, with a set number of seats reserved for students from various colleges. This will insure that each section of the course encompasses students from across the University.

Art & Music

Quite apart from inculcating skills in creative problem-solving, our group recognized the value of an aesthetic education. We make the case for two courses: one in the fundamentals of art history and another in the history of music. We are not averse to something as basic and old-fashioned as survey courses in these subjects. Of course we recognize the challenge of compressing all of world culture into two semesters, but at same time, this offers a way to present a synthetic vision of human experience that is next to impossible in other fields. Furthermore, in the area of music in particular, a survey would offer ample opportunities for experiential learning while taking advantage of Boston's world-class music scene.

Media Literacy

We believe that all students should take a course that develops skills in communicating through what can broadly be termed “screen-based media.” Those skills include—

- Designing content (including written content) for the Web.
- Designing multi-media presentations. This would cover both PowerPoint type presentations but also more sophisticated tools such as animated infographics.
- Synthesizing and presenting complex data through visual media.
- Being able to critique both overt and hidden messages in multi-media content.

We envision this course as a hands-on, workshop experience, where students are asked to respond to a series of challenges. For example, they might be asked to design a single, static graphic that represents the leading causes of death— delineated by age and gender— in 18th Century Boston.

The purpose of this course is not simply to give students skills in design and presentation but to grapple with the challenges of synthesizing and communicating information using today's audio-visual based media tools.

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