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Reinventing the Survey Course

By James M. Lang | JANUARY 21, 2018



Last semester I reinvented English composition as a community-service learning course. My students did the usual work of any composition course — developing basic writing skills, crafting narrative essays and arguments, conducting research — but it was in the service of creating print and web content for a local homeless shelter.

In their end-of-semester evaluations, students praised the experiment, and I will probably repeat it. But I don't want to make too much of that particular reinvention, because I have reinvented first-year composition at least a half-dozen times in

my 20 years of teaching it, and will no doubt do so again. The same goes for most people I know who teach composition.

While I do believe that my fellow composition teachers — both on my campus and elsewhere — are a forward-thinking and flexible bunch, the reason for our continuous experimentation in this class probably has another source: Some courses simply lend themselves more easily to experimentation than others. When it comes to putting pedagogical innovation into practice, not all courses are created equal.

English composition has multiple characteristics that encourage reinvention:

- Class sizes are small, usually capped in the range of 20 to 25 students, and sometimes fewer.
- Course objectives focus on the development of writing skills, which can be fostered within almost any subject, thus allowing instructors to select from an endless palette of readings and assignments.
- Finally, the students are usually in their first year. Because they haven't developed firm expectations about what a college course should look like, they tend to be more open to alternative forms of instruction.

At the opposite end of the reinvention spectrum in English departments is the literature survey, in which we attempt to offer students an overview of literary history and introduce them to the great works of our tradition, along with their authors and historical contexts. Every factor that works in favor of innovation in composition classes is working against it in survey courses.

- For starters, they are packed with students. They are generally the largest courses I teach, just as they were the largest I took myself as an undergraduate.
- Faculty members feel like they have little control over the content of survey courses: Certain things must be covered. They are further hemmed in by the door-stopper anthology they use as a textbook.
- Surveys require faculty members to teach outside of their specialties, which can lead to a very conservative approach toward course design. When we are stretching ourselves with new or unfamiliar content, we are more

likely to play it safe pedagogically.

All disciplines have some equivalent of this: a survey course designed to introduce students to core authors, thinkers, concepts, or skills. Just like a literature survey, your department's version might serve one or both of the following purposes: (a) to give nonmajors a basic familiarity with a field they may never encounter again, or (b) to prepare potential majors to succeed in upper-level courses in your discipline.

In either case, the problem is that we feel compelled to cram as much content as possible down students' throats.

Small Changes in Teaching

In this series, James M. Lang argues that simple changes in our pedagogy — in things like course design, classroom practices, and communication with students — can have a powerful impact on student learning.

- 'How Much Do You Want Your Final to Count?'
- Small Changes in Teaching: The Last 5 Minutes of Class
- Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections



After all, if I only have 15 weeks with students, and this is the only course they will ever take in British literature, I had better make sure they gain a passing familiarity with the giants of the field. Sometimes I imagine myself arriving in heaven and being introduced to Lord Byron or Oscar Wilde at a raucous dinner party, and they snub me because I couldn't squeeze them into the survey. (Even now, I can hear some readers thinking, "What? You left Oscar Wilde off your survey syllabus?")

Likewise, if I am preparing potential majors for upper-division courses in English, I feel compelled to give those students as much content as I can. If a colleague of mine teaching Victorian literature discovers that students in the survey courses have not been thoroughly introduced to Charles Dickens, I'll be the mockery of all at the departmental tea party. (That is, in the event we ever have a departmental tea party, which has not happened yet, but I remain hopeful.)

Conceiving of the survey as a place to hammer students with as much content as possible leads inevitably to very traditional approaches to both classroom practice and course assessment.

If I only have a day to spend on Virginia Woolf, I better make sure they understand her difficult prose, which inclines me to lecture on that aspect of her work. And if my course objectives revolve around familiarity with a certain body of content, then I might feel compelled toward fairly basic assessments — like an identification exam in which students must name key passages from a list of major works.

I don't wish to batter lecturing or identification exams, both of which, in my view, have their place in higher education. But I have argued many times here that lectures should never be the sole strategy we use in a college classroom. To reach as many students as possible, we must vary our teaching methods.

The survey — more than any other type of class I know — puts up a vigorous fight against such variety.

A few years ago I worked with some colleagues who had similar concerns about their literature survey courses. We organized a special session at the annual Modern Language Association conference, which was advertised in that year's program as "New Approaches to Teaching the Literature Surveys." The MLA clearly expected us to draw a modest audience for this teaching-focused panel, and accordingly placed us in a modest-sized room.

Much to our surprise, by the time the panel was ready to kick off, more than 200 people had packed into the room, many of them standing in the back and around the edges.

We realized later — especially after we hosted a similarly popular panel at a meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English — that we had struck a nerve. Something about the survey was not quite working for a lot of faculty members who wanted to do something different in class, too, but weren't quite sure how to proceed.

Three years ago I began working with two of those colleagues, Gwynn Dujardin and John Staunton, on a new book of essays collected from faculty members who were pioneering new approaches to the survey. We had modest expectations for the submissions, but, once again, we ended up pleasantly surprised by the sheer variety of ways in which professors were testing new structures for the survey or presenting intriguing new forms of assessment. Among the highlights:

- In the first half of a British-literature survey, Kevin Bourque, an assistant professor of English at Elon University, asks students to consider the traditional course texts from a geographical perspective. Using Google maps and other materials, they map out the locations of stories and characters around the city of London as the semester proceeds. One of the major assignments requires students to make an audio walking tour of a London location in which they "bridge its present-day appearance with the sights and sounds of historical London."
- Desiree Henderson, an associate professor of English, draws upon the work of Larry Michaelsen to incorporate team-based learning in her American-literature survey at the University of Texas at Arlington. Students work in permanent teams throughout the semester. Each unit of the course follows a similar structure: Students are assessed on their mastery of their reading — first as individuals and then in teams. The teams work in class on "activities that privilege problem solving and the application of knowledge," and are given a final assessment to check for deeper understanding.
- At Boston University, Chris Walsh, interim director of the writing program, describes what he calls the "blank syllabus" approach. It involves creating blank spaces on his syllabus for students to fill in throughout the semester. The first major assignment of his survey course requires students to explore their anthology, identify a work that they would like to see discussed in class, and then write an essay justifying its inclusion. On the day the course covers that work, the student who advocated for it helps lead the discussion.

Those examples provide only a glimpse of what we discovered when we invited our peers to imagine the survey in exciting new ways. The result, published this month, is *Teaching the Literature Survey Course*. It's worth noting that innovation did not arise from any one category of the discipline or the profession. Our contributors hail from all types of institutions and include tenured, tenure-track, and adjunct faculty members. Innovation was hiding away in many corners.

Much of the work that we see in helping faculty members think critically about teaching and develop new approaches in the classroom takes the form of general recommendations, including some of my own work in this field. But editing this volume reminded me that we have to pay equal attention to the problems that arise in particular disciplines, and

even in particular courses. Introductory and survey courses can function as an innovation bottleneck that may prevent us from reflecting on whether the teaching formats we've inherited are really serving students effectively.

Working with colleagues and peers on the literature survey has taught me that we can find creative ways to solve even the most entrenched problems in higher education. Those innovations may be tucked away in the various silos we inhabit. The most effective first step toward fostering new solutions to old pedagogical problems may be the simplest: Invite your colleagues to talk about teaching, and see what great ideas emerge.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. His latest book, Teaching the Literature Survey Course: New Approaches for College Faculty, co-edited with Gwynn Dujardin and John A. Staunton, was published this month by the West Virginia University Press. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

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