

Notes from “Talking About Teaching” session:
“Two Recent Experiments with Teaching and Learning”
April 7, 2010

Note: The comments here are meant to capture key points of discussion and presentation plus the general tenor of the exchange.

Discussants: Elly Donkin, Karen Koehler, Becky Miller.

Karen Koehler and Becky Miller opened the session with remarks about how and why the “50’s” class was pulled together. The idea for such a course was already brewing on campus. The Re-Rad group had established the desire for students to do an independent project in the first year. Karen had served on the retention committee the year before, which had been given the serious charge to look at how creating a curriculum that allowed for independent work in Division I, how academic and social spheres could be combined, and how Div I, Div II and Div III students might be more integrated. The faculty from the 1950s class decided to target the third semester, when students were in their second year but had not yet filed Division II (what we began to refer to as Division 1.5). Karen Koehler, Becky Miller, and Rachel Rubenstein began to craft a course that would be a combination of a large lecture class on the cultural history of the 1950s in America, accompanied by very small groups of students working on extensive research papers. In the Spring of 2009, Michele Hardesty came on board with special expertise and experience on the teaching of writing. Two distinct classes were established: HACU 240 and HACU 241.

HACU 240 was a lecture and discussion course, with a film study component attached. Becky’s area was music, Karen Koehler’s was art history, John Drabinsky’s was philosophy, and Michele’s was literature. The discussion groups were led by Div III “teaching fellows” who were trained to take on this responsibility in the spring and summer of 2009. Some of the Thursday night films were shown at the Amherst Cinema, which seized the opportunity to create a small film series around the 1950’s youth culture.

HACU 241 was a small writing seminar for 4-6 students, who wrote and critiqued one another’s papers—*independent papers developed over the course of the semester.* Credit was given to students for two courses – so a total of 50 seats were taken up, while faculty were given credit for teaching only one course. Students had a total of 6 hours of class time. The workload was very heavy for faculty, who were overseeing both courses and doing intensive writing review.

Karen said that the main book students were using, *The Craft of Research*, was outstanding and students raved about it. She mentioned that the course had been patterned after the Oxbridge model, of large lecture courses followed by small writing tutorials. Students had to learn that research is complicated – that they cannot rely on unvetted sources such as Google on the Internet. Each small writing seminar was a community, where ideas were challenged, and the editing experience was a trusted one. The first big lecture was an overview, where all faculty members spoke. Then Michele did a cultural overview. Karen was the last lecturer, which was unfortunate as students were already writing papers by that point. She made the decision in her class that there

would be no incompletes given. In some cases, a student's last paper was evaluated as a work in progress, in lieu of a final paper.

In some respects, a large lecture class challenges the culture of Hampshire. If this course, or a similar one, is offered again, ways to incorporate discussion could be set up. Any topic would work. The topic is really a vessel for holding topics together. Students wanted a tighter frame. They especially enjoyed the panels, and would like more faculty from outside of the course to present lectures in future. The themes of mobility, containment, improvisation and conformity, offered a framework for the overall view of the decade.

The teaching fellows were given workshops in writing practices, and material to read over the summer months. They were given a stipend for this time and responsibility, and in the fall were brought into the class as TAs for advanced educational activity credit. The small seminars were held in the residence halls, so there would be a living-learning component and the presence of academic activities in the social spaces of the college could be emphasized.

In the future, the faculty recommend that the he Div III students needed more training in the subject matter and in how to ask questions that they received. The students in the class expected a greater breadth of knowledge from them. There were complaints of too much assigned reading, so over time the load was reduced. There did not seem to be enough interest in working independently outside of the lecture class, which translated into a lack of curiosity about the readings and material on the part of the third semester students.

Becky Miller spoke more about HACU 241, the independent writing seminar. Students received two credits for this course. The students who had been entering Div III did not have very good writing skills. In fact, they were floundering. The intent of the writing seminar was to improve writing skills before they got to DIV III. For the course, students had one semester to conceive, research and write a 25-30-page research paper. They met for one and a half hours each week in their small groups. First, they talked about ideas and topics, and then spent time in the library doing preliminary research. Deb Gorman gave a series of writing workshops with an overview of the process, which was excellent. The students also met with Rachel Beckwith who walked them through the various search engines over the Internet and in the library.

Students in each group weighed in on the choices of the others regarding their topic. (This process varied between each of the faculty members' sections, as each approached the section in her own style.) With her groups, Becky spent about a week working on outlining, because students did not seem to understand how to use this skill. She covered the concepts of primary research – including the use of tape-recorded interviews, archival research, and newspapers and other media. Secondary resources were also reviewed as was the use of proper citation and cautions about plagiarism. These were extremely valuable in giving students guidelines about these critical matters in writing research papers.

Each group was assigned a deadline for submitting the various drafts of their papers. They turned in ten pages at a time, which were then downloaded and edited by the other students in the group. Discussion followed in class, and students learned how to critically frame comments. Then came rewriting, writing, and more reading of the work of the other students. Papers were exchanged using email or through the course website. In editing, students learned when to leave things out (“shoot the puppy”) in order to make a stronger case. They learned to distinguish between asserting something and demonstrating with evidence.

In the end, 25-30 page papers emerged. Students learned that coming up with a solid argument is hard as is independent work in general. According to Karen, two thirds of the way through the semester, some of her students realized that they needed to do more research in order to bolster their arguments, so they went back to the library.

In Becky’s class, everyone finished. She is not clear about whether students *knew* they had been successful in learning how to write research papers. They had been encouraged to keep in mind the “so what” question, e.g. what is the main point/argument of this paper. In all, Becky believes that her 12 students did gain enormously from the experience; she’s curious to see how they do as they enter Division III given this background.

The Div III students needed more training than they received. The younger students expected a greater breadth of knowledge from them. There was too much reading assigned, so over time the load was reduced. There did not seem to be enough curiosity about the readings and material on the part of the third semester students.

Elly Donkin spoke about the Mentored Independent Study course, which she and Colin took on as an overload because nobody else had volunteered and they were interested to see how it would work. The course represents a paradigm shift: you are teaching Div IIIs how to teach and mentor, rather than teaching your usual material. Colin and Elly sent out emails to 3rd semester Div I students in good standing (lists were provided by CASA), and a different email to filing Div IIIs. They took on instructing the Div IIIs on how to mentor younger students, and encouraged them to support the newer students in a wide range of projects. There was a huge diversity of topics. Twenty-three Div I students responded, and eleven Div IIIs. Some of the Div IIIs said they would consider taking more than one, and a few said they would take several. A “speed dating” exercise was created – in which Div Is and Div IIIs interviewed one another for three minutes to see if they had common interests and discuss what shape a project might take. Later in the course, the Div I students learned to turn this project idea into a pitch in order to sell their project, as if they were speaking to a prospective Div II Chair.

Elly and Colin met weekly with the Div III mentors, and every other week with the Div I and Div IIIs combined. Early in the semester, Colin invited Hampshire graduates to come in and talk about how their independent studies at Hampshire had given them the foundation for Div III, and subsequently for what they are doing now in their lives. In the weekly meetings with the Div III mentors, the main topic of discussion was to find out how it was going with the mentee, and what kinds of strategies were going to be useful for students who were having trouble with

projects. The Div IIIs were very helpful to one another, giving moral support and practical advice. At the end of the semester, there were two long days of presentations by the younger students – 20-30 minutes each, in East Lecture Hall. A few of the presentations were wobbly, but some of them were remarkable. Only one student got an incomplete. Judging from the self-evaluations and the projects themselves, all the Div Is seemed to have learned a great deal. They exhibited joy and pride in their work. Many had reached a low point over the course of the project, and then surfaced with renewed focus. The Div IIIs felt a great sense of investment in their mentees. Occasionally, in the evaluations, the Div IIIs tended to speak more about process than content, but these were revised at Elly and Colin's request. Elly hopes that a version of the MIS course could be lodged in each school, so that the range of topics would be narrower, and it would be easier to get Div Is and Div IIIs working together in roughly the same area of study.

Jill Lewis mentioned that this course involved a great leap of courage on the part of the founding faculty members, and that because they were not entirely in control at various points, the students feel that and seem to rally more because of that.

There was some discussion of how to move forward with this type of collaborative course. Since most Div III students have not had the experience of crashing and burning, they would really benefit from a semester of this intensive writing and critique. Maybe the 50s course could be offered in two consecutive semesters, and then the workload would be more manageable.

Will Ryan was not able to participate in the panel, but contributed his own notes about The Writing Program for TAs. They follow here.

- Deb, Elly and I host a bi-weekly lunch training session with approximately 15 TAs from various tutorials (and intro to writing). Each year we have had each school represented.
- Our goal is to teach them to be good writing counselors - how to intervene and consult with students, in other words, not how to mark papers.
- Curriculum includes:
 - 1) an introductory session with a discussion of our own writing processes (so students can begin to think about how they might use their own experience in helping others).
 - 2) then a series of 4 sessions that focus on different kinds of first-year writing assignments - a critical analysis; a synthesis; a critical review of a primary research based science paper; a personal essay. (We use actual student papers (with the names erased, of course).
 - 3) a session on helping students with longer papers.
 - 4) a session on intervening with writing anxiety/procrastination (on the part of students) and figuring out how to keep boundaries so they can do their own work and still help out.

5) class party!

In all this makes 8 "sessions," and as you can see they sort of shadow the demands of the semester.

These are set up as seminars, with everyone chiming in, and we all look forward to them. In the first year, we had other faculty come in and comment too (Eva, Jim Wald, Lynne Hanley), but everyone was so mad busy this last fall, we didn't want to impose on folks' time.

We (the Writing Program) paid for half the lunches, and Eva chipped in for the other half.

I send out an email to faculty doing tutorials in August about names of TAs. If anyone wants to just send me the name of a TA. now (doesn't have to be a tutorial; just first year), that is fine. Laura Sizer and I have already spoken about her course.