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# Structuring a First-Year Seminar to Facilitate Self-Authorship: Developing a Shared Understanding of Self

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## **STRUCTURING A FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR TO FACILITATE SELF-AUTHORSHIP: DEVELOPING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF SELF**

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**Tammy:** This project began in the spring of 2010 when four instructors of our first-year-student University Seminar program decided to study our teaching and students' learning related to the expected program outcomes of Critical Thinking, Communication, and Community (often referred to as the 3 C's). I had taught a first-year-student seminar on adolescent identity development on two previous occasions and was eager to evaluate more explicitly how my teaching affected development of critical thinking, communication, and community at Maryville.

Given that I would be studying my teaching and students' learning, using the methods of action research, I knew we would be changing the course quite a bit for the coming fall, so I was eager to have a thoughtful, engaged peer mentor to assist with the process and to represent the voice of the students. I was particularly excited about working with my peer mentor, Juliana (or Jules, as we call her) as we studied the course. Although we did not know each other well, when I shared with her that we would be studying the course and how what we did as instructor and peer mentor influenced (or did not) students' development of self, she seemed eager to make a contribution. I don't think either of us had any idea how much fun we would have and how much of a difference our work would make to the learning of the students in our class (and to our own learning)!

**Jules:** I was a sophomore who had been newly selected to serve as a peer mentor for the program. I was a Nursing major who had not previously been enrolled in Tammy's seminar, but I was excited about how we would work together to achieve the 3 C's. In our first meeting I was nervous about what I was about to embark on as a peer mentor. Then, Tammy told me we would be studying our teaching and I immediately felt overwhelmed; I wasn't sure I was cut out for the task. Tammy sensed my apprehension and eased my fears by explaining the project in depth. The project sounded very intriguing so I decided to dive in.

**Tammy:** The following dialogue describes our journey. I provide the theoretical foundations of our study, Jules and I alternate offering our perspectives on the process of our collaboration, and in some places we speak together, reflecting our shared sense of responsibility for the course and our study of it.

The course was taught during the Fall of 2010 and then, based on the students' feedback and our analysis and reflections from the action research, modified somewhat as it was offered again in the Fall of 2011. We will be sharing more about our learning and the relevant changes we made later in our story.

## Theoretical Foundation for our Journey: Identity Development and Self-Authorship

**Tammy:** Within the framework of action research and the scholarship of teaching and learning, Maryville faculty members in the last few years had begun talking about how to incorporate student voices more intentionally into our teaching and research. I had been reading the research on Self-Authorship and thought the Cognitive, Intrapersonal, and Interpersonal framework for self-development would be ideal for helping students discover and develop their own voices as students and young adults in this seminar. The foundation of our journey began with the theory of Self-Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994).

As individuals work toward Self-Authorship, they begin to listen to and cultivate their own thinking and voices. They develop the capacity to *define for themselves* how they will live, think, and behave; they also develop the capacity to make meaning at complex levels as they integrate thoughts/beliefs, relationships, and identity. Individuals learn to attend to and value their internal voices as they incorporate the coordinated messages from diverse, external voices (particularly voices of authority). Finally, self-authored individuals interpret, within the context of their values, the multiple perspectives they hear to create and act on their own visions for how to succeed in life.

Initial evidence from Baxter Magolda (2001) suggested that individuals needed to be near the end of their college experience or into young adulthood to take responsibility for *fully authoring* their lives. However, more recent work (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006) suggests that younger students *can make progress* toward Self-Authorship with appropriate guidance and support throughout college. The question we wanted to answer in our teaching and learning project was whether we could help *first-year students* make progress toward Self-Authorship. From the review of the literature, we chose to emphasize self-reflection (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Taylor, 2008) and self-narrative (Taylor, 2008) as the vehicles for students to make their experiences meaningful and to help “students come to know better how they did what they did, as well as what this means for themselves as learners” (Kramp & Humphreys, 1993, p. 84).

## Pedagogical Strategies for Facilitating Self-Authorship

**Tammy:** Throughout the summer of 2010, Jules and I met every 2-3 weeks to discuss the kinds of assignments we thought would help our students make progress toward self-authorship. We wanted students to read several novels so they could experience how various characters developed a sense of identity. We believed it would initially be less threatening for our students to analyze and reflect on the identity development of several fictional characters before they had to engage in those same tasks of reflecting on and beginning to make meaning of their own development.

I shared with Jules the novels I had used the previous year in the course; she liked *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999) and said we should definitely keep it. She had a positive response to *Feed* (Anderson, 2002), but since the students had mixed reactions to it, we decided to look for a new novel. We embarked on a reading frenzy to find a novel that would address

such issues as relationships with parents, religion, diversity, and learning. We found and selected *Happy Birthday or Whatever: Track Suits, Kim Chee, and Other Family Disasters* (Choi, 2007). We also included the institutional Maryville Reads selection, *Zeitoun* (Eggers, 2009).

During the summer, we also talked about other assignments for the course. We chose a debate for its contribution to assisting students in the development of critical research, critical thinking, and presentation skills. In addition, since we were trying to encourage students to share their voices, and a significant role in Self-Authorship is students taking responsibility for their own learning, we wanted to develop an assignment or project that required students to lead the class. We chose to use a book of case studies (Garrod, Smulyan, Powers, & Kilkenny, 2007) from which the students would choose one case to lead with a partner. Nine pairs of students would lead the remaining members of the class in a 30-minute dialogue to help us reflect on and analyze the life experiences of the author of each case. This experience would put everyone in the role of dialogue leader and dialogue participant and would also provide a foundation from which to begin to examine how others developed narratives about their experiences. The final graded assignment in the course was for our students to write their own series of narratives about their development thus far, so these cases also provided good examples for them to consider.

**Jules:** Being involved in the process of planning the Fall 2010 class was very exciting. As a new peer mentor, I was shocked that I would have this much say in what goes on in the classroom. It was great to have a professor depend on and trust my input; it felt very empowering. With this new-found confidence I was ecstatic to help out in any way possible.

While reading novel after novel, I had to remind myself to find a book that would lead into great discussion topics for class but that would also be an entertaining book that the students would enjoy reading. Finding the fine balance between my “teacher” role and “peer” role was challenging. The student side of me wanted to ask Tammy to shorten the papers or omit one completely to make less work for the students. However, by omitting assignments the students wouldn’t have to push themselves, which could affect how much they benefitted from the class. Our compromise was to keep the three novels, but require students to write analytical essays for only two of them.

**Tammy and Jules:** Once the course began, we created a classroom environment and class activities to encourage students to be highly self-reflective about their previous learning experiences, to use narrative to share learning from their journeys, and to attend to new perspectives that helped them address areas of difficulty in their lives. We also encouraged them to identify and consider the partnerships that provided support for them along the way. We quickly discovered that we were asking our students to do something that was very difficult for first-year students. To support students in completing these difficult tasks, we, as instructors, provided structure for considering multiple points of view (primarily the perspectives of their classmates and the authors of their case studies), helped students focus on the *process* of reflecting deeply (through a variety of in-class individual and small-group activities), and guided students but also made them responsible for their own reflecting process (by providing expectations for their analyzing and writing assignments).

Establishing trust was critical. During New Student Orientation, all members of the class were part of the same group for which Jules served as an orientation leader. The students spent several days getting to know each other, other students, and campus resources. We met as a class during the weekend during which time everyone shared why they chose the course and to what they were most looking forward. In class, we were intentional about learning our students' names as quickly as possible, giving everyone a chance to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences, having fun, and building trust by ensuring confidentiality and facilitating authentic conversations.

**Jules:** One of the most important things we did to make students feel comfortable was to keep a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom by doing things as simple as setting the desks in a circle with Tammy and me sitting mixed in with the students instead of at the head of the classroom. Also, our attitudes were relaxed and fun. We kept a great balance between being the students' peers and having the authority in the classroom. We worked together by meeting weekly to discuss the next week's plan. This gave us the opportunity to regroup so we were always on the same page. If we weren't on the same page, our class certainly wouldn't be with us. This also allowed us the opportunity to discuss students we were concerned about (whom I would reach out to), students who needed a little encouragement in discussions (whom Tammy would email), and to discuss topics that weren't working so that we could change course.

**Tammy and Jules:** Also important was considering multiple points of view and sharing responsibility for dialogue. Many of our students shared during our Orientation meeting that they attended high schools with fewer than 100 students in their graduating classes (including one student who was home schooled). They acknowledged they had limited perspectives about people and life experiences and were eager to broaden their views in college. The case studies text, *Adolescent Portraits* (Garrod et al., 2007) would definitely afford students the opportunity to examine life experiences of young adults from very diverse points of view (e.g., first-generation American, Native American, gay/lesbian/bisexual, Hispanic). As an example of how we worked together to conduct the class, we will share our strategy for developing our lesson on modeling effective dialogue.

Prior to the first case, in our weekly meeting, we discussed how we would model the kind of dialogue we wanted the students to lead. We first considered the topic of technology and how this generation of students uses technology, but then chose the topic of Multitasking Teenagers (which encompassed teens' use of technology). We found a couple of articles on-line that addressed the topic, we each read the articles and then chose one that we thought reflected the broadest set of issues and perspectives. We then each brainstormed several questions to use for our dialogue. We discussed the questions we each developed, made sure they were open-ended questions, and then put them in an order that seemed to provide a reasonable flow for the dialogue. We also identified a few guidelines that we wanted to be sure to share about how to lead an effective dialogue (e.g., use open-ended questions, be patient with silence). During the next class, we began by explaining the distinction between discussion and dialogue, we then modeled our expectations by leading a 30-minute dialogue (so they gained a sense of the real amount of time involved), and as a group, talked about what contributes to an effective dialogue. From there, the students each chose a partner and a case they wanted to lead, prepared questions in advance (to which we offered feedback if asked), led a 30-minute dialogue, and then prepared

an analysis of the case that included their view on the value of the dialogue to help them understand the perspective of the author of the case.

In addition to the case study dialogues, we shared our perspectives on the nature of a seminar in which everyone plays an active role in each class session. We utilized a number of different classroom activities (e.g., fishbowl, concentric circles, barometer, paired sharing, debate) to engage students in the topics being discussed. For each class meeting, the various activities were discussed at our weekly meeting, selected together based on the goal we were trying to achieve with that topic and lesson, and then led by one or the other of us. With few exceptions, members of the class were engaged in each class meeting, and provided their thoughts on how they were making sense of the various points of view being shared.

One key moment occurred early in the semester when Tammy was presenting a model of development that examined the interplay between Biology (physiological development), Psychology (self and emotional development), and Sociology (relational development).

**Tammy:** I had prepared a handout that examined development for Early, Middle, and Late Adolescence within each of the three realms (bio-psycho-social) and had posted it on our course site. I only had a few minutes to get started presenting the model, so I was describing the three realms and the general ages for Early, Middle, and Late Adolescence and was pointing these out on the chart I had developed. I looked at the students who were slouched in their chairs, eyes glazed, and not taking any notes; I knew I was losing them, so I called it a day. During our next weekly meeting, I talked with Jules about this. She had clearly noticed the students' reactions as well, so offered her own perspective on how we might help them understand this model.

**Jules:** It was frustrating knowing the students didn't understand the concept Tammy was explaining. However, being a current student I know I have been guilty of the glazed look plenty of times. Through reflection, I thought it might be interesting to get the students more involved. I enjoy classes that require active participation compared to a talking head at the front of the room. Rather than Tammy and I playing the part of talking heads, I thought we could have them talk to us. Tammy and I then brainstormed various ideas and decided to have the class describe the three realms to us. The next day in class, we had the students take charge of the blackboards (thank goodness there were 3 boards to use). Each board was designated as Early, Middle, or Late Adolescence and included the Biological, Psychological, and Sociological categories noted. It was the students' role to share the various characteristics and marker events that went along with each realm for each period of adolescence. This sparked conversation when students would disagree with each other about such things as whether "breaking up via text message" was more indicative of Middle or Late Adolescence; then we would turn to Tammy for clarification, but most of the time, she just turned the question back to the group to ask what they thought.

**Tammy and Jules:** Once we had the model and tons of examples on the boards, we had students meet in small groups to use the use the model to think about and describe how adolescents (early v. late, boy v. girl) might experience a given situation such as sexual abuse by a relative, being a star athlete, and being "called out" for being a class clown. Each small group then shared its reflections and analyses with the full class. This was a class where everyone was engaged in thinking about examples of adolescent development from a variety of perspectives

and then thinking about and discussing how a given adolescent might experience the various aspects of development. Together, we noted the original plan was not working well, took time to re-evaluate the plan, and in so doing, found an engaging way to situate learning in students' experiences, a key aspect to facilitating students' development toward Self-Authorship.

Yet another key approach we took was supporting the reflecting process. The major assignments in the course required students to engage in deep reflection and analysis of their own experiences. In some cases, this was in relationship to a major character in one of the novels we read; in other cases, the reflection was necessary for one of three, progressively more detailed, first-person narratives students wrote. The specifics of these assignments were primarily developed by Tammy, but it was important for Jules to understand the expectations as she was the person to whom the students went first for clarification.

**Tammy:** The final self-narrative was the longest and most difficult. This narrative expected students to consider their lives from high school graduation to the end of the first semester in college. We asked them to identify various experiences, to consider the impact of those experiences (especially in hindsight), and the implications of those experiences for their future in the three domains of Self-Authorship (Cognitive, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal development). In conversations with Jules, students indicated that they needed greater clarity about what was expected out of this assignment. Jules shared those comments with me so I developed a lengthy handout that described the goal of the narrative, the nature of narrative, and a process for stimulating their thinking for this narrative (i.e., think about and answer the questions provided, identify themes across their answers for each of the three domains, then think about where there are points of intersection across those three domains and use that as the foundation to think about their future self). Once I developed the handout, I shared it with Jules.

**Jules:** When I first looked at the hand-out I was intimidated by it. I knew if I had this immediate reaction so would the students in class. I wasn't sure how to tell Tammy to take this intimidating paper and burn it so I just sat there and looked through it for a while. The questions were great, but I felt that there were too many. I think Tammy could tell by my silence that I wasn't a big fan. We compromised and decided that the students would not be required to answer all of the questions, but that it would simply be a way to stimulate their thoughts and give them a starting point. However, Tammy would highly recommend that they complete it. We agreed to move forward with sharing it with the students and I think we were both pleasantly surprised with the depth of the students' reflections in these final narratives.

### **Emergent Findings and Broader Significance**

**Tammy and Jules:** In this section of our story we offer some tentative conclusions from our work together. We include the voices of students in the class to help us tell this story and so that they can speak for themselves about how they moved toward Self-Authorship.

### **Student outcomes: The journey toward Self-Authorship**

In *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges*, Baxter Magolda (2009) describes the path one may take to move from relying on others to guide and

direct oneself to trusting one's own voice on which to make judgments and plan for the future. Along this path is Self-Authorship identified by the ability to integrate internal and external voices to make self-directed decisions that guide one's actions, and the ability to recognize and understand the interrelatedness of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. In our examination of students' final narratives, we found wonderful exemplars of students' journeys toward Self-Authorship.

[When I encounter difficult material,] instead of skipping over the confusing areas like I would in high school, knowing I would still get by, I now take initiative to clarify the information through various resources, i.e., internet resources, classmates, and professors. Though I always have and still feel intimidated when approaching another person for clarification (especially a teacher), I now realize the importance of obtaining this information, thus, changing my approach to learning. Even when I understand most of the information, I have learned that asking questions only expands my knowledge more and opens the door to new ideas. (Melissa G.)

Melissa is sharing how she is now taking a new approach to learning because it is important to do more than just "get by." She knows what her professors expect, but she wants to do more than that because she recognizes the importance for her future of obtaining new information and expanding her knowledge.

I feel that the majority of my learning has happened outside of the classroom... [C]ollege...has allowed me to develop the thinking skills to learn in other areas. My biggest learning has come from inside of myself and that had (sic) in turn leaked into the other aspects of my life...In order to accept new experiences and journeys I must take what I have learned and apply it practically. This includes every part of my life from the people I interact with, to how I take care of myself, to how I utilize my knowledge. (Lily T.)

Lily clearly understands that the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains overlap and contribute to who she is. She acknowledges that the development of her thinking skills helps her to learn in other areas. She also recognizes it is up to her to apply her learning practically in all areas of her life.

Through the knowledge that I have learned throughout my classes, mentors, interviews...and career fair day, I understand that I have what it takes to be successful whether that is personally or in my career. I have learned that the only way to learn and succeed is through hard work and dedication to my hopes and dreams. No one is going to hold my hand and help me with each step I take; I will be on my own at times and can only make it if I believe in myself and in the work hard (sic) that I do. (Kelly B.)

Finally, Kelly is truly aware that she has what it takes to be successful personally and professionally and she trusts that she is in a position to decide what to believe and how to move forward. She makes it clear she has the will and skills to follow her own vision for how to succeed in college and life. Knowing how difficult it was to write these final narratives, we were very impressed to see the depth of reflection, learning, and meaning making that was demonstrated by each of these students.



## **Instructor outcomes: Evaluating structure and support**

**Tammy and Jules:** We believe that the structure and support of our course provided “good company” (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p. 15) for our students’ journeys toward Self-Authorship. We created a safe environment for them to explore their ideas and insights and provided appropriate scaffolding to help them tackle riskier and more difficult tasks. We gave them many opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning, and we were elated to see them rise to the occasion so well and so often.

Despite our successes in Fall 2010, students’ feedback and our own reflections from our action research project suggested that we might want to make some changes in the structure of the course and our delivery of the lessons for Fall 2011. We reviewed the course evaluations and during the summer determined that we would simplify the debate and incorporate it into the discussion of one of the novels. We also wanted to amplify students’ voices and did so by clarifying the goal and expectations of the dialogues. Finally, we wanted to provide more scaffolding for the final self-narrative, so we used some of the questions from the long handout as the foundation for small-group discussion of the last novel.

**Jules:** We also made an effort to ask the students about their thoughts about how the class was progressing. When Tammy was out of town, I led an open dialogue with the class about how things were going. They mentioned they were confused on the descriptions of the papers as they found them to be too vague, they thought the papers were too long, and they wanted the writing prompts for the papers sooner. I shared these ideas with Tammy and we were able to provide greater clarity for the papers and to provide the essay prompts sooner; the length of the papers did not change.

**Tammy and Jules:** Knowing the course and each other made offering the course together the second time quite a bit easier. We believe the changes we made from Fall 2010 to Fall 2011 provided greater support and clarity for students as they continued to meet our very high expectations for their engagement in class and the depth of analysis and reflection required to complete their assignments.

## **Benefits of SoTL Work/Lessons Learned**

**Tammy:** This was the first action research project in which I have been involved. I am grateful that I was able to participate in this project with my faculty colleagues in the University Seminar program and with my peer mentor, Jules. Taking the time to reflect on the activities we created to stimulate students’ reflections to determine whether they were effective in meeting student learning goals was a valuable experience. I recognize that thoughtful, deep reflection is difficult and it takes time and intentionality. I now know that I need to help students find the time to do this reflection well and that I can support them by breaking assignments into smaller segments and being clearer and more explicit about each part. Providing clear structure and situating learning in students’ experiences helps them realize what they already know and helps them make connections to other learning. Students who were good writers seemed to be able to articulate their insights more clearly than those who struggled with writing. Through this research, I learned that I need to help all students practice identifying and sharing their

experiences and insights more articulately (include the “so what” not just the “what”), and I may need to give students the opportunity to communicate their ideas using different forms or media. Perhaps those who have trouble expressing their ideas in writing may be able to do so more eloquently through a narrated video or photo collage.

I believe that working together, Jules and I were able to create a safe, caring environment so that students could experience a true seminar. We set our expectations high, communicated those expectations in many ways, and then provided support for students to meet our expectations. We paid attention to the dynamics in the room, talked through all assignments and activities, and made modifications where appropriate. Because we did so, students were able to accept responsibility for leading dialogues, for sharing personal insights and concerns, for documenting individual and group ideas, and for writing deeply reflective self-narratives.

In addition to these insights about our delivery of this particular course, some of my most significant learning came directly from my work with Jules. I have previously team-taught courses and I have also worked with peer mentors in the past, but this project (especially the opportunity to learn from our efforts the first year and make changes for our second year) was truly invaluable. Jules approached her work with maturity and insight. She was initially somewhat reticent to counter suggestions I was making about how we might structure the course, but I sensed that so was able to ask her specific questions to encourage her to share her ideas such as, “Can you think of another way we might do this that could really get the students more involved?” or “Which activities are more interesting to you and would get you more engaged in the conversation?” Once she realized that her opinions and input really did matter to me, she was eager to offer her ideas.

Having a peer collaborator allowed me to consider, in advance, how a particular lesson would be received by the students. Sometimes I thought I was being really clear about what I wanted and expected on a paper or with an activity and when I explained it to Jules, she was clearly confused. Her reaction helped both of us clarify the expectations or directions so that we could explain it to the students more explicitly. I believe this give-and-take also helped Jules consider the different components involved in creating a lesson, so she could use this process when she led several lessons with the class. Following certain lessons, it was also valuable to hear Jules’ perspective on whether the students learned what we were trying to convey. She had the benefit of her own reaction to the lesson as well as the input from students having seen them in the dining hall or connecting with them on Facebook (two places where they were more candid with her than they ever were with me). The immediate feedback from the students allowed us to modify the direction we were heading whenever needed which helped make each class a better learning experience for everyone.

**Jules:** My involvement in the class forced me to reflect on myself and my own adolescent identity development. I came to the realization that I will always be developing in each of these domains; for as long as I live, there is always room to grow and my development will never cease. However, by participating and observing group discussion and reading the students’ reflections I realized that the biggest changes come about in adolescence. I realized how much I’ve developed over a short two years. Cognitively, I’m learning every day about the nursing profession, society, economics, and just everyday living. Interpersonally, I’ve noticed how much

I've matured in interactions with both the students and Tammy. I matured by leading discussions, explaining assignments to students, and helping to plan the class activities. Intrapersonally, looking back on how I interacted with students in Fall 2010 compared to Fall 2011, I've gained confidence in the classroom. I've gained confidence that will be applied in my future endeavors.

As a nurse, I will use the knowledge of adolescent identity to understand my patients more. By listening to discussions and reading students' reflections, I learned that people have different points of view on what's important to them and what has impacted their lives. For example, some students saw choosing high schools as a significant crossroads whereas another saw an eating disorder as a crossroads in her life. I learned to respect students' opinions for what they were.

As a student I've gained more respect for my teachers and their efforts. I've also realized how much I've grown and developed. When I beat myself up over not knowing as much information as I think I should, I can remember how far I've come. It's rewarding and comforting to know that I am indeed learning; not just memorizing but actually applying my knowledge.

As an educator, I've learned how to plan class activities. The most important thing I've learned as a future educator is how purposeful a class is. I know it sounds horrible, but as a student I just thought teachers chose a book and worked through it for 16 weeks. Being on the other side of things, I realized how wrong and immature that thought was. Tammy had a goal in mind for the class and we worked incredibly hard to ensure the students understood it and took value from the lesson.

**Tammy and Jules:** We believe we found a way to provide the guidance and support our first-year students needed to make progress toward Self-Authorship; it was clear the students also surprised themselves with their abilities to complete their assignments successfully. For us, consistent with the goals of Self-Authorship, we have learned to listen to and cultivate our own voices as we teach and learn, but even more importantly, we continue to hear and learn from each other's voices as we facilitate our mutual development as teachers and learners.

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