Sustaining democratic practice in neo-liberal times:
A graphic exploration of community
in a first year transitional course

Valerie Burton, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Author's Contact Information

Valerie Burton, Academic Director of the First Year Success Program and Professor of History
First Year Success Program, Education Building, ED3046
Memorial University of Newfoundland
230 Elizabeth Avenue, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, A1C 5S7
Phone: 709-864-8433
Email: vburton@mun.ca

Abstract:

Academic community and the provision of a democratic education are closely linked inside and beyond the classroom, but how might one see, trace, record, and advocate for these relationships? This is a pressing question as neo-liberalism displaces the practices that cultivate the personal, social, intellectual and moral attributes of free students as enquiring agents. This presentation uses a curricular experiment with academically challenged students in their first year at Memorial University. Graphics and annotations draw the viewer/reader into a dialogue on instruction as social transformation leading to how support can be leveraged for social justice agendas.

Key Words:

community, democracy, moral economy, neo-liberalism, first-year, academic literacies, phenomenological research, reflective practice

- Past trends showed that few undergraduates admitted in the lowest grade band (70-75%) would ever graduate from Memorial University.
- They are the target group of this *pilot* programme consisting of academic supports and three credit-bearing core courses.
- From the start (2012), First Year Success [FYS] recognized its students as ambivalent -- the most likely to *question* whether universities are places for "people like us"?

This photo-study begins in a classroom that has been viewed in an image by colleagues and students. Many see in it evidence of student – and faculty – involvement and learning.

Image and text furthers an exploration of "community" and "practice" and how they mesh in an education that keeps the moral economy of the student to the fore.

The image comes from an initiative that targets the "most challenged" students entering university in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The province has experienced some of the lowest rates of literacy and highest rates of poverty in Canada. From these considerations the University's "special responsibility to the people of the province" took root.

In the aftermath of the collapse of its staple cod-fishery "responsibility" was largely construed as making higher education accessible commensurate with the low tuition fees enabled by the allocation of provincial tax revenues. Now, two decades later, NL's oil-related boom has turned to slump and the moral economy of education needs new advocacy (Golfman).

The three persuasions that have influenced my approach to the Program's second semester core course are Academic Literacies (Lea, Street, Haggis); the re-evaluation of professionalism (Ball, Biesta) and the student as agent in a Freirian sense of the term (Freire, Haggis, Neary).

This opens to a different prospect than the Wengerian "community of practice" that is, in these neo-liberal times, too unproblematically asserted as a model for curriculum design (see, for example, Gauthier).

Impressed by the scope of what my references encompass in their pedagogical sweep (Canaan, Malcolm), I also find in literacies framing a way to make the theoretical and methodological construction of disciplinary knowledge meaningful to students whose interests in life may well not be closely connected to study (Sutton).

What are you seeing?

    Phenomenological research is fraught with difficulties, but there is nothing gained by turning away from situations that can lead to seeing how content, purpose and relationship are key questions about learning. Contrary to conventional assessment procedures that separate out learning elements into categories of perceptions, approaches and outcomes (Prosser & Trigwell), I am inviting an approach that respects elements simultaneously present in student and instructor awareness. Thinking differently, at the level of ontology and epistemology, requires that we do the same with a research method (Bennett). Current efficiency and economy agendas really do ask for a new kind awareness of how resource needs can be articulated starting from the ethics of the classroom.

What did others see?

In Fall 2015 students and faculty on the St John's campus of Memorial University volunteered answers to "what are you seeing" when they were shown the previous frame's image.

The results provided cross-sectional cameos of student and instructor "talk".

First, the words are plotted as cloud graphics so patterns of word-use frequency can be more readily discerned.

Later we return to the cameos to concentrate on instructor talk.

Details of survey
- Four groups were canvassed, each consisting of twenty-five persons.
- The two FYS groups were constituted by Program students[1] and faculty[2] respectively. Provided the image in a Jpeg attachment, they responded to the question in an email under conditions guaranteeing anonymity.
- For non-FYS faculty the same method was used. They were selected by matching with FYS faculty on factors of disciplinary/professional affiliation and seniority.
- Non-FYS students were differently recruited – serendipitously – from students in the University food-court. They were not known to the researcher, but they confirmed they were first year undergraduates. They viewed the image online and sent their responses to the anonymity-providing website.
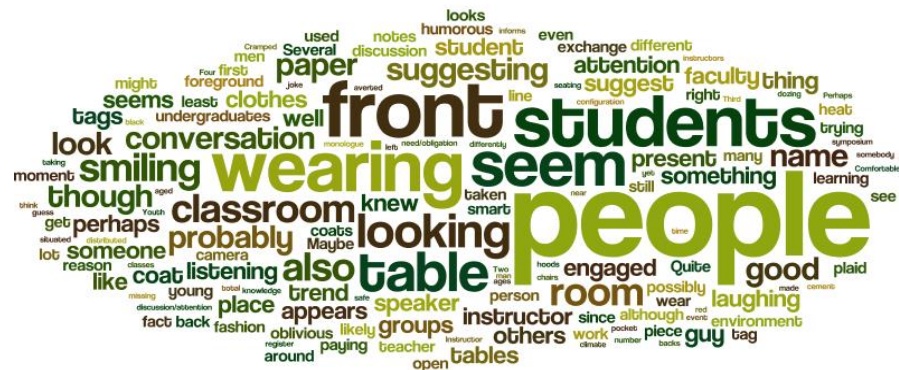
[1] Note that this survey of Program students was done b*efore* they started in University 1020.

[2] "FYS faculty" are not necessarily full-time instructors but unlike "non-FYS faculty" they were involved first-hand in the Program.
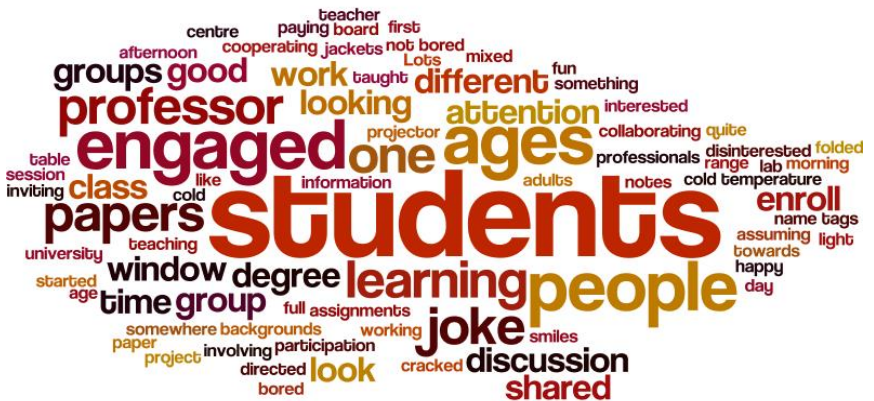
Approved by the Memorial University Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research.

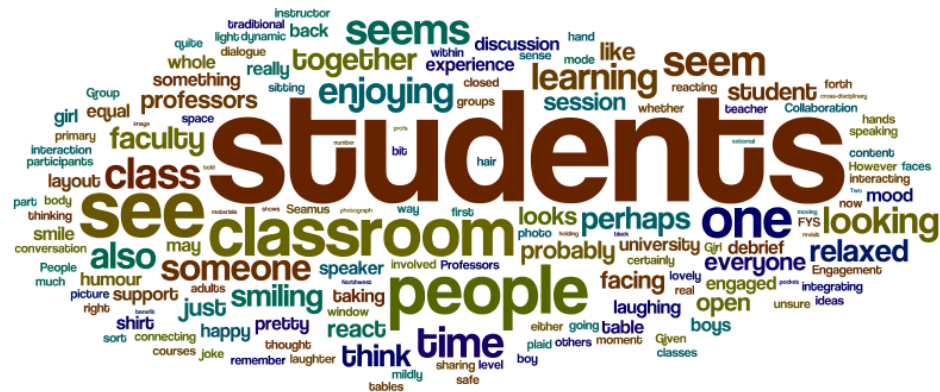# Non-participants in FYS

Faculty

Undergraduates

Participants in FYS

Faculty

Undergraduates

Words in the clouds

The image captures a moment in this class when a joke is shared: are these students and instructors thinking or are they laughing, and in any case what is the difference?

Students is a word frequent in the register of all four groups. It takes first order in three of four clouds. The non-FYS faculty use people where others reference students. Engaged is there, but not so much as anticipated, nor was it to be predicted that its most frequent users would be the undergraduates, and the non-FYS students to boot. Is the term a specific pedagogic marker, or one that is now so much in currency that we should not allow it an over-determining authority?

First semester undergraduates are sensitized to learning and its conditions however. Both student groups take in the physical conditions and social interactions of the classroom. Their clouds suggest that Program and non-Program students alike weighed up whether the class is one of which they would want to be part. There is a difference between the two groups. FYS students resolve the scene in greater detail than their counterparts: group work and teamwork, talking, discussion and listening are their preferred words. The cloud of the FYS students is the only one to feature socializing, community, participation and environment. Perhaps they are further than checking this out as a class? It seems the FYS students are already there, and while they rather than their counterparts are positioned to anticipate what the Winter semester Program has in store for them this is an important reflection on their subjectivities

Instructors with experience in FYS are less inclined than the FYS students to identify the "nuts and bolts" of classroom organization (groupwork, tables). More frequently they reference the emotive conditions of learning, and revealingly they use a fuller emotional vocabulary than their non-FYS counterparts: enjoying and relaxed are found in their cloud, but not in their counterparts'. Their non-FYS colleagues indeed recognize smiling and conversation, but their observations of clothing for example suggest they are positioned as by-standers on this scene.

Three groups demonstrably perceive this scene as one of laughing and learning. The fourth – the non-FYS faculty group – see laughing and smiling, but is not so sure that what it is reviewing is learning. Disengaged is there in their cloud. More than one of the non-FYS faculty respondents predicted poor learning outcomes, taking laughter for a lack of attention and construing the shared joke as evidence of a disorderly classroom.

So, again, what are you seeing?

The course involved a retinue of plenary presenters who most times visited as individuals to "explain themselves" as disciplinary or professional school experts.

Faculty returned as a group to join the students in roundtable conversations where the "thought-encouraging" questions were the students'.

The course was *made* by a community of practice

A picture allows scope for meaning-making based on an assessment of content. This one opened up the fleeting and the distributed aspects of learning.

As a micro-level introduction to an FYS classroom it increases the possibilities of the outsider being able to envisage what is meant by democratic education.

The Semester's Program mapped

Plenary	Workshop Activity	Assignments (Examples) *
1. Introducing the Course: Everything is a Question	Finding Meaning: Structure and Argument in Academic Literature	Posting to online discussion: what interests me most in course website.
2. But is Everything a Question? A Philosopher's Take on Questions	Preparing and using a text in discussion: seeing the larger picture & getting the detail.	Annotation of Gee reading (cartoon/text) incorporating revisions subsequent to class discussion.
3. What is Evidence? A Linguist's View	Couples plan field work case study based on an example in assigned reading	Class ends with self-evaluation mini-essay: how (well) did you prepare ?
4. Engaging with Communities in Asking and Answering Questions	Academics doing community research. Analytical categories and ethical considerations in research.	Quiz on readings on ethnographic and participant investigation.
5. My Univers[e]/ity: Images and Meaning	Visual literacy: discussion of class light-box referring to concepts in Sontag reading etc.	Taking and making images: Asynchronous discussion posting
6. A Question of Life and Death: Working in Teams	2 practice routines: Do teams work? Groups plan for writing a class Wiki.	'Wiki' reporting class research on teamwork using research literature.
7. Questions Going in Search of Answers: Information Sources	Info/digital literacy in Library computer classroom	i) finding and assessing sources ii) summarizing and contextualizing literature.
8. Mathematics as a Questioning Practice	[How] does practice make perfect? Making an argument with statistics.	Report on routines and results (including student-generated statistical display).
9. Questioning by Experiment: The Chemistry of the World Around Us	Lab session: The science of materials.	[Photo]-essay documenting experiments
10. Technology: The Answer to All Our Questions?	Practice routines: distractions and keeping focus.	Critical response: short essay responding to an editorial.
11. Review panel and review week: Outstanding questions for faculty.	Prep for advance notice exam: Exam strategies considered	Using instructor feedback: a self-evaluation/assessment
12. Questions Taking Us Further Into the Future: Year II & Beyond	Workshop instructors available to individuals & study groups	

"there is not one 'academic culture' that students have to be 'inducted' into but [an academy] that ... consists of a range of diverse and often contradictory cultures that students have to learn to negotiate" (Haggis 2003, 101).

The Semester's Program "Deconstructed"

While the Table of Contents on the website enables students to review the key headings of University 1020 they take their lead from the semantic threading of session titles: "Everything is a Question" begs "But, is Everything a Question?"; "Questions Go [the Library] in Search of Answers" and a crunch point is reached with a nursing professor who speaks to "A Question of Life and Death". The plasticity of post-modern syntax lends to the proposition that "My University" can transition into "My Universe". Communities are to be questioned, the world is to be examined in laboratory experiments, and then we pause to ask "Is Technology the Answer to all our Questions". Finally with "Outstanding Questions" students re-engage their conversations with the plenary presenters.

In this linking of epistemologies to value systems across a range of studies we are encouraging students to recognize and value the kind of agency that is at the core of a university's endeavours.

But will this approach to literacy practices and their contextualizing values put these students at ease? Recall these are the students who are most likely to be alienated from an academy that does not respect the values and ideas with which they came.

Students as Producers I

Students have a hand in the means and the material of instruction.

They are thinking about and representing problems in ways both principled and empathic; they see that learning is not just an accumulation of knowledge.
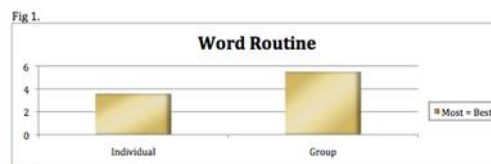
They are experiencing the importance of critiquing ethical processes in research agendas

Group Performance

A Wikipedia-type Entry by Students* of Univ 1020 Winter 2014

Fig 1.

Word Routine

■ Most = Best

Fig 2.

Letters to Numbers Routine

■ Fewest = Best

Hypothesis

Group work might have advantages when compared to individual work. Experiments have been conducted to decide whether the advantages of group work outweigh those of working alone. In further experiments, done by a research team at the University of Illinois, USA (c. 2004), Professor Patrick Laughlin put a different proposition to the test. He took the advantages of group work to be proved. Instead, his team wanted to gather evidence on optimum group size (Laughlin 2006).

Research Routines

Research has been conducted in order to assess the efficiency of group work.

Week 6: Class collaborates online in reporting their rehearsal of psychologists' experiments with group work.

Research project: Anthropometry of the Sami

Background information:
For this class, we will reproduce some research done by physical anthropologists in northern Norway in 1914 and 1921 (Evjen 1997). In the effort to understand more about the Sami (the indigenous people of Norway), we will make detailed measurements of their heads and document head shape by taking photos.

As described in Anders Retzius' 1843 thesis, *On the form of the Scandinavian head*, mathematical measurements of people's heads can help in classifying humans into dolichocephaler (long heads), mesocephaler (medium heads), and brachycephaler (short heads).

Research process:
· You will be paired up with a research subject (a Sami person from Norway).
· There is no need to explain this research to him/her.
· Fill in personal information about your research subject on the chart below (sex, age, approximate height). Assign them a research subject number.
· Using your tape measure, make the following two measurements (in cm) on your research subject and enter them on the chart below:
   · (a) Measure around the head at the level of the eyes, and divide this measurement by 2.
   · (b) Measure from one ear, over the head, to the other ear.
· Calculate index number: Divide length (a) by breadth (b), and multiply this number by 100.
· Take front and side photos of head, with research subject number in photo.

· Dolichocephaler: index number is under 75
· Mesocephaler: index number is between 75 and 80
· Brachycephaler: index number is over 80

Research Subject Number: _____

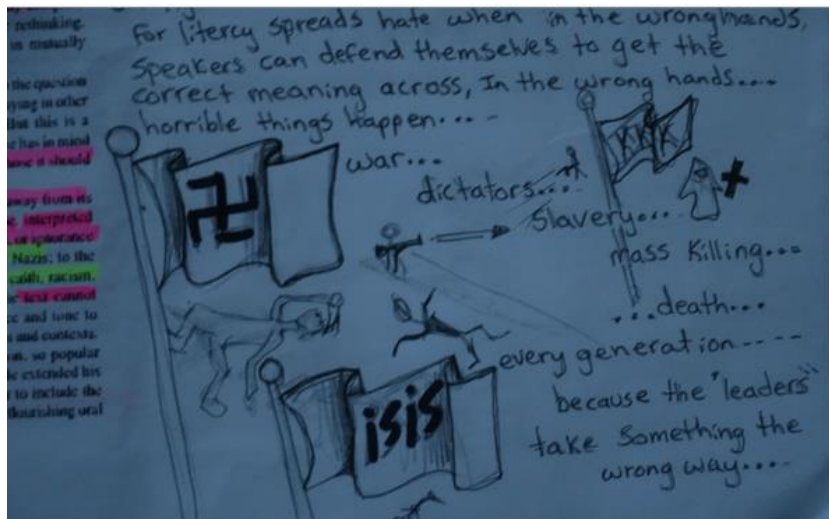| Sex:		(a) Length:	
Age:		(b) Breadth:	
Height:		(Length/breadth) x 100:	

Reference cited: Evjen, Bjorg. 1997. Measuring heads: Physical anthropological research in North Norway. *Acta Borealia: A Nordic Journal of Circumpolar Societies*, 14(2): 3-30.

Week 4: A workshop experience in the silencing of research subjects

Week 10: Groups document a path to discovery in the Lab (including what did not work)

The third powder we chose was Cu(OAc)2/Cupric acetate [A turquoise powder] .This powder had a chemical reaction when it was mixed with the base and the acid. In the acid mix, the powder almost completely dissolved and turned a light, transparent blue. In the base mix, the powder didn't dissolve as much compared to the acid mix and it created an almost opaque mixture in the tube. When the indicator was added to the base mix, it created a vibrant green.

Students as Producers II

Literacy practices and their contextualizing values

Students conjugate "website" into "site of discursive action" (Goodfellow & Lea) and examine elements of long-established knowledge bases differently and more critically for the advent of malleable text and new forms of online dialogue (Burton & Sweeny).

"Putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - - and therefore, like power." (Sontag)

There are countless ways to view the world around us. Whether switching the lenses on a camera or changing moods, people interpret situations diversely. This is relevant for both looking through a camera lense or the human eye; the way we view the world is subjective. What we once perceived to be profound can ten years later seem trivial, and vice versa. Through growing and becoming seasoned with experience we see certain perspectives we didn't notice before. Photographs allow us an immense opportunity to look back on our lives and apply what we've learned or learn from what we see. Perspective might be the most vital part of an ever changing mindset.

Week 10: Knowledge and Power Critical Response
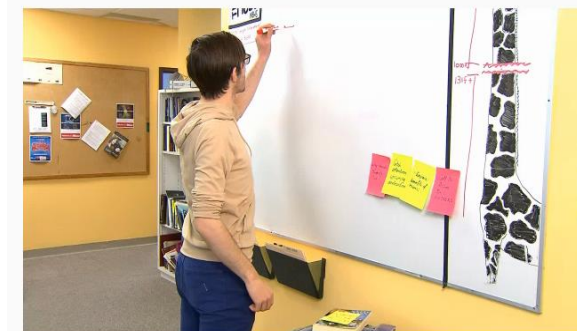(Since when could an essay be done like this?)

Week 7: Student Journalism Provides a Writing Guide Video
(When did senior students get to be so helpful?)

Table of Contents > Week 7 Questions Going in Search of Answers > Critical Inquiry Video ('Loft and Landing')

Critical Inquiry Video ('Loft and Landing')

This video introduces you to critical inquiry though treating the processes involved in a similar research and writing project. If follows Michael Sullivan, a student journalist, as he takes on a research topic, finds out about different sides to the argument (over Memoril's Loft and Landing), discovers about new aspects through library research, and plans and writes his article.

A couple of your classmates participated -- thank you Alyta and Tiffany.

Week 2: Plato's reflections on knowledge transmission
(We could never treat library books like this)

But is the FYS target group becoming more at ease with the values and tacit understandings of the university?

Instead of a conventional questionnaire, the classroom Jpeg shifts attention to the nature and consequences of students' interaction with what was provided for them in University 1020 and what they have contributed to the course.

Provided with the picture (for a second time) before they prepared questions for the returning plenary presenters students were able to reflect on their engagement in the evocation and construction of the emotional relationships of learning: the crux is how are they now connected with people in the university?

FYS Students in *First Semester*
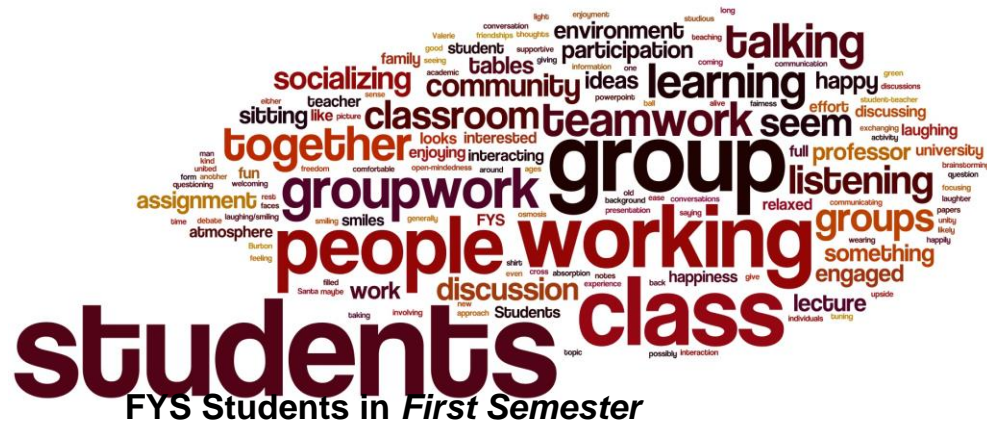
Words used in greater frequency:

Questions
Ideas
Discussion
Conversation
Everyone
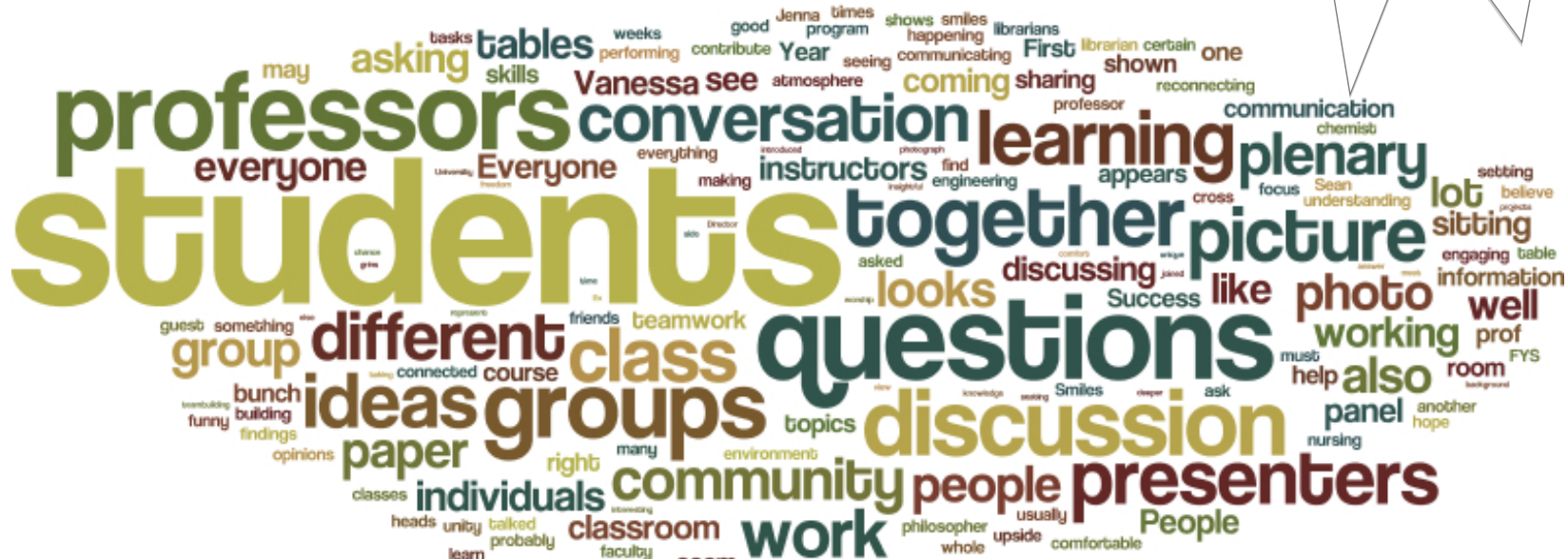
FYS Students in *Second Semester* – Anticipate "the Grand Plenary"

With this shift *practice* is a different point of connection. It involves elements simultaneously present in student and instructor awareness.
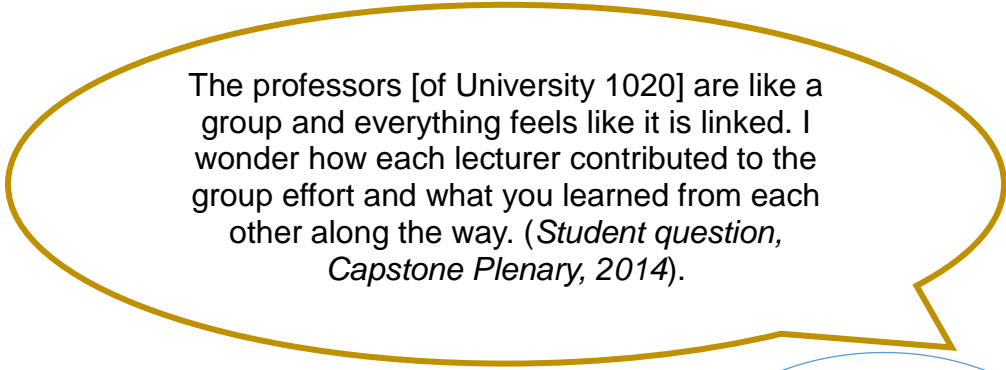
"My reflections on the course were really affected by the session we had at the end, particularly the many insightful and challenging questions they [the students] brought up…."

How did you decide which questions were the best to ask when doing research in your field?
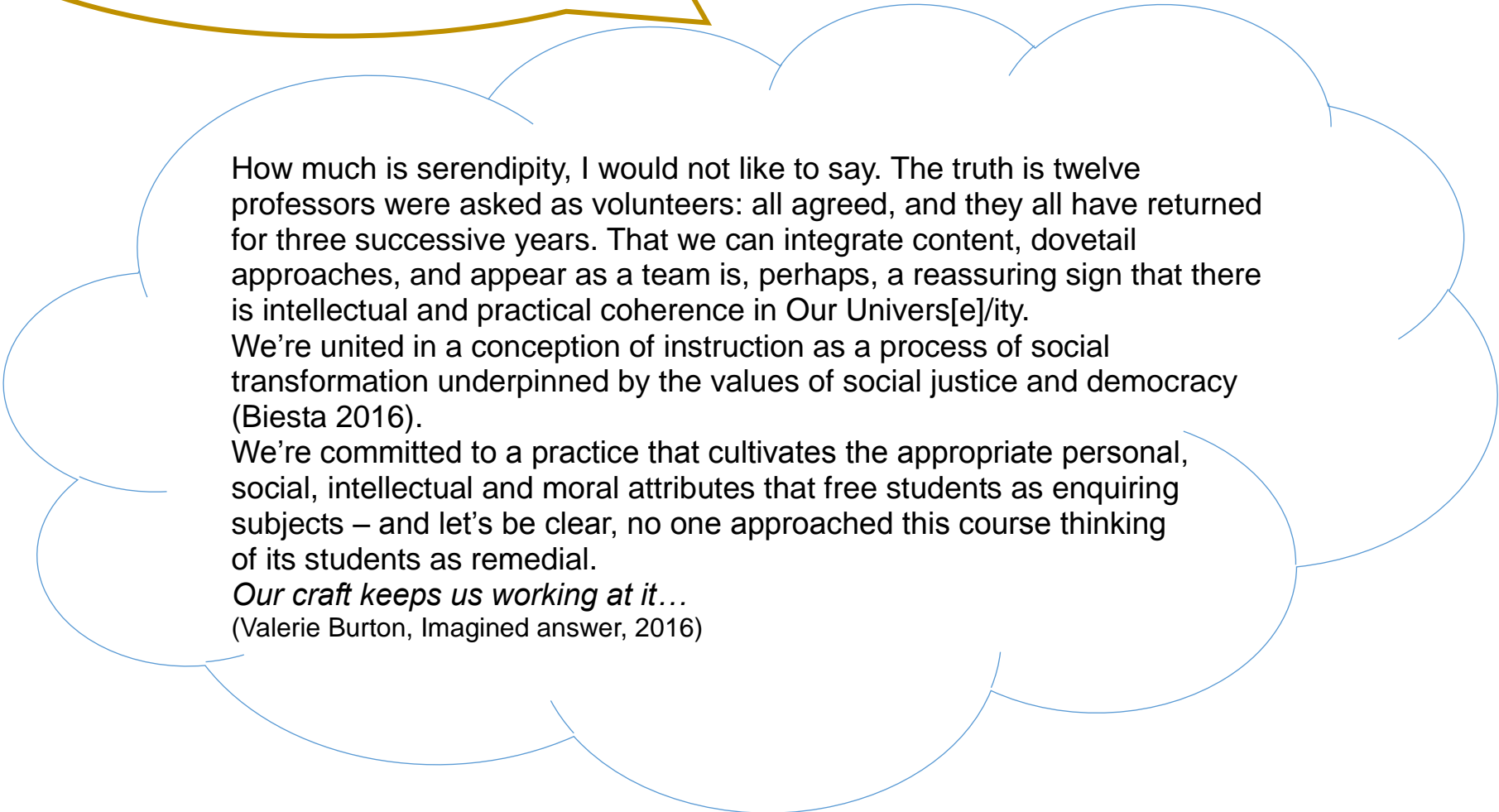
I produced stuff for the group work wiki but I am still finding material suggesting not all researchers are on board: do you think that starting a discussion thread is the way to go?

Have you ever abandoned your research on a certain topic because it is not going as you had planned, or even because you felt your abilities would be better suited for a different topic within your discipline?

Could you provide me with an example of how your approach to the participants in your research influences your results?

The professors [of University 1020] are like a group and everything feels like it is linked. I wonder how each lecturer contributed to the group effort and what you learned from each other along the way. (*Student question, Capstone Plenary, 2014*).

How much is serendipity, I would not like to say. The truth is twelve professors were asked as volunteers: all agreed, and they all have returned for three successive years. That we can integrate content, dovetail approaches, and appear as a team is, perhaps, a reassuring sign that there is intellectual and practical coherence in Our Univers[e]/ity.

We're united in a conception of instruction as a process of social transformation underpinned by the values of social justice and democracy (Biesta 2016).

We're committed to a practice that cultivates the appropriate personal, social, intellectual and moral attributes that free students as enquiring subjects – and let's be clear, no one approached this course thinking of its students as remedial.

Our craft keeps us working at it…
(Valerie Burton, Imagined answer, 2016)

Drawing on Craft in Furtherance of a Moral Economy of Learning

Rejoining *FYS Faculty* Answers to "what are you seeing?"

People's hands are folded or holding chins in a large number of cases; the overall sense I have is of people who are cautious in moving into a moment of humour, informality, and perhaps intimacy, none of which they were expecting.

(Anthropologist's narrative)

"This is a photograph of a multidimensional dialogue.
I see an alternative layout to the traditional university classroom in which students are grouped—not only with their peers, but with authority figures/instructors.
I see a subversion of the usual student vs. teacher layout of the classroom; not to mention, the instructor in this image is in the midst of activity, laughing along with the others.
I see placards and handouts (various learning materials) being used by the students
I can tell based on the directions that people are facing that the primary speaker(s) is (are) not (presently) the class lecturer(s). This implies that the focus of the conversation is on a student (or students) speaking in response to either the material in hand or a topic presented. Basically, a conversation is occurring in this classroom in which multiple parties are involved, implying class participation. The mood is certainly light, showcased by the smiles and laughter painted on faces. The power dynamic has been altered drastically by the layout of the classroom and the inclusion of external figures."

the looks on…people's faces …makes me think something was said that everyone thought was unexpected, perhaps outside the box of rules the students have brought to MUN with them from high school.

(Mathematician's contribution)

There is a feeling of acceptance and trust evidenced by the relaxed body positions and eye contact with the speaker and with each other.
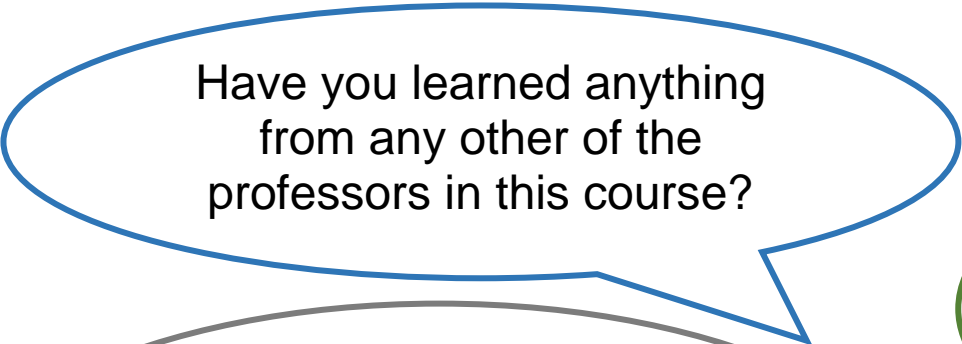
(Nursing Professor's observation)

Woman at extreme left (hand under chin) is glad that this is not going to be too stuffy.
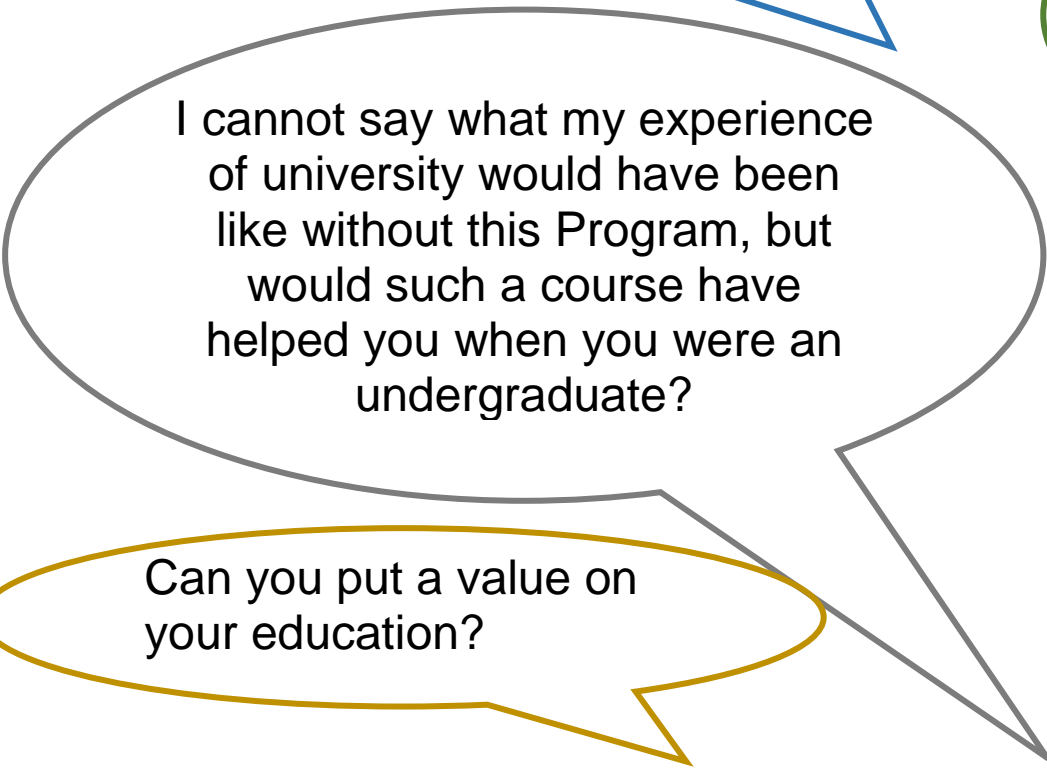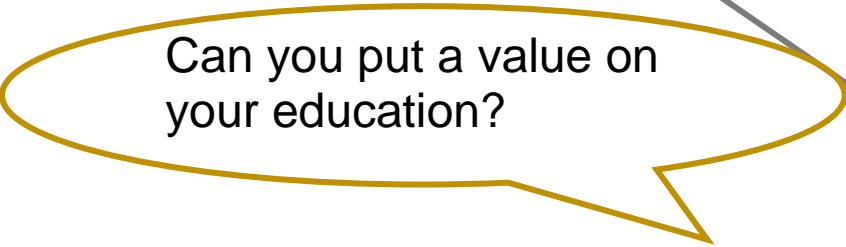
(Folklorist's extemporization)

"There is an open, equal space for sharing ideas. The hierarchy has been suspended. Students and professors are equal here. People are looking at and engaged with others not just at their own tables, but among and between tables - they aren't even closed off within their table groups."
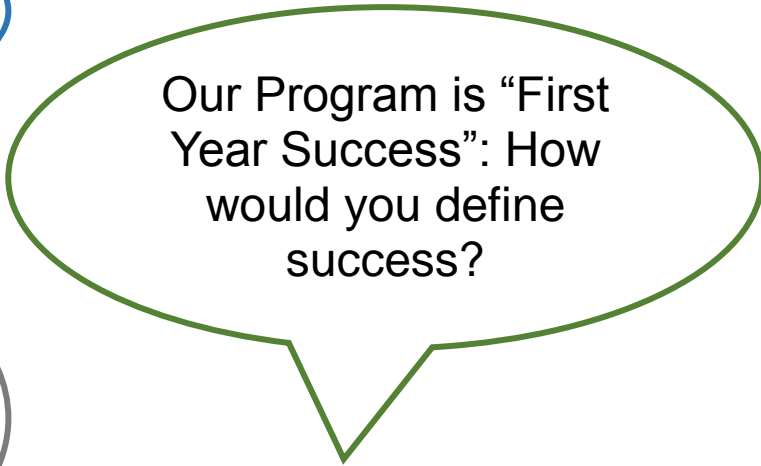
Have you learned anything from any other of the professors in this course?

Our Program is "First Year Success": How would you define success?

I cannot say what my experience of university would have been like without this Program, but would such a course have helped you when you were an undergraduate?

Can you put a value on your education?

Curiosity about the personal trajectories of individual faculty blended with students wanting to know about the social and collective applications of their knowledge. Some students reflected on how a course had come about that encouraged students and faculty to meet and talk about these matters.

This is a way to trace changes in students' understanding of learning and purpose. These are the forms of awareness in which students can see the important values and aims of education.

Increasingly familiar to educators are the arguments for connecting teaching and research at the undergraduate level. But here are signs of the potential for further pedagogical advance.

The politics of the academy and the history of educational provision indicate a new reach in these students' awareness of themselves in their environment. They are moving away from a simple present along a trajectory of retention and expectation. (Burton & Sweeny).

"[S]uccess" in reflective practice is a matter of agility, mobility, flexibility, and, importantly, the interdependence of one's movements with those of others on and beyond the reflected scene" (Lesnick, 38)

Now after doing two of these debrief sessions I can really appreciate the intent to bring together fields, faculty, students: this is what integration looks like. The students are integrating the knowledge and experience they've been collecting, and they are integrating with us and with each other, bit by bit. I hadn't thought much about it before in the FYS context, but now I see the real value in taking the time to debrief, and have realized how much other university courses could benefit from taking that time too.

My university experience so far has been very different to my friends'. While they have been stressed and irritable as exams crept closer, I have been enjoying my time in class. Each week introduced a new topic and provided another hint towards my biggest question: what is the point of this course? Seeing the roundtable plenary again made the difference. In the end I have come to the conclusion that Univ 1020 is not just sample of a bunch of university courses like I originally thought. It is an idea. The "samples" are the chosen methods of examining ideas, building on each other perfectly.

Faculty Participant in email
to Course Coordinator
(October 2015)

Student Essay
submitted in Final
Examination (15W)

"What are you seeing?" is no longer asked in verification of our findings in FYS. Now it is part of a dialogue promoting interpretations in furtherance of this work. These dialogues involve the young people who signed up to the Program and, importantly, others.

University 1020 as a
Lesson for Neo-liberal Times

Denying "remediation" a place:

Community in FYS has helped us to realize the difference made by a practice that cultivates the appropriate personal, social and intellectual attributes to free students as enquiring subjects.

Reinscribing professionalism:

The collegial co-operation involved in University 1020 exemplifies how we might in our institutions face down the neo-liberal scepticism of professionalism (Knyber).

Clueing into a protective not individualistic ideology:

Students and faculty alike have shared learning experiences that transcend the intellectual, conceptual, existential and ethical limits of the market.

Resisting the will to commodification:

Multiple factors shape the learning environment. The argument for multiple criteria to validate its outcomes goes hand-in-hand with skepticism of the appropriateness of target-driven, managerial, solutions to the provision of higher education.

The local moral economy of student worth:

The popular vision of post-secondary learning with its democratic purpose is currently a rallying point in NL. April 2016 saw the introduction of taxes on learning and provocative cuts to education.

In Spring 2016 NL became the only Canadian province to tax books in a budget introduced by a Finance Minister who declined a junk food tax. Cathy Bennett's personal fortune was in part accrued through her ownership of MacDonald's franchises.

I am grateful to Chris Hibbs for the original "what are you seeing?" photograph and its various permutations; to the anonymous sign-makers at the rally in St John's on May 7 2016 for permission to reproduce their signs.

Students and faculty of FYS agreed to the use of their work in this presentation. Many thanks to them.

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