

FYS Instructor Reflection Sessions:

Key Themes for New FYS Instructors at UWSP

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The following summary notes were compiled from two “reflection sessions” held with past, present, and future First Year Seminar (FYS) instructors at UWSP. While these notes have been distilled and digested by James Sage (jsage@uwsp.edu), and therefore represent only his perspective, nonetheless they are intended to be reflective of the main points raised at the two reflection sessions. Any inaccuracies (or bits of sarcasm) are entirely James’s responsibility. Despite this, if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions about these notes, please feel free to send James a quick message.

Designing, Scheduling, and Teaching

Be Flexible, Focus on Process & Engagement

Don’t plan too much; integrate some “wiggle room” in the schedule for discussions that emerge organically.

Incorporate an “ice-breaker” immediately; avoid the temptation to “talk through the syllabus” in your first encounter with the students. Instead, get the students interacting with each other right away (that is, before you accidentally set the expectation that YOU, the instructor, will be delivering content and THEIR role is to sit and listen passively). Form groups (and rotate them often during the semester). Have them write something. Anything. Get them writing right away.

As you design your FYS, remember to focus on SKILLS / PROCESS / ENGAGEMENT... not content. Using “backward design” principles (begin with learning outcomes, identify the types of assignments that will utilize these, plan the learning activities to support the assignments, etc.) might be a good idea. This is one way to frame the course during the design process, and it helps to integrate and give meaning to the various learning experiences that you plan from week to week.

Be Patient:

It is *not* your responsibility to ensure that each student FULLY ACHIEVES each learning outcome in 15 weeks! After all, the six (6) FYS learning outcomes are quite ambitious. Select 1 or 2 learning outcomes that seem approachable (i.e., low-hanging fruit) and focus on those. Design the course to “address” an additional 1 or 2 learning outcomes. “Touching upon” the remaining learning outcomes is advisable. Remember: students will have 7+ additional semesters to receive the rest of their education.

In other words, your FYS class is NOT the only opportunity they will have to meet the learning outcomes! In this sense, set up the six learning outcomes as larger goals for their education as a whole. Exposing your students to the very idea that there are skills associated with effective time management, note-taking, and test-taking is valuable even if you don’t offer your students the opportunity to fully

develop in these areas. The same is true for critical thinking and information literacy. Even if you spend some quality time on these, students will still require practice beyond your class. Remember: it's only their first semester in college, and they will be refining and updating these skills well beyond your FYS (you know, as their brains continue to mature).

Personal Transformations:

You will learn a lot about first year students, including: their varied levels of preparation for college; their lack of understanding about college (vocabulary, culture, expectations, organizational structure, etc.); their flexibility about how the course proceeds (more so, perhaps, than experienced students); their (fairly narrow) sense of expectations for the college experience (what's the value of college, what they hope to get out of the experience, etc.). Many are "first generation" college students (parents didn't attend/finish college), and show up with the basic idea that going to college is a way to get a good job. They are right about that (getting a good job), but you'll need to be patient with them as you help them to see that college is WAY more important than getting a good job.

You will find yourself astounded by what they DON'T know: What's a syllabus? What are office hours? You'll also come to see that the way you teach your other 100-level courses will be transformed: you'll see that even in your "freshman" course, many sophomores and juniors are the ones who are participating and driving the conversation forward. Or maybe it's those wonderful "non-traditional" students who have life experience to share with the class, and aren't shy about participating. Either way, it'll be a spooky realization, once you come face-to-face with 20 first-semester students. Yikes!

If all goes well, you'll feel frustrated, incompetent, and defeated. This is normal. Welcome to trying something new! Seriously, though: give yourself permission to HAVE FUN with this experience, to make mistakes, to experiment with new approaches, and don't take things too seriously. Will an assignment implode? Yes! Will the class go off on a tangent for a week? Most likely. Will students show resistance to an idea or activity? Absolutely!

But remember, this FYS course is an adventure of ideas, an opportunity to introduce students to their entire college experience and to share your passion with them. At first, they might not share your passion, but give them the opportunity to see for themselves the excitement involved with what you've built your career around. Oh, and bring treats. That's always a hit.

Components of the FYS Course:

In addition to delivering (some) content that you are passionate about, some FYS instructors have suggested that you integrate a course component based on developing an "academic plan" or "educational plan" of some kind. This type of assignment could be narrative-based, or it could include a 2-semester projection of coursework (or both). At first, students might focus on course selection aspect of the assignment, which is understandable (it's the most pressing issue during registration). Remember: even this (course selection) is an opportunity for your students to think carefully and engage in systematic decision-making. Eventually, of course, it would be nice to move into larger issues: What's the point of a college education? How do I think about selecting a major? What kinds of skills, abilities,

and attitudes are expected in different majors? How do I know what I'm capable of achieving? What kind of life do I want to assemble for myself?

These will be new questions for them, so be patient as they make this transition into adulthood. Yes, technically, they are adults: they are 18 years old and they can vote and they can join the Army. But, their brains are still developing, and Mom and Dad are still providing an immense amount of guidance. So, even something as (seemingly) mundane as selecting courses is a new skill for your FYS students.

This academic/educational plan would also be the kind of assignment that would allow students to understand the value of a liberal education, including its comprehensive value in their lives: as they finish their major, as they pursue a career, as they start families, as they become responsible citizens. This kind of assignment might also be "timed" to coincide with advising and registering for spring semester classes.

Key idea: their brains still have training wheels. Before treating them like adults, they need a bit of practice thinking for themselves, weighing consequences, identifying goals/values, and making decisions based on evidence.

Learning Outcomes & Modules:

While some learning outcomes will be easily integrated throughout the semester (probably those learning outcomes you are most comfortable addressing), others might be included as individual "modules" or "topics" (a dedicated day or two on note-taking or study skills or information literacy). This doesn't mean that these topics aren't valuable, it might just mean that you aren't sure how to integrate them into the rest of the course as seamlessly as the others. In this sense, your FYS course might feel a bit "chunky" at times. That's okay. It's a first draft. You might utilize some pre-existing materials (YouTube videos, handouts you borrow from others, etc.). The main idea is to get students to engage with the skill or ability, to support them in exploring new ideas (it's okay not to know everything), and to think about new things in new (safe, supportive) ways. Remember the training wheels on their brains.

Assignments & Grading:

FYS instructors also reported that it was important to think about the various assignments that you'll be asking students to complete, the relative "weight" of each assignment (when calculating final grades), and also what your grading policies will be. Will every assignment be graded? Are some assignments worth more? Are some assignments graded based on completeness (merely "Yes" or "No")? Are some graded "0" or "1" or "2" or "3" (to reflect some modest amount of effort/engagement with the process). Are some assignments graded according to specific criteria, and given a letter grade?

Give this some thought, in other words, especially if you are asking students to write a journal, develop an academic plan for themselves, or interview their roommate. Some of these assignments are fairly personal or subjective, and therefore it might be hard to assign grades. Other assignments might be valuable for engaging the student in the process itself, not necessarily the outcome produced.

Building Connections: To Each Other, To the Campus, To the Community

In addition to getting your students talking with each other right away, build in activities and assignments that get them to engage each other (and you!) on deeper issues *as a learning community*. Building this sense of a learning community is important for a number of related issues: creating a safe place to learn; respecting other points of view; inviting participation from everyone; maintaining an environment that is open and inclusive.

In this respect, you might also consider utilizing upper-class students to assist with small group work, reflection sessions, or off-campus events. This might also be a good time to think about integrating some experiential learning opportunities.

In terms of what the campus has to offer, you might consider scheduling a library visit or a meeting with an Instructional Librarian. Some FYS instructors have sent their students on a scavenger hunt (locating and visiting various student service centers on campus).

Finally, some FYS instructors required that students attend a variety of different kinds of events/activities: academic presentations, creative/artistic performances, off-campus events, cultural events in the community, local government meetings, athletic events, and/or various student organizations (including student government). Not only does this give your students the opportunity to experience these events and write about them, they can summarize what they learned in presentations to each other and to the class. It also gives them a sense of the full experience that college has to offer. If you are lucky, they will begin to see that going to college is way more than getting a diploma. It's also about liberating their brains from training wheels. But don't be disappointed if they haven't reached full enlightenment by the end of the semester. Try to feel confident that you have, in fact, set them on a challenging path of exploration that will last the rest of their lives.

FYS Resources

A Sharepoint FYS Teaching site has been developed here:

<https://campus.uwsp.edu/sites/acadaff/collaboration/fys-teaching/SitePages/Home.aspx>

This site has a variety of resources for you to use, including: example syllabi, FYS teaching and course design resources, FYS workshop materials, FYS course portfolios, as well as assessment resources. Feel free to browse the various folders and documents. If there's something specific you are looking for, or if you have trouble accessing the Sharepoint site, please contact James Sage (jsage@uwsp.edu, 715-346-4625).