

Chapter 12. Introduction

Lillian E. Craton
LANDER UNIVERSITY

Every fall semester, my English 101 students undertake a series of formal debates as a way to practice their rhetorical skills. Topics are drawn from student life. For instance, should our dry campus become wet? Does our university need a football team? One group of students in each class debates whether the university should maintain its current general education distribution requirements. Though the topic initially seems dry, it often leads to one of our most impassioned discussions.

Designed to foster reflection on the purpose behind students' coursework during freshman year, this topic has the added benefit of drawing in other voices to reinforce my sales pitch for the value of our course. Moreover, it gives me a window into students' assumptions about my class. These assumptions can be troubling, and the students charged with interrogating our general education system often question the value of higher education itself. They imagine dark motives for institutional decisions. General education coursework, they say, is just a way for universities to lengthen the degree program and make more money from their students.

These conspiracy theories seem silly to educators tuned in to pedagogy and accreditation requirements. Nonetheless, they highlight the importance of communicating with students about the reasons we do what we do in the classroom. Though writing is not something one simply memorizes—it requires practice and coaching, as does any skill—students perceive and resent the repetition of high school material in university coursework. They bemoan a lack of purpose behind many of their general education courses. Beyond checking off boxes required for graduation, many students don't understand what they are supposed to be getting out of the freshman experience.

If I want students to invest in my class and assignments, I must be able to articulate the value of this work in a way they find meaningful, to communicate the learning outcomes driving our activity. Fortunately, the English 101 debaters assigned to defend our gen-ed program help me do so. Last semester, the pro-gen-ed team won their debate with a simple argument: Did their classmates actually feel *ready* yet? At the start of freshman year, did they feel like they had the skills necessary to succeed in difficult classes in their major, on the job market, in careers? No? That's okay, my students argued, because the purpose of general education coursework is to prepare us to succeed.

I agree, and so do the authors in this section. The essays provide borrow-worthy activities, themes, or assignments that you might consider adopting in your

own classroom. More importantly, though, they provide a model for deep thinking and intentionality within a course design driven by concern for students' long-term academic and professional success. Such modeling is useful, not only for our teaching, but also for students' learning. Writing about writing for the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Miriam Carey argues that purposeful teaching can create intentional, integrative learners primed to succeed:

Intentional learning implies a greater degree of student self-awareness regarding the importance (or not) of what is being learned and the best methods of learning for the particular individual. . . . Integrative learning implies the ability to apply learning outside the classroom in the broader arenas of other course work and life in general; to make connections between the academic theories or processes learned in one course to other courses and hopefully to their larger life in the *real world*.

Carey suggests that integrative learning may “facilitate better academic performance” and “foster life-long learning.” Furthermore, most students “can be encouraged to develop both of these predispositions and thus find, in their learning experience, greater success and satisfaction as they would define it themselves.” To become intentional and integrative learners, students need help finding connections between the work in front of them and the long-term success they hope to achieve.

These five essays trace those connections. The section begins with an exploration of how our approach to source material may help students grasp the purpose and value of research. Lynée Lewis Gaillet considers the value of primary sources: archival research not only in academic libraries but also the less formal information centers offered by families and communities. Undergraduates often prejudice research as tedious or pointless. However, true research requires more than a Google search; in an era of instant access to facts, writing teachers must remind students of the differences between information and knowledge. By delving into hometown archives, Gaillet's students learn the process of research while also reflecting on the act of creating knowledge—and having a lot of fun.

Just as hometown archives give new purpose to the act of research, an active digital life reminds students of the real purpose of writing: to inform or affect an audience. Kathryn Crowther taps into her students' enthusiasm for digital communication by assigning blogs as part of their composition coursework. The assignment reinforces skills like self-presentation and audience-analysis while building a sense of community among first-year students. Because bloggers have creative control over the presentation of their ideas but receive feedback through comment tools, blogs encourage students to take ownership of their own writing and accept critique. Ultimately, the combination of wisdom and personal connections built online reshapes the classroom dynamic.

Even engaged students may struggle to rise to the daily challenges of a full college courseload. Lisa Whalen details an assignment that accomplishes central goals of writing coursework—understanding the stages of the writing process, conducting and incorporating research, fine-tuning language and structure—while also teaching students how to be students beyond English 101. Whalen’s students use collaborative learning and reflection to explore topics related to academic success. The approach has value for students at all levels but has been particularly meaningful for underprepared students.

A clear sense of the professional payoff of education provides the motivation to struggle through academic challenges. Abigail Scheg asks her students to research the professional audiences and rhetorical situations they are likely to encounter after graduation. Students spend most of their writing-lives responding to the demands of their chosen careers; as nurses, teachers, or FBI agents, they must adapt to differing goals and expectations that govern communication within their fields. Writing projects tied to career goals help students see and access the practical value of composition coursework.

Finally, Matthew Paproth explores a popular theme in composition courses: food. As an essential part of life and a reflection of family traditions, food is a relatable topic that taps into personal experiences. It also, however, opens up cultural, social, scientific, and ethical questions for student research. By connecting personal taste to larger issues—deconstructing their Thanksgiving feasts, for instance, or considering why they perceive some animals as more palatable than others—students practice analytical skills in a comforting but challenging context.

Work Cited

Carey, Miriam. “In the Valley of the Giants: Cultivating Intentionality and Integration.” *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 6, no.1, 2012, p. 7.