

2011-2012 Seminar Participants

"Teaching Reading and Writing of Philosophy to Non-majors"

Prof. Brendan O'Sullivan

Project Description:

I will start with my project description and then provide the rationale and benefit. The issue that I want to focus on is how to best teach the reading and writing of philosophy to non-majors. After three semesters of teaching GP100 and PHIL221 (which satisfies the moral inquiry requirement), I have noted a sizable gap between what I expect of my students by way of critical reading and writing and what they are able (willing?) to deliver. I want to develop a set of assignments, discussions, and presentations that can be integrated into GP100 or my moral inquiry course that will close this gap.

I anticipate needing to address several questions to successfully complete this project. First, how can I motivate non-majors to care about their critical reading and writing skills? Students in these required philosophy courses, especially GP100, come in without any familiarity with philosophy or philosophical writing. On the whole, they are not convinced that they need to work on critical reading and writing and not convinced of its value for them. What is the best way (or at least a good way) to demonstrate the value of these skills, both for their college and professional careers?

Other questions that will need to be addressed including the following:

How can I better articulate what critical reading and writing are, so that the students have a clear idea of what they need to be doing?

How do I encourage critical reading without generating a ton of busywork, either for them or for me?

What sorts of low stakes writing should be assigned? How should it be evaluated?

How many formal writing assignments should be assigned?

How can I best balance the need for skills instruction with the desire to communicate definite content?

How many days of instruction should be devoted to skills instruction?

Two-thirds of my teaching occurs in required classes predominately peopled by non-majors. As I see it, much of the value of these courses lies in developing critical thinking skills. I do not hold out much hope that in five years, my students will remember the details of (say) Kant's argument for the categorical imperative. I do hope, however, that they will continue to exercise the critical thinking skills acquired as they studied Kant. In light of these facts, developing an intentional strategy for skills instruction in these courses is an integral part of my becoming a more effective teacher at Stonehill College.

Benefits:

Besides the evident benefit to me as a teacher, I foresee potential benefits to several constituencies on campus. First, my students would benefit from my improved instruction of critical thinking skills. Second, my departmental colleagues could benefit from the lessons that I learn, for they too do most of their teaching to non-majors and confront similar issues. The ideal would be if I could to develop a relatively discrete set of strategies that requires no more than a few course periods to implement. This would maximize the chances of my colleagues actually using them. Finally, as our wider curriculum moves towards emphasizing skills, my project could prove useful to non-departmental colleagues who teach in the general education program.

Community Outreach Plans:

I expect to share my project findings in three ways. First, I would make a presentation to my department (assuming the permission of my chair). Second, I would look to publish my findings to the wider Stonehill Community through a blog entry to 'Class Notes' (assuming permission of Stacy Grooters). Finally, I would explore the possibility of making presentations to other departments that teach in the general education program.