

Under My Wing: A “How-to” Process for Designing a Freshman Experience Course

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Designing a first-year experience course was a new endeavor. In my case, it could be considered a “first-year leading the first-years” experience. The title embodies my belief that this is the most important mentoring service we can provide first-year students as they enter a world of dissonance and self-discovery. A well-planned and engaging first-year experience course will show our students that we value them and their journey. They and their families have entrusted us with a very important task, and we owe it to them to deliver the best product possible. This “how-to” article will explore the process of effective course design, supporting tools, and effective assignments and activities.

Keywords: first-year experience, course design, design process, freshman, scope and sequence

My course motto was Under My Wing. The title captures my belief that this is the most important mentoring service we can provide first-year students as they enter a new and unfamiliar world, navigating the discoveries of who they are. They entrust our university and their first-year advisor, to guide them through a time of dissonance and growth (Kidwell, 2005). As their first professor, mentor, and advisor, I consider it my obligation and calling to gather first-year students who are aspiring teachers under my wing and empower them to succeed. This “how-to” perspective will examine a design process that can be used to successfully deliver a first-year experience course and develop a relationship with students who are new to higher education. This experience must empower them to remain with us in subsequent semesters through graduation. It is important to understand the rationale for a course such as this, the design process, and the tools to implement it successfully.

Context

Schreiner University is an independent, Presbyterian-affiliated, Liberal Arts college in the Hill Country of Texas. The university has a student body of 1,308 students and a typical incoming first-year class of 300. All incoming freshmen must take our IDST (Interdisciplinary Studies) 1301, which introduces them to the academy of research, scholarship, thought, and knowledge. The course was discipline-specific, where students who have designated their intent to major in education are paired with faculty or staff in their field of interest.

Rationale

Having served as an education professor for four years, I immediately saw a gap in our contact with aspiring teachers. Previously, our first course was a sophomore course, EDUC 2303 Foundations of Education, where students learn how to become a teacher. However, we were missing a critical opportunity to see those aspiring teachers when they walked through the university gates. After my first three years, I felt an intense drive to gather future teachers under my wing in the freshmen “Teach Like a Champion” course.

Design Process

COURSE GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Having designed the curriculum for years as a public school teacher and administrator, I knew the process necessary to create such a course. The challenge was proposing an aspiring teacher focus to the approving dean. I decided to go in over-prepared with a fully developed course, starting with this course goal and seven objectives:

Course Goal: Aspiring teachers are exposed to the Profession of Education.

7 COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Aspiring teachers analyze their “why” and evaluate important and necessary professional teacher characteristics, behaviors, and demeanors.
- Aspiring teachers analyze teaching degrees, courses offered, teacher certification tracks, and course content through team-building activities.
- Aspiring teachers travel to elementary, middle, and high schools to study and observe the world of teaching and reflect on their experiences.
- Aspiring teachers study the Doug Lemov book *Teach Like a Champion 3.0*, which explores best practices in teaching.

- Aspiring teachers prepare professionally written documents for effective communication as professional educators.
- Aspiring teachers formulate, articulate, and justify their rationale for becoming a teacher in a cumulative assessment that meets the requirement for a course product.
- Aspiring teachers understand and can explain the philosophical, historical, governance, ethical, and student diversity aspects of professional education.

Scope and Sequence

IDST 1301 for incoming first-year students is an entire semester (14-week) course that meets twice a week. This schedule gave me 26 class meetings on Monday and Thursday. The Dean of Student Services stipulated that eight of these meetings were standardized IDST curriculum (labeled IDST curriculum below). That directive left me with a generous 18 “Teaching Topic” classes, as seen below:

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE:

Week 1: Aug 15-19

C 1 Teaching Topic 1 Introduction, team building, What is your “Why”?

C 2 *IDST curric 1: Pre-Course Survey*

Week 2: Aug 22-26

C 3 Teaching Topic 2 Teach Like a Champion introduction

C 4 *IDST curric 2: Take/Upload Focus 2 My Career readiness planning/Academic Strengths*

Week 3: Aug 29-Sep 2

C 5 Teaching Topic 3 Education Department degree plans, Course descriptions and content

C 6 *IDST curric 3: Teacher dispositions, Setting up a FOCUS 2 account*

Week 4: Sep 5-9

C 7 Teaching Topic 4 Teach Like a Champion, teacher degree plan

C 8 *IDST curric 4: Complete college academic plan*

Week 5: Sep 12-16

C 9 Teaching Topic 5 Classroom and school observations

C 10 Teaching Topic 6 SU Services Library and Nurse

Week 6: Sep 19-23

C 11 Teaching Topic 7 SU Services: Guest Speakers

C 12 Teaching Topic 8 Field Trip to Hal Peterson Middle School

Week 7: Sep 26-30

C 13 Teaching Topic 9 Teach Like a Champion techniques 1

Week 8: Oct 6-7

C 14 *IDST curric 5: Path attribution 1*

Week 9: Oct 10-14

C 15 *IDST curric 6: Path attribution 2*

C 16 Teaching Topic 10 Education Syllabus Analysis

Week 10: Oct 17-21

C 17 Teaching Topic 11 Degree Plan audit

C 18 Teaching Topic 12 Communicate like a teacher. Evaluation of writing exemplars

Week 11: Oct 24-28

C 19 Teaching Topic 13 Writing techniques, Technical/Descriptive Writing techniques

C 20 Teaching Topic 14 Ethics

Week 12: Oct 31-Nov 4

C 21 Teaching Topic 15 History

C 22 Teaching Topic 16 Philosophy, What do you believe about learning?

Week 13: Nov 7-11

C 23 Teaching Topic 17 Teach Like a Champion techniques 4

C 24 *IDST curric 7: SMART Goal setting worksheet*

Week 14: Nov 14-18

C 25 Teaching Topic 18 Course closure, present philosophies

C 26 *IDST curric 8: Post-course survey*

LESSON PLANS

“You demonstrate your respect for and belief in students by putting their time to good use.” (Lemov, 2021, p. 27) Effectively using their time is accomplished through meticulous planning and course design. Lemov (2021) further asserts that creating a class with warmth, humanity, attentiveness, and encouragement requires detailed and thoughtful planning. Students will know you care if your lessons are designed with them in mind, are respectful of their time, and are engaging. Therefore, although no one checked, I created detailed lesson plans and student objectives for every class.

PROPOSAL AND APPROVAL

Our university’s proposal and approval process for IDST courses is straightforward and simple. A face-to-face presentation to the Dean of Student Services was required, demonstrating minimal resources. As stated above, I over-prepared and laid out artifacts such as my personal rationale for this class, course goal, course objectives, scope and sequence, all lesson plans, syllabus, assignment examples, and advising tools. As a result, the course was enthusiastically approved for implementation in Fall 2022.

COURSE CONTENT, ACTIVITIES, AND ASSIGNMENTS

In this section, content, activities, and assignments are aggregated together because they are interrelated and, in many cases, one and the same. With eighteen classes focused on the teaching profession, I had plenty of room to provide engaging exploration and experiences for 18 aspiring teachers. As seen in the scope and sequence above, the teaching content drew heavily from the sophomore course, EDUC 2303 Foundations in Education. I chose Doug Lemov's Teach Like a Champion 3.0 as a teacher-specific textbook for focused content.

Teacher-focused activities and assignments included education degree plan and syllabi analysis, teacher observations, campus field trips, teacher role-playing, writing and communicating like a teacher, educator code of ethics analysis, and exploring the history and philosophy of teaching. As a culminating student performance activity, students wrote a research paper on one of 6 education program goals: Content Knowledge, Pedagogy, Learning Environment, Curriculum, Assessment, and Teacher Professionalism.

The IDST focus of the course was standardized for all instructors. This content focused on self-reflection, Attribution Theory, career and academic planning, and SMART Goal development. Each of these was done as in-class and heavily guided assignments. This is important so as not to overwhelm students and so that they would not view the course as a burden to their new world.

COURSE TOOLS

Our university uses Canvas as an electronic platform in which courses are designed, placed, and delivered. We have an auto-video capture of all our courses called Echo 360, where classes are automatically recorded for student use outside of class meetings. The IDST shell for the course is a generic scaffold upon which instructors can build as much or as little detail as necessary for course delivery. I created fourteen modules corresponding to each week in the course. Every module had a weekly overview, daily lesson plans, learning materials and readings, assignments due, and a module summary. IDST assignments such as pre-post class surveys, student portfolios, skill inventories, and goal-setting worksheets were provided in this standardized shell.

Conclusion

Bringing first-year students under our wing is critical to ease them into the university "pool" rather than diving in headfirst. This belief served our university and first-year

students well, with a retention rate of 87% for this class of first-year students. Our students and their families are entrusting us with a huge responsibility to be sensitive to their needs and empower them to succeed in attentive, engaging, and affirming ways. An effective first-year course must be well planned to demonstrate that we value this trust, and the initial professor-student relationship is critical to student success and retention.

References

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