

PERFORMING DIVERSITY (First Year Seminar)
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With Randy Olivo and Lyndsey Rawson, students from spring 2003

Excerpts from First Year Program Philosophy and Goals Statement (2002-2003):

First-Year colleges provide ideal environments for fostering the complex intellectual and social skills that are at the heart of a liberal education. The First-Year Program (FYP)/First-Year Seminars (FYS) play a significant part in the development of students' abilities to communicate effectively and to use writing and speaking to help them to become critical readers of a variety of texts.

First-Year Seminars

A First-Year Seminar will be approved if students:

- a) are given diverse and repeated opportunities to write and speak, including opportunities to benefit from detailed formative feedback from instructors and peers
- b) are asked to assess adequately the research requirements of a particular assignment and to seek out efficiently the means of meeting those requirements
- c) are given diverse opportunities to incorporate appropriate illustrative or persuasive detail in oral and written communication
- d) are required to complete at least one and no more than two projects comprising some combination of formal and informal oral, written, and research activities that demonstrate a satisfactory grasp of the program's communication goals
- e) are instructed in and held responsible for the ethical use of sources
- f) are required to assemble all their work in a portfolio that includes a written assessment of that work, and to submit the completed portfolio to their faculty for review

Description information by which students selected Performing Diversity:

Using research, creative writing, and personal experiences, this seminar will explore various issues of multiculturalism and diversity on the St. Lawrence campus and in America today. We will engage a variety of texts to investigate the links between identity and oppression by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. In addition to a significant research project, the class will create performance texts about their research topic areas (combining video presentations and live performance work) and will present a selected group of these projects to the campus community. To be a part of this seminar, students do not need prior experience in video production or acting/performance, but they must have a willingness to get involved with exploring both as part of the work of this class.

From Performing Diversity course syllabus, spring 2003):

We will spend the semester investigating issues of multiculturalism and diversity at St. Lawrence, on college campuses, and in American society. We will read commentaries on relevant issues and the ways in which the media teach us about diversity, as well as specific articles on current issues of multiculturalism and diversity on college campuses. You will engage in research about various aspects of diversity in America, and you will teach each other about the results of your research as well as creating and performing theatrical scenes and monologues based on your research materials. You will also be dealing with media representations of diversity by developing and creating your own image-based presentations on issues of diversity at on campus or in your own life. This is a highly participatory seminar and active engagement with the issues is expected of all seminar students. Participation will include in-class writings and/or other exercises, discussion participation (both classroom and electronic), rehearsal participation, and peer review activities (in or outside of class).

REQUIREMENTS/ASSIGMENTS

(Overview only - detailed assignment guideline handouts will be provided throughout the semester. These are not sequential; we may have several projects going at the same time.)

Image, Film, and Performance Response Journal – 10%

During the semester, you will have the chance to see numerous films, videos, gallery exhibits, and guest performances or speakers on issues of diversity. Each of you will keep an interactive electronic journal in response to at least five events of your choice. Entries will be submitted at various times during the semester, depending on the schedule of events.

Images of Diversity – 15%

This project will be the conceptualization (including an outline and storyboard), creation (casting/shooting/editing), and public showing of a creative video response to issues of diversity on the campus of St. Lawrence University or in your previous experience. Formats could include interviews with others, performance of self, documentary footage, created scenes, image collages with voiceovers, etc. All students will be given access to camera and editing equipment as well as training on video editing. For students not comfortable with the video technology after the training sessions, alternative formats for image presentation could include PowerPoint or traditional art media. If you choose the video option, you will be responsible for purchasing your own videotapes. If you use traditional media, you will be responsible for buying your own art supplies. The final stage of this assignment will be a written self-evaluation of your personal process during the development of the project, including both the challenges and the successes you experienced.

Electronic Discussion Board– 5% for general participation; 5% for leading discussion

All students will regularly be expected to participate in an electronic discussion board created for the purpose of extending classroom discussion outside the class meeting times. Each week, two students will work collaboratively as discussion leaders for issues of their choice. Guidelines will be handed out early in the semester for both participation in general and leading discussions.

We will be doing research throughout the semester on various issues of diversity, possibly including class, race/ethnicity, gender/sexual orientation, culture/language, religious differences, and differing abilities. The next group of assignments will all be focused on the particular area of research in which you choose to focus.

Research Proposal and Precis of Sources – 10%

Each of you will conduct a review of the literature pertinent to your selected research topic and will prepare precis of a minimum of three research sources, including one popular/alternative press, one scholarly/academic article, and one Internet source. In addition, you will hand in a concise and focused research proposal identifying key themes and arguments you expect to be exploring in your work with this topic.

Teaching Your Research – 15%

Based on personal interests, you will be divided into teams to be responsible for teaching elements of your research to other class members. Each team will work in collaboration with the instructor to decide on the best method of presentation for your research materials, and each team will have full responsibility for one 90-minute class period. The presentation may include lectures, short readings from our text to be assigned by the group in advance, discussion guide handouts with questions/issues for the larger group to address, or any other materials or techniques you wish to use in your presentation to the class. Each team will also administer a brief quiz on their materials to the class at the end of the presentations. The final element in this project will be a written summary of the research elements you included in the presentation, your personal evaluation of the successes and failures of the oral presentation of the research, and your evaluation of the class quizzes as a reflection of the level of comprehension you were able to impart to your audience.

Script Development Oral Progress Report – 5%

You will identify key issues and themes you have explored in your research and discuss ways in which you believe these issues/themes will make good theatrical performances in a brief individual oral

presentation to the entire class. Depending on your progress at this point, you may even share bits of your proposed performance text with the class at this time.

Script of Scene (5%) and Monologue (5%) for Final Performance – total 10%

In preparation for the creation of the performance scripts, we will study a play which was created based on a specific historical event, read out loud other examples of dramatizing life experiences or current events, and engage in some script writing exercises in class. Each student will then create one multiple character scene and one monologue based in their own research findings. The scenes will be read and discussed in class. Monologues will undergo an extensive process of revision for public performance and will become part of larger group performance pieces for the final oral assignment.

Final Public Performance of Monologue – 10%

Students will spend some time in improvisational exercises and ensemble acting techniques as preparation for a final group performance of monologues developed by members of the class. In this stage of the work, some linking narration and additional dialogue may also need to be developed to flesh out the group collaborations. Performances will be staged and fully memorized, though technical support for the performances will otherwise be minimal.

Reflective Essay on Presenting your Research in a Creative Medium (10%)

All students will do a detailed narrative reflection on the challenges and successes they have experienced in the process of gathering their research sources, starting from the initial research plan and then culminating in the development a creative piece based in that research. Full bibliography expected.

Portfolio/Self-Evaluation – 5%

At the end of the semester, you will also compile all of your work into a portfolio, accompanied by a substantive and detailed self-evaluation of the semester's progress.

REQUIRED TEXTS FOR THE COURSE: Available at the Brewer Bookstore. You are expected to complete the readings by the date listed in the syllabus for in-class discussion.

Maurianne Adams, et al, Readings for Diversity and Social Justice

Moises Kaufman, The Laramie Project

ADDITIONAL READINGS: In addition to the above texts, a number of articles and selected excerpts from texts will be available on our course Blackboard site. *Other texts may be added to this list during the course of the semester.*

Carlos Cortes, "Building Community from Communities: Diversity and the Future of Higher Education" and "'The Diversity Within: Intermarriage, Identity, and Campus community.'"

Jeffrey Hatcher, excerpt from The Art and Craft of Playwriting on the six elements of drama.

Linda Holtzman, "The Connections: Life, Knowledge, and Media."

Tim Raphael, "Staging the Real: Breaking the 'Naturalist habit' in the Representation of History."

Jeffrey Sweet, excerpt from The Dramatist's Toolkit on dialogue and getting started.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, "The ABC Approach to Creating Climates of Engagement of Diverse Campuses."

From revised syllabus (including changed calendar for remaining six weeks of the semester):

CHANGE IN REMAINING GRADED ASSIGNMENTS (35% of total course):

Creation of Collaborative Group Performance Project based on the recent hate mail incident (15%)

All students will participate in the collaborative creation of this group performance. All students will participate in the research and development phase where we gather the materials and information we need and decide on a performance strategy and structure. Once the shape of the piece has been determined, there are many possible ways to participate in this performance, whether as writers, performers, behind the scenes personnel, or some combination of multiple functions. The main criterion is that all students will be expected to participate equally in the creation, ongoing development and public performance of the piece.

Script and performance of monologue based on research findings –10%

Each student will create a 1-2 page monologue based in his or her particular research findings. Monologues will undergo a process of revision in the writing phase and will be fully memorized for performance to the rest of the class during the final week of classes. These monologues will also be submitted to the First Year program office for possible inclusion in next year's American Voices performance.

Portfolio/Self-Evaluation – 10%

At the end of the semester, you will compile all of your work into a portfolio, accompanied by a table of contents and a substantive and detailed self-evaluation of the entire semester's progress, including the following specific projects from the second half of the semester:

- a significant reflection on the process of creating a collaborative performance piece about hate crimes and racism at St. Lawrence, including a detailed personal self-evaluation of your participation in this collaborative endeavor
- a significant reflection on the process of turning your library research into a creative form of expression (monologue), including a complete research bibliography and general evaluation of "useful" sources and a brief evaluation of your own creative process in developing and performing the monologue

Other elements to include in this self-evaluation will be the video project, the electronic discussion board activity, and general class and online discussion dynamics throughout the semester. This essay is the approximate equivalent of a take-home final exam, and detailed guidelines will be provided in the last week of classes.

Note: Participation in the Blackboard electronic discussion forum will continue as planned throughout the rest of the semester.

From the production program:

THE DIVERSITY PROJECT Spring semester 2003

Characters: Margaret Kent Bass, various members of the St. Lawrence University community (including students, faculty, administrators and staff), and members of the local Canton community.

Location: St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY

Time: March-April, 2003

This performance is based in a series of interviews conducted by the students in Performing Diversity, a first year seminar at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY. In mid March 2003, an anonymous letter was received by Associate Professor of English, Margaret Kent Bass, who had recently been promoted to Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and featured in both the student and the local newspapers. This hate mail, which was sent from somewhere in the local postal area served by the Watertown post office, was most likely a response to the feature article or some other announcement of Dr. Bass's new position within the university. The impact on Dr. Bass and on the campus and local community was significant. This is the story of the multiple voices heard in the weeks that followed the receipt of the letter.

This script is structured in "moments" that are based in the structuralist working methods of Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project.

Excerpt from the finished script of The Diversity Project:

MOMENT: THE LETTER/REACTION

NARRATOR

On March 18, 2003, Associate Professor of English and recently appointed Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, Margaret Kent Bass, received an anonymous letter at her office in Richardson Hall. The letter is a mere 60 words long, but it uses the f-word twice, the n-word 3 times, has three references to animals and drips with hate.

MARGARET

It took me a couple of days to leave my house. It took me a week to get back to campus. It was really great that it was spring break because I literally could not come to campus. I couldn't go to the department; I couldn't go to my mailbox. There was just something between this campus and getting the letter and the job. I spent a couple of days, pretty closed at home and then I just said "this can't happen; you can't let fear run your life"... I can't tell you how many offers I had for guns: "do you know how to shoot?" people wanted me to take self-defense courses. I lived in a relatively nonviolent and passive world. I didn't want to learn because who am I going to shoot?

ANONYMOUS FEMALE PROFESSOR

I heard about it the afternoon that Margaret got it. I came into the English office and people told me. Then Margaret came in later on that day and she showed it to me. I was shocked by the letter: it seemed like something from another universe. It didn't seem real. Then I felt really, really helpless because I did not know what to do to help Margaret.

NARRATOR

Rance Davis, Director of Multicultural Affairs at St. Lawrence speaks out

RANCE

My initial reaction was that this is just dreadful. Why would someone send her this type of letter? We as folks of color get jabbed here and there many times, ya know. Not so much by students, to be honest I have not had a negative racial incident with a student my whole time here. And I've been here a long time.

NARRATOR

Students, mostly white, respond to the letter.

MATT

I was disturbed, to see how someone could ever send something like that. It was disgusting. I did not go to any of the events, umm. I don't know. It's something that should still stand, the whole thing that happened there. I do support her. The rallies were appropriate, I think you can, I don't think it's going to be as strong now, but it should still be on everyone's minds on how people discriminate and stuff.

STEVE

I was like man this person is pretty stupid, and it didn't qualify my extensive reaction. It was like a fourth or sixth grader writes some stupid thing, I'm not even gonna waste my time with it. I didn't go to the events either, I think that draws more attention to it, I notice people of different ethnicities a lot more now. All these events are just bringing back segregation to the school. It redefines racial differences.

SIMON

I was shocked, it was ridiculous. I didn't go to the meetings, I wanted to go, I would have supported it, but I had other plans. I mean they should try and find out who did it, and solve the problem, as far as the spot light goes it's gotten a lot of attention over campus and turned a lot of heads. I think it in a way has

made people more aware of the racial differences and in a way, no. It all depends on how you look at the situation.

TIM

I didn't really think that anyone actually thought or spoke like that before. With such hate, I was a little disgusted. I didn't go to the events, and I should have. I mean it's life and you gotta move on, they did what they should have when they did, but now it's, it's more or less, all the protests were one and now it's over.

MEG

I really never thought that anything like that would ever happen on such a small campus, it was really vulgar and something needs to be done about it. I don't know that much about it, I'm really not that informed. I didn't go to any of the events. They definitely need to make a point out of it, but I don't really know how much or what more they can do.

ANONYMOUS MALE

This is so overblown. I am so sick of hearing about it. If I got a hate letter, no one would give a flying fuck. Hell, if a white male professor got a letter from someone who said they hated him because he was white and male, and he wanted to have a rally, people would call him a white supremacist, not a victim. I can't stand this school sometimes.

COLIN

I thought it was blown way out of proportion. I mean, I think this person got way more attention than they deserved. I mean, people have that much hate built up inside them it shouldn't be recognized by anyone; it should just be ignored. I mean, this guy got the thrill of a lifetime because he was known all over campus and got a riot protesting in his name and all this stuff that I think if it was just ignored then that's just a much better approach

NARRATOR

Roberto Torres, assistant professor of Sociology

ROBERTO

I saw the letter during Spring Break, and I read it and it literally made me feel sick. It made me feel sick and upset and angry and a whole bunch of things. In a way I read it and I laughed at it too because after I read it I was so shocked that someone actually still felt this way and was fucking crazy enough to put it down in words.

NARRATOR

Ali Pomponio, Anthropology professor

ALI

I was shocked, I was horrified, and I was very concerned about Margaret because we are very close friends, and through all of that I got very angry.

ROBERTO

When I first came here, my sense is that these weren't things that were talked about. Like this school to me seemed fifteen years behind every other school that I have been at in terms of talking about these issues. And I mean other forms of oppression, too, man, not just race, like homophobia, sexism, all that stuff.

I honestly think what happened right after the letter came out was that a lot of faculty didn't know what to do. I'm not excusing them, but I think that they actually felt a form of paralysis, right?! They are like, okay, they saw this letter, what do I do? I mean how do I help? So I think a lot of faculty members actually thought about it they just didn't know how to approach it because they are uncomfortable with it.

It's that 800lb elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about. I tried to bring it up in class on occasion and it was shut down pretty quickly.

This school has traditionally catered to upper-class white students and that, that's been its bread and butter for a very long time. It's pushing it in the right direction. But I think that for years the school probably just sat on its kind of comfort spot, which was upper-class white students. When I came here the thing that floored me was that there are no freaks here. I was like, "where are the weirdoes?" Where are the Goths? I mean every other school you have been at there has been this little avant-garde, this little segment of weirdoes, freaks, artists, whatever you want to call them. And they've always, I think helped to draw the student culture in a different directions in some ways. And we don't have that here really, we don't have students who have tattoos, ya know, purple hair or lots of facial piercing, you know what I mean. It's a very, very kind of preppy, white culture. I think that increasing diversity, not just in terms of color, but in terms of different kinds of students, would be a useful thing here at this school.

NARRATOR

St. Lawrence University president, Dan Sullivan.

DAN

I felt pain for Margaret, I have never been a beneficiary of racist hate mail, but I certainly have had my share of hate mail... I know something about how it feels. There would need to be strong statements from the president and the dean... some people feel less affected than others do. We have the ability to say it won't happen to me, so maybe I shouldn't speak up when it happens to somebody else, but it can happen to everybody.

NARRATOR

Margie Strait, director of Athletics at St. Lawrence.

MARGIE

I was disappointed for the university to experience something that overt that attempted to display the university as an uncaring and unwelcoming place for minorities in a time that they are trying to advance that important issue.

NARRATOR

In 1996, a group of prospective students was staying in Whitman lounge for the weekend. A group of people yelled "go home niggers" and other assorted slurs late at night.