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2013-14 SAIF Grant  
Developing Social and Ethical Intelligence in General Education Literature Courses

**Introduction**

I applied for and received funding in order to work on a research project involving the development of social and emotional intelligence in general education literature courses. During Summer 2013, I worked with a student to organize quantitative data I had collected during the previous academic year, in which I gave students qualitative and quantitative surveys regarding their empathetic abilities at the beginning and the end of the semester. (Tools included NSSE questions that UW-Platteville students have historically scored low on, in comparison to national averages and Mark H. Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), a twenty-eight questionnaire that takes a multidimensional approach to empathy).

The results were very positive for the two groups of courses/students I had used—one that utilized activities and assignments directly related to empathy and one that acted as a control group (i.e. no changes to course). While students across all groups showed improvement, the beginning- and end-of-the-semester averages for courses that directly discussed and had activities and assignments geared towards social and ethical intelligence showed an even greater improvement in the IRI (in particular) and all 5 NSSE questions. Significantly fewer students reported in their end-of-the-semester comments that the course had improved their empathetic abilities in the control group as opposed to the other. Therefore, bringing up the notion of empathy and perspective taking—and keeping those as consistent topics of discussion—seems to be a strong pedagogical practice.

My initial proposal was to take this data and to write a pedagogy article. However, my research agenda has shifted and expanded considerably. This type of work represents a radical departure from previous scholarship and publications in literary studies, and I’ve spent much more time than I anticipated reading within different fields of study, including pedagogy studies and the psychology of fiction (both of which I expected) but also cognitive literary studies and public perceptions of higher education. I’m still in the process of contextualizing both the quantitative/qualitative data I’ve collected and the classroom practices and strategies I’m outlining, but ultimately, I think this context will allow me to discuss the broader implications of this study in relation to the current state of the humanities and general education within the American higher education system.

**Results**

The results of my SAIF grant were very successful. I now envision this as a longer research project that I hope to work on for the next several years. At this point, I am planning a series of three articles, which I detail below. All of three of these are in draft stage, though some are further along than others: for instance, I’ve been working on new strategies for close reading that I’m putting into practice this academic year, so the corresponding essay is less developed than the other two.

*Perspective-Taking Essay* (untitled so far): This essay focuses in detail on one particularly successful assignment I’ve developed that relates to social and emotional intelligence. While this assignment has been very effective in terms of building students’ awareness of different
points of view, I also discuss the excitement that perspective-taking often generates in general education students, who often view required literature courses as an obstacle to their real education. I predominantly use qualitative data, especially student comments, in this piece since the quantitative results don’t directly measure the consequences of this assignment.

Close Reading Essay (untitled so far): This essay explores classroom strategies in teaching a key concept in literary studies—close reading, which is a skill that many students have trouble with: due to the focus on state and nation-mandated testing (which for writing, is measured in a five-paragraph argumentative essay), many are coming from a background that stress macro-level rather than micro-level approaches. In here, I detail how close reading can be successfully taught in relation to “reading” characters and culture, which I then translate into “reading” people. One of the contexts for this article is new pedagogical practices in medical school, as more and more universities are incorporating humanities-type work (i.e. reading poetry about illness, taking drama workshops) in order to build medical students’ empathy and engagement with students (as typically, these sharply decrease through residency).

Why Do I Have to Read a Poem?: Making General Education Courses Matter: This article discusses more broadly key concepts in making general education courses in literature and the humanities valuable to students. As manifested in periodicals like The New York Times to The Chronicle of Higher Education, the humanities are in crisis mode—in part because they are not valued by the general public or by college students. Within the latter group, self-oriented attitudes often manifest themselves most forcefully when students discuss how higher education fits into their personal goals and ambitions. Not surprisingly, most students state that they are in college because they want to obtain good (i.e. well-paying) jobs, and the idea that a college education should make them better community members and citizens is often baffling to them. I discuss in this article how to make general education courses matter to students by stressing the connections between the skill sets of social reasoning and emotional intelligence that they learn in a literature course to those that they will need in their personal and professional lives.

The SAIF grant has allowed me to work on these separate articles, and to present a related LAE Faculty Forum response on “The Ethics of Reading Fiction” (March 2014).

Budget
I received $4000, $500 of which I used for student help and $3500 I used as summer salary, which allowed me to work on my research over the summer and to purchase some books.

Previous SAIF Grant Results
I was awarded a SAIF grant for 2012-2013 for my work in Irish literature, multiculturalism, and race. My co-edited collection, Where Motley Is Worn: Transnational Irish Literatures, in which I contributed two separate articles and edited the other essays, was published by Cork University Press in December 2014.

Benefits to the University
Clearly this project has a direct impact on my teaching practices and thus on students. Although I am a good teacher—I won the 2014 LAE Outstanding Teaching Award—this research has allowed me to improve my classroom practices. More particularly, it addresses specific weaknesses that external entities have identified in relation to a UWP education. In the last
several NSSE reports, Platteville students scored themselves lowly on questions related to empathy, perspective-taking, cross-cultural communication: for instance, that our classes “included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments” and that students increased their “understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.” My research and courses directly address these weaknesses.

I also would like to point out that, in the last HLC report, Platteville was criticized for its lack of emphasis on general education (2006). I didn’t start at UWP until 2008, but it seems to me, having served on the UUCC during the general education review and the implementation of the new general education model, that this problem has either remained static or worsened. However, my research is about how to make general education students understand the value of these courses, and in both informal measures (conversations in my office, class discussion) and more formal tools (student evaluations), by and large, students do find value in my courses—especially when I put into practice the pedagogical models I discuss in this research project.