

FACULTY SELF-EVALUATION

Changing Life: Reading the Intersections of Gender, Race, Biology, and Literature

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On the space provided below, please comment your experience proposing and teaching a course with the GCWS.

(You might consider: reflections on team-teaching; whether or how this experience or course has impacted your teaching or research; thoughts on the course development process, classroom and facilities, or GCWS office support; suggestions for future teaching teams; whether or not you would teach with the GCWS again, etc.)

The evaluations are a tool designed to help the GCWS assess areas of strength and areas of improvement so that we can continually improve our course offerings and our process of course development and faculty support. The evaluations are shared with the GCWS Curriculum Committee and in some cases, our Board of Directors.

- I am deeply indebted to GCWS for yet another opportunity to co-teach a Project-Based Learning (PBL) course about about Gender, Race, Science and Technology and to the co-teachers for jumping in and trying out the model that I have carried over from one offering to the next.
- I do not plan to apply to co-teach for GCWS again—five times is a good run—but, from the perspective both of stimulating thought in readers of this evaluation and taking stock myself for when I teach PBL-style graduate courses again, what follows are some notes about a) my specific goals for this offering of a PBL course, and b) what worked well (and thus would be continued) [“Plus”] and some notes on what needs further development before one could say it is working well [“Delta”].

Major goals

1. Have students maintain a Private Learning Journal and by the end “formulate a personal plan for ongoing inquiry that troubles the boundaries of knowledge production in the academy and sciences, especially as they concern race and gender.” (Pursuit of this goal was foreshadowed in a conference presentation last fall, <http://ptaylor.wikispaces.umb.edu/4S16>.)

This first goal derived from a wish that students took the lead in making sense for themselves of why, at least initially in a PBL course, students feel some discomfort. In other words, they would not wait for the instructors to prove or justify the value of the PBL approach to learning. My feeling is that there were some students, including those who withdrew during the semester, who did not take the lead.

2. Learn new angles of interpretation of science through literature that concerns science.

*Deep reading of texts in the manner typical of classes in the teacher proved difficult to marry with the PBL approach. Having a co-instructor whose discipline is literature and was open to experiment led me into a new area from me, namely, Cli-Fi, that is climate related fiction, into an interesting experiment for the last class based on Vivian Paley's book *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, and into reading a lot of stories and some novels.*

3. Understand how another faculty member learns the PBL approach.

Mary tells me that she has become an apostle of the PBL approach, so something has worked. However, when we found ourselves pressed for time, I took the lead in planning class time. So, there is more work to be done if I am going to become someone who can mentor others into leading PBL classes.

Notes on some other features of the course

- Each time I teach the GCWS course I learn so much and, even more so, have many threads exposed for further learning through the unique mix of students, and through working with a co-teacher who has a different background and experience from me. I also find myself curious about what doesn't get talked about or delved into as much as I expected with any given cohort. (This time, for example, as was the case in 2015, the questions and theory from Science and Technology Studies weren't grabbed onto by many students.)
- **Blog:** Almost everything that was generated in the course, including audio recordings (but not including initial submissions of assignments and instructor comments), has been posted to a private wordpress blog, to which all participants continue to have access after the course is over. The blog does add up to a resource for the future. In particular, we are in the process of extracting the resources and references that students annotated in their blog posts and editing them into a separate PDF for everyone in the course. At the same time, the blog signified to many students that postings could be informal. This was not our intention and, I think, makes it less likely for students to view it as a resource to return to. To police the guidelines is to take time away from the learning interactions in class or office hours. This conundrum was present in 2015 and needs further thought.
- **Remote access:** One UMB student took the class from a distance, joining class over google hangout. Occasionally other students, when they were ill or away for a conference, joined this way as well. Providing this access to students did require set-up time, attention, and tech problem-solving efforts from me, but I understood that when giving permission to the student to register.
- **Booklet:** Making guidelines explicit and putting them into a long course booklet that was printed seems to provide a resource for students, yet allow anyone who wanted to cut to the chase of what they had to do in the next week to feel like there was too much information. I added postits on my course booklet so I could quickly get to the most relevant page, which was the project we were working on for the given three weeks. But I did not see other students do this. More coaching is necessary. (The alternative is a short syllabus accompanied by separate handouts for each project, but this more conventional approach leaves much of the instructors' thinking opaque, so it is not one I favor.)
- **Focal reading:** Following a suggestion made by students in previous years, a common "focal" reading was assigned each week and discussed in the first 30 minutes of class. I would not continue this experiment, for two reasons: it signified that this was the homework for the class when, in fact, the most important work between class sessions was that the students spend several hours inquiring in relation to the PBL projects; and, in this spirit, the time might be better used in having students share what they were learning from the reading each of them was doing as part of the PBL inquiry.
- **Consulting with students:** Students did not make enough use of us as coaches or consultants or informants for their projects. One week we passed around a sign-up sheet for conferences with us during the spring break week. In future classes I would do the same, thus making meetings with instructors more of an opt-out rather than opt-in option.
- **Modeling:** I wanted to experience something of what the students were experiencing so I began my own Private Learning Journal and undertook my own inquiry for projects and presentations.

Around the middle of the semester, however, I stopped being able to keep this up. (Perhaps this was like the experience of students.) I do think it is valuable for instructors to model what they're asking students to do and so I would try to post more of my personal learning journal if this was part of a future course.

Other notes on items to continue

- * An initial class that makes explicit the pedagogy that runs through the whole course and begins the process of students making connections with each other.
- * Invite "alums" of the course back for the first session or two to help ease students into the unusual dynamics of the course.
- * Foster explicit discussion and reflection on the unusual learning dynamics of the course.
- * Carry over annotated bibliography entries and, with permission, projects from previous years to serve as resources and models for current year.
- * Establish a routine of reflection/synthesis/feedback in the last 10 minutes of every class.
- * Bring visitors from afar into presentation sessions via google hangout. (This was done only once this semester.)

Notes on items to develop identified in 2015, not carried out well in 2017, but still worth developing

- * In-class and video tutorials on blogging to make it a valuable guide and resource for all students (not only the tech-comfortable ones) and to counter undesired effects of using a blog (e.g., inconcise writing).
 - * Turn requirement of office hour sessions to discuss PBL projects into a routine for all students.
 - * Guidelines for each assignment summarized in the flow of the syllabus, albeit with reminder that the aim is for the student to pull each assignment in a direction that connects with their interests.
 - * Shorter presentations, esp. final presentations, allowing more time for discussion and not going over the end-of-class.
 - * More word-of-mouth publicity to recruit additional students with the expectation that a fraction will withdraw once they appreciate that the course requires an equal commitment to their required courses, thesis preparation, etc. Employ "alums" from the natural sciences and from historical fields to try to recruit more students from those realms.
 - * Require group work in one of the instructor-designed cases (so as to fill out the students' experience of the range of approaches to teaching using PBL cases).
- * Additional items that emerge after digesting the experience of the course and evaluations from this spring (<http://grst.wikispaces.umb.edu/Evaluations>).