

# Designing & Evaluating a First Year Seminar: A Pilot Curricular Initiative

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## Introduction

In the transition to college, the freshman experience presents a singular opportunity to structure and support students' academic and interpersonal integration into a new and often challenging environment (Arnett & Tanner 2006; Burt & Masten 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The significance of this transitional moment in relation to academic success and psychosocial adjustment has been documented extensively (Barefoot 2005; Upcraft & Gardner 1989), and the steady expansion of dedicated first year programs underlines the importance of this early college experience in predicting student success (Tobolowsky, 2005).

This study describes the implementation and evaluation of a pilot First Year Seminar class designed as a first step in the development of a new first year program. The seminar will eventually represent the third required component of the college's first year curriculum, complementing the existing writing and oral communication programs. The goal of the seminar will be to support students in their transition to the Emerson community, to demonstrate the particular integration of Arts and Communication with the Liberal Arts, that is central to an Emerson education and, to build foundational practical, creative, and critical thinking skills. More broadly, the project aimed to create a methodology that would support the development and refinement of a strong first year program, support pedagogy in this and other classes across the campus, and model the value of outcome-oriented and evidence-based course development and evaluation.

The study addressed three broad questions:

1. *How well did students perform in the class against learning outcomes?*
2. *What was their experience of the class?*
3. *Were there individual factors that changed student experience of, or performance in, the class?*

This summary will focus largely on student experience but will also describe the development and refinement of the evaluation process, the next steps in the analysis process and preliminary recommendations for future iterations of the course.

## The Structure of the Class

The FYS Pilot Initiative extended over two semesters (Spring and Fall 2014) and included a cohort of second-semester freshmen in Phase I ( $n = 52$ ), and a cohort of first semester freshmen in Phase II ( $n = 47$ ). Students who selected the class through the freshmen registration process were invited to participate in the study. Students

were placed in one of three course sections – each with a dedicated faculty member. Numbers across sections were roughly equivalent.

The class was team-taught and led by faculty from three disciplines – Psychology, Biology and Literary Criticism. Visiting faculty from departments across campus also contributed to the program. The interdisciplinary approach was adopted to reflect the goals of the class – to demonstrate the link between the majors and the liberal arts and to model a critical, creative thinking. The class was organized around a large lecture/small section structure and met three times per week. The week began with a large class meeting, including all students from all three sections and all three faculty. Students met in their sections with their designated professors for the other two classes.

## Procedure

The aim of the study was to capture a comprehensive account of student and faculty, experience of the class. The evaluation process was modeled on Astin's (1991) *Input-Environment-Output* (I-E-O) approach to assessment, collecting information student characteristics (*input*); their experience of the class (*environment*); and their performance over the course of the semester (*output*) (Swing, 2004). The assessment process was also designed to include qualitative and quantitative responses, from a range of sources, as follows:

- *Beginning of Semester: Student Characteristics* - demographics; standardized test scores; academic beliefs and attitudes (e.g. Academic Motivation; Need for Cognition; Self-Efficacy)
- *Mid-Semester – Student Experience*: In-Class Survey
- *End-of-Semester: Student Performance & Experience* - assignment grades (rubrics-based and aligned with SLO's); academic beliefs and attitudes; teaching/course evaluations; peer-led focus group to capture student experience of the class (the focus group was replaced by an End-of-Semester Experience Survey for the second phase of the study).

Each data source included scale-based quantitative ratings and open-ended responses, and provided information on 5 aspects of the course experience: Course Content (texts; class activities; assignments); Class Structure (team-teaching; large class/section arrangement); Thematic/Theoretical Coherence; Course Organization; and Instructor (teaching style/interpersonal interaction).

**Phase I: Student Experience Data – Response Rates:** *Mid-Semester Survey (89%); End-of-Semester Focus Groups (67%); Teaching/Course Evaluations (64%):*

**Phase II: Student Experience Data – Response Rates:** *Mid-Semester Survey (81%); End-of-Semester Survey (79%); Teaching/Course Evaluations (96%).*

## Phase I: Results

**Phase I: Spring Semester Participants:** subjects in this phase were second semester, Freshmen (n = 52; average age: 18; range 17–22). 35% of the group were male and 65% female. The group was predominantly white, non-Hispanic (73%). 10% were Asian American; 2% African American; 10% Hispanic; and 2% multi-racial. A large percentage of the group's parents (88%) had at least one parent who had a bachelor's degree or above. All the students were enrolled full-time and reflected a broad range of majors. 12% of the group were international students and 6% had transferred from another college. A third of the group reported having either a psychological disorder (17%), a learning difficulty (8%) or medical condition (8%).

[Phase I: Academic Attitudes and Beliefs: to be reviewed in the second round of analysis]

### **Phase I: Student Experience: Headline Observations:**

**Course Content: Positives, included poetry, conversation, storytelling, reflections on identity, variety of mediums/media and perspectives. Negatives focused on relevance/difficulty/theme and organization of course texts and assignments.**

**Course Structure: Students loved the small section meetings but found the large classes less engaging. They appreciated the exposure to different perspectives in the large class, team-taught, format, but found the classroom experience less engaging and less productive.**

**Thematic/Theoretical Coherence: One of the most consistent student comments related to the "Coming of Age" theme. Students felt the course was 'mis-labeled' and not sufficiently reflective of the personal nature growth and development. They were engaged by the theme itself, and individual topics, but could not connect the "theoretical dots".**

**Course Organization: The course was seen as reasonably organized - but with some issues related to the design and maintenance of the course management system (Canvas) and the timing and clarity of assignments.**

**Instructor: Instructors were seen as responsive, enthusiastic, caring, respectful, strong facilitators, and good listeners. However, students asked for more specific and more timely feedback. Instructors' strengths in the small sections did not appear to fully translate into the large-class environment.**

## Phase I: Review and Refinement

### **Course Refinements – Based on Phase I Data:**

- + Simplified and streamlined student learning outcomes (SLO's) to include a self-regulation component.
- + Re-designed class assignments, adding more structured grading rubrics directly linked to SLO's
- + Clarified assignment instruction and organization.

- + Introduced an explicit analysis framework to reinforce a systematic and critical approach to texts
- + Directly addressed the theme of coming-of-age in the presentation and discussion of course texts.
- + Developed a final project to give students an opportunity to introduce their own coming-of-age text as a subject for analysis.

## Phase II: Results

**Phase II: Fall Semester Participants:** subjects in this phase were second semester Freshmen (n = 47; age range 18 – 20). 34% of the group were male and 66% female. In terms of ethnicity, the group was predominantly white, non-Hispanic – 70%; 13% Asian American; 2% Native American; 4% Mexican American; 2% Puerto Rican; and 6% multi-racial). A large percentage of the group’s parents (91%) had at least one parent who had a bachelor’s degree or above. All students were enrolled full-time and reflected a broad range of majors. 7% of the group were international student. More than a third of the group reported having either a psychological disorder (16%), a learning difficulty (13%) or medical condition (9%).

### **Phase II: Student Experience Headline Observations:**

**Course Content:** Positives again included class discussion (sections); poetry, storytelling and variety of approach. Course theme was less of an issue; Negatives - difficulty/style of texts; and ambiguity in assignment wording.

**Course Structure:** Again, students loved the small section meetings and found the large classes less engaging. They appreciated the disciplinary perspectives, but wanted more interaction with all three professors, more collaboration, and more active learning/engagement in the large class.

**Thematic/Theoretical Coherence:** The “Coming of Age” theme was less problematic. Students continued to be engaged by the topic, but wanted more exploration of the connection of theme to texts, and a clearer “definition” of the topic as a framework for discussion and analysis.

**Course Organization:** The course was generally seen as reasonably organized, but there continued to be problems with timing, scheduling, clarity, and “juggling multiple” assignments. And, although improved, students felt Canvas could be better organized.

**Instructor:** Again, instructors were seen as respectful knowledgeable and strong facilitators, including “creating a safe environment for discussion”. Usefulness/timeliness of feedback was a concern, but students found faculty to be more effective in creating a connection to the class theme.

## Phase I & II: Review & Recommendations

- + Continue to review and refine SLO’s in relation to foundations program goals and college-wide outcomes.
- + Refine assignments/rubrics in alignment with SLO’s.
- + Clarify assignment instruction, organization and access.

- + Continue to refine the Phase II analysis framework but include explicit scaffolding of critical thinking to build a bridge between high school and college-level work.
- + Review texts for coherence, relevance and purpose.
- + Consider teaching critical thinking in a disciplinary context but with reference to an inter-disciplinary community.
- + Consider structural re-organization from dispersed team-teaching model, to collaborative faculty communities/hubs, with shared outcomes, pedagogy, curricular/assignment structure and with planned community interaction.
- + Work on the mechanics of large-class instruction to incorporate more active learning strategies *or...*
- + Review the relative value of the large-class versus small section formats.

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