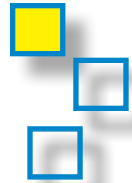


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Message to Freshmen: *Let's Start with Kafka and Darwin*

FOR THE PAST two years, Bard College has asked first-year students to read works by Kafka and Darwin over the summer. These texts then become subjects of analysis when the students arrive on campus in August for an intensive three-week program of reading and writing before the fall semester begins. Let me explain the thinking behind this approach.

The idea of assigning summer readings to students entering college has three justifications. First, since American high school students usually take more of a vacation from serious thinking and study during the summer months than is warranted, readings remind them that college promises to be demanding and difficult and that it would therefore behoove them to stay in some sort of intellectual shape. This exercise is especially welcome because once high school seniors learn what college they will attend, they often cease to study seriously so that the final months of high school are wasted.

The second reason for summer readings is that most colleges have a program of general education that complements the normal process of choosing a major. Summer readings are often designed to introduce students to that general education program, and readings often become the first subjects of paper writing and class discussion.

The third reason for summer readings is somewhat superficial. Institutions have learned over time that first impressions are sometimes the most lasting. Some research has indicated that students decide to remain at an institution or to transfer based on attitudes they form during the first six weeks of the first year. Whether or not this is true, during the lull between the end of high school and the first semester of college, institutions use summer readings to signal their aspirations and to help shape students' initial impressions.

In the case of Bard College, to some extent all three reasons inform our decision to assign summer readings to incoming first-year students. We have staked out a clear position against the conventional high school curriculum in the sense that we believe high school is not sufficiently rigorous and takes too long. Bard College at Simon's Rock, which admits students after tenth grade, was the first so-called early college in the United States. Bard also runs two public schools in New York City---Bard High School

Early College in Manhattan and in Queens---that accept students after the eighth grade in a program of study that allows them to earn both the high school diploma and the Associate of Arts degree within four years.

Bard also uses the summer readings to remind entering students of the idealism it believes should be prevalent among students and faculty, an idealism about the task of learning, and the satisfaction that comes from a rigorous engagement in interpretation, analysis, and the formulation of one's own considered opinions.

Faith in human reason and its inherent link to liberty and justice is an eighteenth-century conviction held by the founders of this republic, who wished its citizens to be capable of distinguishing between fact and fiction, truth and lies. The sooner the connection between education and liberty is strengthened on the level of higher education the better. From the start, the summer before the first year, Bard students confront the opportunity to develop the skills that our Founding Fathers wished the ideal citizen to have.

Our summer readings point our students to the habits of mind---analysis and argument, inquiry and inference, skepticism and belief---that will enable them to distinguish appearance from reality, sense from nonsense. Bard gives first-year students the opportunity to apply these skills in two intensive three-week programs that lie outside the traditional semester calendar and transcend curricular requirements.. The first, the Language and Thinking Program, engages students in close reading, interpretation, and writing and takes place in August before the fall semester starts. The second is the new Citizen Science Program. Designed to help first-year students encounter and engage scientific questions with confidence, the program takes place in January between the fall and spring semesters and focuses on a single issue, infectious disease.

Bard's required summer readings most closely reflect the intent and purpose of its general education sequence, the First-Year Seminar. A two-semester, credit-bearing course of required readings that mark significant developments in political, ethical, and scientific thought, the First-Year Seminar demands a great deal of analytic reading and writing. In the opinion of our faculty, first-year students should be introduced to that

which they would not ordinarily encounter in any other context. In most American high schools the choice of texts is highly regulated by politicians and bureaucrats, and rarely do students encounter readings with serious philosophical content. Even more discouraging in terms of the high school curriculum, educators are afraid to ask students to read classic texts closely, to struggle with difficult and unfamiliar ideas.

In Bard's view, a general education program should offset this deficiency by asking students to read texts from worlds different from their own, particularly worlds from which they are separated in time. In the fall semester of the First-Year Seminar we ask students to read, among other texts, the Book of Genesis, the Aeneid, and selections from The Divine Comedy as well as the writings of Galileo. In the second semester, readings include Rousseau's "Second Discourse," Frankenstein, and Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents as well as Levi's The Periodic Table. A full description of the First-Year Seminar and complete list of readings can be accessed here.

Not only the ideas, but also the rhetoric and language of the First-Year Seminar readings suggest a relationship between author and reader of which many students are unaware. We read the Aeneid before The Divine Comedy because we know that Dante presumed his readers would have been familiar with Virgil's epic. We read the "Second Discourse" before Frankenstein because readers of Mary Shelley's novel would have understood its engagement with Rousseau's arguments about the nature of the human.

see **FRESHMAN**, Page 2

Fall Mid Term Week: October 11
Fall Break: October 14-15
Faculty Meeting: October 27

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Modular Assignments: Learning Episodes for Diverse Students

ON OUR CAMPUS, we have growing numbers of nontraditional students. The demands on their time out of class are numerous—work, family, and military obligations. It is my job to meet them where they can learn and benefit.

One tool that I have used in a general education biology course is a suite of modules that allow creativity, encourage initiative, and make use of analysis and writing. These modules are more or less traditional assignments, but in shorter formats. I have designed them with two facts in mind: students have other demands on their time regardless of my memories of the way things used to be in my undergraduate days, and the digital, virtual world of computing doesn't solve all workload problems or learning objectives for either the students or myself.

My goals have changed—they aren't as lofty as they once were. I recognize now that I am not training the next cohort of professionals in a survey course. I want students to see the relevance of topics they may disdain or find confusing. It would be nice if after they finish my class, they could read articles in the newspaper (or online) and understand how that information relates

to them personally, locally, or even globally. Perhaps they'll simply have a better shot at understanding their physician, if someday the doc sits on the front of her desk, leans in with nonverbal attentiveness, and hits them with, "We need to talk about your test results. The histologist found evidence of a melanoma in your biopsy."

Almost any traditional assignment can be modularized. For example, I have used one that links a student's journal record of dietary intake, interpretation of the FDA nutrition labels, and the biologically important macromolecules. With that, I was able to take advantage of timely information on military "First Strike" rations or even the daily diet of Olympic gold medal swimmer Michael Phelps, for comparison to daily intakes. Another module ties in the study of genetics to family genealogy and human genetic variations or disorders. Another, coordinated with a photosynthesis lab, relates data in absorbance spectral graphs to environmental research in remote sensing.

As these examples illustrate, I now accomplish course goals by engaging the students in more pointed, brief units that fit the time demands of their diverse lives.

FRESHMAN

Continuing from Page 1

The task of a general education program is to open new vistas for undergraduates overwhelmed by the contemporary density, rapidity, and ephemeral nature of information. Part of this task is to recover memory and distinguish continuities between the distant and unfamiliar past and the present. Another aspect is to strengthen the links between the world of literature and the world of science. In the First-Year Seminar we analyze the substance of Galileo's defense of Copernican science in his "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," but we also study its arts of persuasion. When we read *The Periodic Table*, we examine how the author, a survivor of Auschwitz, discovered in chemical reactions a way to understand the causes and effects of extreme tyranny and sadism.

For these reasons, for the last two years we have asked incoming first-year students to read two texts in the summer before they arrive at Bard—Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and the fourth chapter of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, "Natural Selection." On some level, students will find something familiar about these summer readings as well as something counterintuitive and obscure. A simplified version of what takes place in Kafka's short

story has some presence in popular culture, and at a minimum most students will have heard someone use the word "Kafkaesque." A direct encounter with the writing of this remarkable German-speaking Jew from Prague who was reluctant to have his writings published can be inspiring precisely because of the tension between image, reception, and textual reality that characterizes both *The Metamorphosis* and Kafka's life.

The disjunction between image and reality could not be more pronounced than in the case of Charles Darwin. The claims of no other thinker or scientist, with the possible exception of Einstein, have been so mangled and distorted in the popular imagination. Somehow every citizen thinks he or she knows what Darwin thought without actually having read his writings. Direct engagement with Darwin's work not only makes the character and significance of modern biology more apparent, exciting, and vital, but the brilliance and subtlety of Darwin's thought quickly dispel the distortions that dominate scientific journalism in the popular media.

Colleges must counter the experience of conventional high school education in the United States, where learning is little more than a standardized test-driven chore with utilitarian benefits. In college, students should discover that most of the important writings

Modules like these also show students that what they study in courses, even required courses not necessarily in their fields, is relevant to their everyday lives.

I have heard the youngest of our university students referred to as the "episode generation." That may be an apt description, but it doesn't fit the diverse student population I teach. Some of them thrive on epic dramas, while others prefer miniseries, and still others love their sitcoms. With a number of modules that I have used through the years, getting each to engage in a way that maintains his or her interest involves creation of something like an episode of learning. Comparisons, technical writing, journaling, even value calls on issues involving course information can successfully yield reasonably savvy students. As with episodes online or on TV, these modules also allow for a certain amount of "product placement"—the course content we hope for them to learn.

Rolland Fraser is an assistant professor in the Biology and Environmental Health Department at Missouri Southern State University.

Rolland Fraser, Modular Assignments: Learning Episodes for Diverse Students, Faculty Focus, September 10, 2010, [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/modular-assignments-learning-episodes-for-diverse-students/], September 10, 2010

and discoveries they will study were not generated for their benefit, but rather came into being in order to illuminate and improve life. It is precisely the connection between learning and living that justifies the life of the mind and makes study and inquiry a treasured form of human activity and among the most rewarding.

This belief cannot be preached; it can only be experienced. What better mechanism to set this experience in motion than assigning common readings in the summer? Students who encounter vaguely familiar texts like *The Metamorphosis* or "Natural Selection" will discover on entering college, through the intervention of teaching and the exchange of ideas with peers, that there is so much more to learn than they had expected about texts and subjects with which they believed they were familiar. With this realization, they embark on a journey of discovery that will strengthen their confidence in themselves and the enterprise of serious learning.

Leon Botstein, Message to Freshmen: Let's Start with Kafka and Darwin, Minding the Campus, June 10, 2010, [http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2010/06/message_to_freshmen_lets_start.html#more], September 10, 2010