

The First Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning and Success, Volume III: Teaching in the First-Year Seminar

by Brad Garner

Reviewed by

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Although first-year seminars have been around for many years, there are still many institutions of higher education piloting and revamping programs each year. With these programs comes the promise of increased retention and engagement for first-year students, which makes the argument that they should be seen as an investment rather than merely another expenditure seem easy. From personal experience, however, I can say that no matter how sound an argument and data suggesting gains, financial as well as academic, from an increased budget to fund or expand a program are, passing it through the powers that be can be much more cumbersome than expected. Once the decision has been made to increase financial and human resources, it is important that a first-year seminar lives up to those promised expectations. *The First Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning and Success Volume III: Teaching in the First-Year Seminar* by Brad Garner is certainly a piece that can help to that end.

As a reviewer of this text, I come at it from a unique place. My institution is currently expanding our first-year seminar from a voluntary option to requiring it of all new students. This expansion, which we have been anticipating and pushing toward for four years, is both exciting and filled with added pressure to be successful. As one of the co-directors of the program, I read this text from a coordinator standpoint, hoping to find nuggets of wisdom that could be implemented to increase the effectiveness of our seminar as a whole. Much of this evaluation will come from looking at the text through that lens.

Teaching in the First-Year Seminar is the third volume within the series titled *The First Year Seminar: Designing, Implementing, and Assessing Courses to Support Student Learning and Success* produced by the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. This

series joins the already large body of knowledge produced related to the field of orientation, transition, and retention. Because each chapter in this text looks at a different area Garner feels is important to this process, I will likewise structure this review.

Chapter 1: Understanding our Students: Current and Future Perspectives

I believe understanding students is an appropriate way to begin. Obviously an area with seemingly endless research available, Garner puts forward a very succinct summary of important points. There is even a small section on adult learners, which pushed this reader to think for a moment how a course such as this could be utilized with non-traditional student populations. One small oddity is that, at the beginning of the chapter, to transition the reader's mindset into that of a traditional first-year student, he provides examples geared to students entering in 2003, almost ten years prior to when the volume was published. This is a great concept that falls a little flat because of the dated references. Pointing to the Beloit College Mindset List, which is done later in the appendix, I feel would have been more appropriate here.

Chapter 2: Basic Principles of Effective Teaching

The material in this chapter is key to the success of first-year seminars. Many who teach, including full-time faculty, have no background in formal teaching-learning principles. Within the chapter, the author breaks down Chickering and Gamoson's Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, Barr and Tagg's Learning Paradigm, and Edgerton's Pedagogies of Engagement—"three of the most enduring perspectives on quality of teaching in higher education." Throughout the chapter, the importance of collaborative learning and fully engaging students is emphasized. Although not contiguous, this chapter dovetails nicely with the concepts later found in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3: Planning for Instruction in the First-Year Seminar

This chapter guides the reader through the process of planning a comprehensive and cohesive learning experience in the first-year seminar. Specifically, the focus is on establishing learning outcomes, determining course content, developing a syllabus, and sequencing learning experiences. The chapter starts with a good working definition of and frameworks for selecting learning outcomes. This helps those just starting out in the assessment world begin on the right foot and ties directly into the final chapter on assessment.

As Garner transitions into course content and syllabus later in the chapter, he gives information not only on specific content, and ways to present the syllabus, but different philosophies one could adopt to help inform both processes. Although the graphic syllabus example is an interesting nugget, I'm not sure how practical it is for instructors to construct or students to follow. It is nice, however, to have a variety of models to help instructors think deeper about this necessary part of the teaching and learning process.

Chapter 4: Special Considerations in Teaching

Earlier in the text, Garner references how many first-year seminars identify building community as a key learning objective. This chapter begins by launching from that concept. The first half delves deeper into why community building is

important and cites a number of methods for an instructor to accomplish this goal. The most noteworthy is the identification of six key variables—connection, participation, safety, support, belonging, and empowerment—one could use to assess his or her own program's ability to foster community. Toward the end of the chapter, much attention is paid to selecting and utilizing a textbook. I particularly made note of how many instructors will follow the order in which information is presented in a textbook for their lectures, even if the material isn't presented in their preferred sequence. Taking that into consideration, this puts even more emphasis on using the right textbook and teaching materials. Not only should a text be selected for content, but also how it might impact the flow of a semester.

Chapter 5: Alternative Approaches to Learning

This chapter marks a transition to looking at specific strategies for more actively engaging students in the classroom. With the main method of curriculum delivery remaining largely the same for hundreds of years, while everything else worldwide has changed dramatically, presenting alternatives is a good addition to the overall body of work. Since the passage of the GI Bill, the variety of learners in institutions of higher education across the country has steadily increased. This has attracted an ever-increasing diversity of backgrounds, preparedness levels, and learning styles to our classrooms. Equipping instructors with these additional teaching tools will only increase their effectiveness as educators. The techniques of focus are cooperative learning, problem-based learning and service learning. Each section contains a variety of examples from which any instructor, new or seasoned, could pull away something of value.

My only criticism of this section is that throughout the chapter certain assumptions are made of those teaching the seminar, all of which are based on faculty teaching, not administrative professionals. Given most programs utilize staff members as well as faculty to serve as instructors, I would like to have seen more material directed toward that audience.

Chapter 6: Technology as an Instructional Resource

This chapter touches on many different areas of how technology can have an effect on student learning, both positively and negatively. The author focuses both on classroom and web-based instructional resources. The tone is set first by looking at possible trends of today's students continuing to expect faculty to utilize new technology as we move forward. With the current emphasis in the classroom on PowerPoint, the author rightfully starts off by identifying hazardous traps to avoid when using the presentation software and giving common sense advice such as using a remote to keep you mobile. It is tricky including anything on technology, given once one sends it to be published, it immediately becomes dated. Garner takes this into account when looking at exactly what to include. He focuses on broader elements, such as electronic textbooks, web-based resources, course management systems, online courses, and social networking, instead of specific trends that may be more fleeting. He rightly points out that we are only seeing the beginnings of how technology will impact teaching, learning, and classroom management.

Chapter 7: Assessment of Student Learning

In today's age of accountability, a meaningful piece on student learning would not be complete without devoting some time to assessment. The material presented within this chapter helps to lay the foundation for a program coordinator or instructor to effectively evaluate learning goals of enrolled students. Garner looks at assessment from two perspectives: activities and performances to demonstrate learning and methods to evaluate those performances. Learning styles and assessment methods are tied together nicely here by emphasizing the use of a variety of methods to ensure adequate assessment and not faulty approaches that may inaccurately gauge student progress.

As far as the overall organization of the text, each chapter concludes with a brief "Connecting Points" section containing a paragraph or two of closing points. This is a good wrap up, illustrating the keys most important to the author. There are several potential audiences for this text, as I've mentioned: first-year seminar coordinators, instructors, and administrators at any institution looking to start or increase the potency of their current program. I could see this text distributed to new instructors of a first-year seminar as a training tool or, if not distributed to all instructors, certainly a first-year seminar committee or special task force charged with improving the program.

The text, as a whole, is a good resource for anyone involved in the oversight of a first-year seminar course. Although it is filled with a wealth of information, possibly the most valuable takeaway from the book is the selection of research that is cited throughout. Any reader leaving hungry for more can certainly obtain a bookshelf full of additional literature on a number of specialized topics.