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Engaging first-year students through a shared multi-disciplinary, creativity requirement. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Even though interest in embedding creativity into tertiary curricula has grown internationally, little scholarship exists about implementation strategies or the efficacy of linking creativity pedagogies to first-year experience programs. This practice report describes how Suffolk University in Boston, Massachusetts, inserted a new creativity requirement for first-year students as a part of curriculum reform in the College of Arts and Sciences and in the Sawyer Business School in spite of considerable resistance. It will demonstrate the uniqueness of the approach and suggest anticipated outcomes in advance of a comprehensive assessment process now underway.

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Introduction and Relationship of Topic to Existing Knowledge

This practice report examines how Suffolk University in Boston, Massachusetts, a private liberal arts institution, developed and implemented a unique prototype for embedding creativity into its shared General Education curriculum for first-year students. The report builds on several areas of study: the internationally recognised value of embedding creativity requirements in higher education curricula (Jackson, 2006; Marquis & Henderson, 2015; Marquis & Vajoczki, 2012; McWilliam, 2008; Pink, 2005); agreement in scholarly and trade literature about the crucial role that creativity plays in a rapidly changing global economy (Catmull & Wallace, 2015; Kelly & Kelly, 2013; McWilliam, 2008); interest in assessing creativity across disciplines (Daly, Mosyjowski, Oprea, Huang-Saad, & Seifert, 2016; Marquis & Henderson, 2015; Marquis & Vajoczki, 2012); and the increasing importance ascribed to a robust first-year experience (FYE) (Erickson, Peters, Strommer, 2006; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). This report suggests that linking a creativity requirement to FYE programs has special value.

Context and Motivation for the First-Year Creativity Initiative

Small, urban, private, liberal arts institutions in the U.S. like Suffolk University were affected by the 2008 global recession and the projected steep demographic declines in college-aged students. In response to these challenges facing so many private U.S. institutions, the University introduced a four-year strategic plan in 2012. The plan called for a move away from siloed administrative and operational systems and toward "… a comprehensive approach to support student learning through a common core" (L. Bruenjes, personal communication, January 5, 2018). Soon thereafter, the Provost's Office formed a new General Education Task Force with representatives from the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) and the Sawyer Business School (SBS) to develop a new shared curriculum for both schools.

CAS faculty initially resisted the mandate, skeptical that a productive collaboration was possible given the differences in content, style, and structure between the two schools. One of the chief obstacles to a shared requirement was that courses in SBS were based on a three-credit system; most CAS courses were offered for four credits. Additionally, SBS faculty were critical of required courses in CAS, and departments in both schools recoiled at adding any new requirement to their already credit-heavy majors. Eventually, faculty loyal to their endangered institution realised that the ongoing threat of enrollment decline could be mitigated through progressive curriculum reform and the development of a robust FYE program.

Implementing the Creativity Initiative

In the early months of the newly formed General Education Task Force, SBS and CAS engaged in their own intensive meetings on curriculum reform. Each body researched and debated these questions: *What do students in 2020 need to know*, and *what should they be able to do when they graduate*? To find out, each school conducted extensive research in scholarly and trade literature, reviewed accrediting standards, and surveyed their faculties. When the Task Force addressed these questions, they were surprised to discover that both bodies had reached similar conclusions independently (L. Levesque, personal communication, December 28, 2017). As a result, the Task Force established the following learning goals that would become the foundation of the new shared General Education curriculum: Critical Thinking and Logical Analysis; Social, Cultural, and Global

Perspectives; Versatile Communication and Professional Development; and Creativity and Dynamic Innovation.

About the same time, Theatre Department Professor, Rickard Chambers, delivered a lecture about the spread of STEM to STEAM[1] education to a multi-disciplinary group of CAS faculty. It was a pivotal moment that led to the establishment of a CAS working group committed to developing courses for the new creativity learning goal. SBS leaders on the General Education Task Force were encouraged to meet with their colleagues in CAS to collaborate on building a new Creativity and Innovation (CI) requirement from the ground up targeting first-year students. The newly expanded working group discovered unexpected similarities between the two schools. For example, several SBS courses emphasised learning from failure, divergent thinking, and ideation as essential habits of successful entrepreneurs—traits that are also crucial in the visual, performing, and literary arts.

Since we were developing something new, we were eager to learn about other models. Stanford University's "Creative Expression" requirement, one of eight "Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing," was formative (Stanford University Undergraduate Catalog, 2017). We were also inspired by a University of Michigan conference that studied the importance of "makers" courses to boost retention and achievement for high risk students (Arts Engine National Network, 2012). This validated our conviction that all CI courses should focus on making and doing not only because they are appropriate pedagogies for teaching creativity, but also because "makers" courses promote the kind of active learning prized by FYE programs.

A study of nearly 15 U.S. tertiary institutions that embed creativity in their curricula (*see Appendix*) revealed the distinctiveness of our approach: most other creativity requirements were based on the selection of existing courses drawn from their performing, visual arts, and humanities departments. This practice is based on the myth that creativity is the exclusive province of artists (Cropley, 2014; Glăveanu, 2014). Our multi-disciplinary approach asserted that creativity is best understood as a problem-solving process that may be deconstructed, taught, and assessed across disciplines (Baillie, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, 2006; Daly, et al., 2016; Jackson, 2006; Kelley & Kelley, 2013; Marquis & Henderson, 2015; Marquis & Vajoczki, 2012; Pink, 2005; Sawyer, 2013). Consequently, we aggressively recruited faculty across domains for our initiative.

Our research also suggested that Suffolk's new creativity requirement could and should embrace both discipline-general and discipline-specific content (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, 2006; Daly, et al., 2016; Jackson, 2006; Marquis & Henderson, 2015; Marquis & Vajoczki, 2012; Plucker & Beghetto, 2004). This, too, made our creativity requirement unique.

We found no evidence that other tertiary institutions had creativity courses that shared a clear definition of creativity, a required syllabus template, as well as shared learning goals and objectives as we had done at Suffolk. Nor could we find mandates that faculty employ alternatives to the lecture format to create a supportive, collaborative environment where risk, resiliency, divergent thinking, and iterative processes are valued and employed to engage students.

[1] STEM to STEAM is a K-12 pedagogical movement to integrate the "Arts" into traditional Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) curricula.

CAS and SBS faculty argued about what form the discipline-specific content of CI should take. While SBS contended that CI courses should look like one of their existing requirements for first-year business students, CAS faculty countered that the best way to motivate students was to provide faculty with the freedom to develop courses drawn from their academic interests. The CAS Seminar for Freshmen requirement provided a useful prototype in line with research that argues that students are more likely to be engaged if they can choose from specialised courses that pique their academic interests (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006).

After almost two years of debate, disagreements between CAS and SBS faculty were resolved. Departments were given the flexibility to enable students to complete the CI requirement in their second year if necessary, and CAS and SBS Deans agreed on three-credits for all CI courses without compromising faculty compensation or workload.

One issue that initially divided CAS faculty, but had broad support among committee members, was the efficacy of linking the new creativity requirement to the FYE.

The FYE Connection

For over 40 years tertiary institutions have been looking critically at how to effectively challenge and support first-year students inside and outside of the classroom. The U.S. has two national centers to support first-year programs and most tertiary institutions have some form of Freshman Seminar (Erickson, Peters & Strommer, 2006). Compelling data suggests that FYE programs are a powerful tool to boost recruitment and retention rates – issues of increasing concern after 2008 (Upcraft, et al., 2005; Greenfield, et al., 2013).

We were surprised to discover that Suffolk University was alone in linking its creativity requirements to the FYE. SBS Associate Dean Laurie Levesque (L. Levesque, personal communication, December 28, 2017) observed that first-year students are:

> more rigid, more scheduled, less able to handle feedback than ever before. We hoped that a first-year creativity course could loosen them up, get them more comfortable to handle risk and failure, and keep going … and … we wanted them to care about the content of their courses.

Moreover, our research suggested that creativity courses should focus on the *process* of creative problem solving rather than on material that requires advanced knowledge, high level critical thinking, or skills that take years to master. This focus on the applied study of discipline-specific content and the preference for active learning strategies over a lecture format was well suited to the FYE (McWilliam, 2007, 2008).

Courses as different as 'The End of Global Poverty', 'Comics & Co', 'Theatre at Work', or 'Emergency Management: From 9/11 to The Marathon Bombing', all have creative problem solving in common.

Impact and Early Outcomes

Since the pilot of the CI requirement in 2013, CAS and SBS faculty in 20 departments have generated 45 new courses. Twenty-two courses originated in Art & Design, English, and Theatre, which we assumed would be a natural fit for the requirement. However, it is important to note that faculty in SBS, Biology, Chemistry, Government, History, Philosophy, Physics, and Sociology developed 20 other courses. The CI initiative continues to generate more and more interest from diverse faculty. The 2017/2018 Call for Proposals spawned nine new courses, a 25 per cent increase over the previous year. Five of the eight new courses embrace discipline-specific subject matter outside of the Arts and Humanities.

Significance and Conclusion

Now in its fourth year, our CI initiative for first-year students has become a robust component of the shared General Education curriculum. Its multi-disciplinary approach has encouraged faculty in the natural and social sciences and diverse business school faculty to embrace the shared criteria in ways that were inconceivable five years ago. The ever-growing number of CI courses in disciplines outside the arts has emboldened our multi-disciplinary approach, and the CI Steering Committee continues to find ways to encourage faculty to develop new courses in as many domains as possible. Seven new course proposals from five different departments for the 2018/2019 academic year is a measure of our ongoing success and implies enthusiasm for the CI initiative across domains. Given the greater diversity of course options, we anticipate that students will continue to find specialised course content that interests them. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the initiative is that more faculty across domains are integrating pedagogies that encourage student engagement in their course designs. The steering committee's review of all CI syllabi ensures that these pedagogies are built into every CI course. Syllabi that do not fulfill this criterion are either remediated or rejected. We are also learning that CI faculty are increasingly adapting these pedagogies into the upper level courses in their majors.

The next phase of our work is to build a nimble and comprehensive assessment tool for our CI courses. We also hope to develop a process for scaffolding creativity throughout the four-year experience. Through assessment, we anticipate that students will perceive their CI courses have made them more confident learners. We expect that they will report in a formal assessment process (as they have already done in their course evaluations) that creative practice tools have broad application to academic study across disciplines, to the workplace, and to everyday life.

Moreover, we believe that these first-year courses promote student engagement with the university community – a goal of all successful FYE programs. Our shared criteria and current scholarship will guide our efforts to develop a credible assessment tool that we hope will inspire others who are considering embedding creativity into their curriculum for years to come.

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