

First-Year Seminars Inspire Faculty Collaboration

They are there to learn strategies for writing good papers. There's a primer on using Bowdoin's extensive paper and electronic library holdings. There are tips on critical reading and oral presentation, caveats on plagiarism. There's even advice on dealing with a poor grade on that first college paper.

It sounds like a group of new students being initiated into the rigors of Bowdoin's academic program. But it's not. It is actually a group of Bowdoin professors who have come together for an intensive workshop in best practices for teaching first-year seminars.

Over the course of a day in late August 2004, the assembly of nearly 30 faculty members share tips and anecdotes on teaching what may be the most ambitious courses within the college curriculum—small seminars designed to ground first-year students in the fundamentals of research, academic writing, public speaking, and critical reading and analysis.

"There is the expectation that this one course does everything," says Allen Wells, Roger Howell, Jr. Professor of History and coordinator of the first-year seminar program. "But of course no one class can be successful in every one of these areas. What these workshops do is to introduce faculty to the special challenges of teaching seminars and give them some hands-on advice from people who have been through it."

There are 41 first-year seminar classes being offered during the 2004–2005 academic year, including the program's first seminar cluster—a two-semester sequence devoted to the theme *Modernity and Its Discontents*—which will be taught by several faculty members sharing the same syllabus.

First-year seminars first appeared in Bowdoin's catalog in 1983 and have been popular ever since. Although they are not yet required (they will become one of Bowdoin's distribution requirements beginning Fall 2005), fully 95 percent of first-year students take seminar classes, which often feature a multidisciplinary approach. They are popular, says Wells, because "they are often eclectic and have appealing titles to them. They're very interesting courses. First-years also hear from upperclassmen, deans, and their advisors that these seminars will really help them succeed at Bowdoin."

This year, for instance, students may study *Living Spaces* with Linda Docherty; *Seekers' Lives* with Kidder Smith; or *The Pursuit of Peace* with Allen Springer.



Bowdoin faculty from left: Lisa Hicks (Dance), Paul Baure (Chemistry), and Kathleen O'Connor (Writing Project), share insights on teaching freshman seminars.

“Seminars are often linked to professors’ research areas,” notes Wells, “so they’re very passionate about what they’re teaching. For a student this can be a tremendous boon. From the faculty’s perspective, they’re important courses because they could inspire students to take additional courses or even become a major or minor in that subject.”

Because seminars are intrinsically writing-intensive, offerings have historically fallen within humanities and social science departments—notably, English, government, history, art history, and religion. “One of the challenges as we go forward,” says Wells, “is to encourage more departments to participate in the program.”

Madeline Msall, associate professor of physics and astronomy, is one of several professors pioneering non-traditional first-year seminars. Her fall 2004 seminar, entitled, Science Fiction, Science Fact, gives non-science students an accessible means for understanding basic scientific principles. “Some people sign up for my science seminar because they hate my subject,” she quipped at the faculty workshop. “They can get their requirement in a humanities-based way and hope it will be ‘easier’ than any other science course.”

To break the ice, Msall told her colleagues, she asks seminar students to share their earliest understandings of science, a world of Slinkys™ and baking-soda volcanoes. “Toys and games are my fallback,” she said. “It’s safe and personal; it gets conversation started. Then you can move into more sophisticated material.”

If first-year seminars introduce students to a rigorous complement of academic and intellectual skills, they present the faculty who teach them an equally daunting challenge: a scant semester to build those skills among students of divergent abilities, learning styles, and interests.

“There are those students who are on fire at the beginning of the semester,” noted Connie Chiang, visiting assistant professor of history and environmental studies. “By mid-term their energy has dipped; it’s hard to keep the level of engagement throughout the semester. And some students are a lot more tentative about communicating orally with their peers than others.”

“What I’ve learned is that less is more,” responded Wells, who has taught first-year seminars for the past 16 years. “You’re not going to have them fully formed by the end of the semester. It’s first steps. The first time we teach these seminars, we try to do too much and load up with assignments. Then we learn to pull it back.”

A host of faculty and academic support staff appeared throughout the workshop to offer advice and strategies for making first-year seminars successful. Kathleen O’Connor, director of the Writing Project, offered a cornucopia of tips and exercises for encouraging and improving student writing. Reference Librarian Carr Ross and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Nancy Jennings

“Often I ask a student who has read someone else’s paper what they learned, what they want to know more about. It’s not so much criticism; it’s about learning how others write and learning about the topic.”

discussed matters of academic honesty and plagiarism—and the importance of developing sound research skills early in students' careers.

There also were sessions on developing students' oral presentation and discussion skills, and information on bringing more technological resources into the classroom.

But perhaps the most insightful advice emerged as faculty members shared anecdotal lessons learned in the trenches of teaching:

"Seminars can be a very scary course for first-years," noted Wells. "They're used to getting A's on their high school work. When they get their first C back on a paper it can be a crushing experience. You have to give them the opportunity to rewrite, to recover, to learn. It's one of the worst teaching experiences to have to hand that first paper back."

Because seminars are designed to build confidence as well as skills, class participation is limited to approximately 16 students. Barriers can come down quickly, said Wells, when students share work in small groups and develop peer-review partnerships.

Visiting Assistant Professor Julie McGee noted that peer-reviewed papers can promote respectful intellectual exchange among students: "Often I ask a student who has read someone else's paper what they learned, what they want to know more about. It's not so much criticism; it's about learning how others write and learning about the topic."

Madeline Msall said she takes peer-review a step further: "I also like peer reviews when students give a draft to a peer who then rewrites the paper," she said. "The original student writes two pages and the peer turns it into a one-page paper. They have to discuss what's most important. It's like a scientific collaboration."

"What we have at Bowdoin often is a loose framework which gives faculty members the autonomy they need to incorporate their own pedagogical approaches," noted Wells, as faculty members streamed out of the workshop and into the afternoon sunlight. "The workshop is a vehicle for sharing how we address some of the challenges, and hashing out the fine points.

"Ultimately, as with much of pedagogy, it comes down to trial and error. If I can come away with two or three sound strategies from the workshop and apply them to my own seminars, I'm pleased."

Visit www.bowdoin.edu/news for more stories about faculty research, performances, and exhibitions.