

Christopher Wetzel and Hailey Chalboub Democratic Education at Stonehill College Classroom Innovation Grant

Project Description:

In taking seriously Stonehill College's mission to educate "the whole person so that each ... graduate thinks, acts, and leads with courage toward the creation of a more just and compassionate world," we often wonder about both the causes and potential solutions to widespread intellectual contentment. The so-called "Stonehill stare" is routinely explained away on the basis of politeness, privilege, or academic indifference. In some ways, these assertions are supported by data about how students allocate their time. According to the senior exit survey for the class of 2011, 66 percent of seniors spent less than 10 hours per week preparing for class, 74 percent spent less than two hours per week talking with professors, and 77 percent spent less than two hours per week reading for pleasure. Where is the sense of intellectual wonder, curiosity, and passion for knowledge? We have been contemplating these questions for the last year as we participated in the Community-Based Learning Summer Institute to redesign Introduction to Sociology, completed a SURE project analyzing cultures of student action on college campuses, and reflected on our own experiences in the classroom. Based on our desire not just to understand but address these challenges, we propose creating a pilot democratic education program where students will offer peer-taught courses in Spring 2013 called SPES, which is Latin for "hope" and is taken from the College's motto "lux et spes." Stonehill College's Faculty Senate voted unanimously to approve the pilot program on October 3.

Democratic education programs give students more ownership over their education through student-led, student-taught courses. They are a vehicle for students to share their passions, experience, and wisdom with their peers in ways that aren't always possible in a traditional classroom setting. We think this philosophy of engagement and truly student-centered learning is particularly well reflected in the mission statement of Tufts University's Experimental College, the oldest democratic education program in the United States:

"Through its innovative, interactive, and interdisciplinary programs, the Experimental College strives to enrich the intellectual experience of undergraduates at Tufts. These programs serve as an incubator for new ideas about teaching, learning, and curriculum. They also aim to engage students actively in the design and delivery of new academic initiatives, often in collaboration with faculty. Shared governance, collaborative learning, and involvement with the community are hallmarks of the ExCollege."

Stonehill's transition to a credit-model presents a great opportunity to pursue new approaches to learning that can better engage the entire community. We have examined various models of democratic education at other institutions and focused on emulating programs which offer a rigorous academic focus featuring peer-to-peer education where students are responsible for creating and teaching innovative classes.

Here is our planned timeline through Spring 2013 when we will introduce SPES:

June-August 2012: Research democratic education models at other colleges and informational meetings at Stonehill

June 2012: Meet with director of Tufts' Experimental College

July 26, 2012: Meet with Stonehill students to discuss democratic education

August 15, 2012: Deadline for instructors to submit course ideas

September 15, 2012: Deadline for submission of instructor applications

October 3, 2012: Meeting with Faculty Senate to approve pilot

October-December 2012: Meetings with SPES instructors for syllabus design, course activities, and teaching reflections

December 9, 2012: SPES open house for students

January 2013: SPES courses begin

Benefit to the Stonehill Community:

SPES promises multiple lasting benefits for the community. For faculty, SPES offers a different method to envision how to facilitate truly student-centered classrooms. We can begin to identify areas of student interest that may not be adequately addressed in the curriculum as well as strategies to foster a love of learning. For students, SPES is a chance to explore areas of great personal interest. Teaching a course could allow students to further develop SURE research, thesis projects, or capstone projects. We also envision that involvement in SPES would lead students to demand more from their education. Based on our comparative research, it is also clear that graduate schools and employers ask about experiences in democratic education, to this would prepare them for admission to graduate programs or future jobs.

Community Outreach Plan:

We propose undertaking three types of community outreach. First, near the end of Spring 2013 we will organize a campus-wide SPES "open house," giving each course a chance to share what they learned with the community. We envision these interactive presentations focusing on the specific course content, how we connect these questions to Stonehill, and about the impact of democratic education. This will also serve as an opportunity to begin recruiting the next cohort of SPES instructors. Second, we also plan to organize a breakout session for Academic Development Day in April 2013 to discuss some of the lessons learned with faculty members. In this session we would concentrate on better identifying and utilizing student experiences in the classroom as well as how SPES courses can signal areas for potential curricular and pedagogical growth. Third, we will also write a piece about SPES for the Center for Teaching and Learning's "Class Notes" blog. In this note we would like to emphasize avenues for faculty and staff to become involved with the program.

Budget: Based on 8 SPES courses in Spring 2013:

\$75 per course for materials \$600

\$50 per course for mentoring \$400

TOTAL: \$1,000

The materials budget would be used to provide support for instructors in implementing their courses, whether this would be for photocopies, items for class use, or a modest gift for guest speakers. The mentoring budget would be used in a similar manner to the Center for Teaching and Learning's faculty partnerships, where the mentor and instructor could meet over coffee or a meal to discuss SPES and pedagogical issues.

Bibliography (required for SOTL Research Grant)

Syllabus (optional) -- can also be emailed as an attachment to Patricia Neagle (pneagle@stonehill.edu)

Pedagogy Seminar:

In Spring 2013, the pedagogy seminar for SPES instructors will be offered as SOC 352 B: Topics in Sociology: Democratic Education. The course, co-facilitated by Chris Wetzel and Hailey Chalhoub, will offer instructors support and guidance about the classroom experience.

For readings we will use selections from the following texts:

Curzan, Anne and Lisa Damour (2000), *First Day to Final Grade: A Graduate Student's Guide to Teaching*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Freire, Paulo (2000), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

McKeachie, Wilbert J. and Marilla Svinicki (2006), *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage.

Our weekly seminar meeting will be used to critically reflect on the teaching experience and share knowledge about best practices. We will also invite guest speakers including Stacy Grooters to talk about teaching evaluation, Liza Talusan to talk about teaching outside of the classroom, Robyn Gittleman from Tufts to talk about the history of democratic education and ExCollege, and SPES faculty mentors to talk about their experiences as teachers and learners. Throughout the semester SPES instructors will keep detailed teaching journals and prepare a summative research paper analyzing their experiences and the lessons.

SPES Courses:

The eight courses will be offered as sections of APL 090: SPES.

1. Chemistry of the Cupcake: Stephanie Murray
2. Designing for the iPad: Michelle Curtis
3. Geopolitics: Anthony Borzano
4. Myths and Realities: Current Topics in Science: Gabrielle Cole and Patrick Cabral
5. Nature and Sustainability: Chris Astephen, Daniel Gardiner, and Jessica Mardo
6. Nerd Culture: Laura Dzgoeva and Samantha Smith
7. Statistics in Baseball: Matt Tardiff
8. Stereotypes and Multicultural Encounters: Kristen Kennedy, Noah Dunn, and Prithak Chowdhury