Can First Year Seminars Impact Critical Thinking?

Over the past ten years, Elon University has offered a first year seminar designed to increase academic challenge by pushing students from the dualistic stage of intellectual and moral development, as defined by William Perry, through multiplicity to relativism. Can we expect to push students this far in a first year seminar? This session will present evidence that it can, and explore the types of teaching and learning that fosters such intellectual development.

Question to ponder:

Can we foster high level critical thinking in first year students?

OR

What plan for advancing critical thinking do you have for your first year students?

General Studies Intellectual Development Scheme

Many first year students arrive thinking that things are clearly right or wrong, but without any real backing for their ideas:

**It’s My Way or It’s the Wrong Way – Just Because.**

Moving students past this way of thinking is the first big job of General Studies, and one of the main objectives of Global. The basic strategy is to confront the students with cultures that do things differently. The conferences also help, for they must put themselves in the place of someone representing a different culture or defend their own culture. The six themes also help support this goal. By the end of the semester, almost all of your students should be willing to accept the idea that different cultures do things differently. They should all be believing:

**That’s OK, It’s Their Way – Just Because.**

Moving on to the next stage is the job of the “Liberal Studies” requirement. In these courses, the students will be introduced to a number of different methodologies —different ways of deciding if an argument or point of view is valid or acceptable. We try to start this in Global by introducing the idea that some things are wrong, even if they may seem to be acceptable in some cultures. The step the students need to make is to see there are EXTERNAL standards that should apply in some situations, whether they are moral or intellectual. We try to assess the progress of the
students here by looking for the use of evidence, not just opinion, in the sophomore Writing Assessment. By now, the students should be saying:

**Here’s a Way – Because.**

The students now realize they can’t just say “because.” They have to have a reason for their ideas, opinions, and actions. The General Studies Seminars are designed to make the students choose between methodologies and systems of support. They might also try to synthesize points of view from different works. The idea is they are starting to put together their own system of beliefs and behaviors, a system thought through and not entirely culturally determined. They should also begin to realize they will be reviewing and revising their system of beliefs throughout their whole life. We hope they are now saying:

**Here’s My Way – Because.**

This journey from “My Way – JUST Because” to My Way – Because” is not easy. Developmental Psychologists have found almost no one gets to this final stage when they are college age. In fact, the studies show a large majority of Americans never get to this stage. We need to give our students a good start on this journey if we want them to become responsible citizens, good neighbors, and leaders in their workplaces and communities. If we don’t start them, the chances are very good they will never get very far.

### Global Themes

While there are general course goals for all General Studies courses, our course will focus upon six main themes. Over the semester, we will work to understand:

1. the importance of individual responsibility.
2. the relationship of humans to the natural world.
3. globalization and tribalization as powerful global forces.
4. the impact of imperialism and colonialism.
5. the nature of culture.
6. the plights of disempowered groups.
Pretest

From your perspective, what impact will this semester have on you? This includes what you would like it to have, along with what you think it will be. What changes will occur? What opportunities will it offer? How will it influence your values, beliefs, and ideas? Will it influence your view of yourself? Your sense of yourself as a student? Your family and friends? Their view of you?

Midterm

For our midterm exam, I want us to reflect upon the course objectives that mean the most to you. Consider at all we have read, heard, and watched this semester, and explore the three objectives that have meant the most to you so far. For those of you who fail to have the objectives memorized (or tattooed on your body), here they are:

1. the importance of individual responsibility.
2. the relationship of humans to the natural world.
3. globalization and retribalization as powerful global forces.
4. the impact of imperialism and colonialism.
5. the nature of culture.
6. the plights of disempowered groups.

In writing the midterm, feel free to draw upon any assigned texts, lectures, cultural events, online articles, or comments made by someone in the class (as always, be sure to cite sources you refer to). Also, feel free to bring in material from your own life, readings on your own, in other classes, bull sessions with friends, specific events, your acculturation into Elon, anything that you believe is relevant to your understanding of the question below.

This is not a place where you attempt to regurgitate as many names and articles as possible, in order to impress the teacher. You should generate a thoughtful, considered, coherent reflective essay, which helps me to see what you have learned so far. Argue why the three objectives you have chosen have made an impact on you, and how they shape the way you see yourself. You will not be evaluated by your ability to read my mind and say "what I want to hear." Instead, you will be evaluated on the level of your intellectual engagement, and the seriousness with which you have participated in the readings, writings and discussions we have had so far.

The midterm should be two to three pages in length. I would refer to a wide variety of materials.

The assignment:

Reflect upon the six themes and the work you have completed this semester. Which three objectives have had the greatest impact on you? Why? How have they help change the ways you see the world? Your work with others? How have these three objectives influenced your perspective?
Post-test

This is it, the final paper. After all we have been through, this is your last chance to translate into a written text just what this class has meant to you. What an opportunity, right?

Remember where you were four short months ago? Naïve and innocent. You were dying to get to go to cultural events. You hadn’t heard of Jihad and McWorld. You may have had no idea why some people do better than others. You may not have cared. Contemporary slavery was being assigned three papers over the weekend. Think of where you are now and compare. What I want you to bring on Monday is a reflection upon how much you have changed and why. How have you developed as a person? What has led you to this point? What things have you controlled? Which ones have you not? Why? Was this change inevitable, change that comes from exposing yourself to new ideas in college? Or have you minimized it, by rejecting most new ideas, trying to protect what you were when you came to Elon in August?

Look back at your earliest writing, your look ahead at this semester, as a reminder of where you were when the class began. Compare that person with the one who is writing the final. How have you changed? What have you learned? What skills did you possess then that still serve you well today? Which ones were you forced to discard? Develop? How have your views about writing and thinking changed? Do you like it more or less? Does it have value in your life (be honest with me; I can take it!)? Are you a better writer and thinker today? What did you do to bring about this change? What academic and social forces on the campus have changed you as a person? Recognizing that this class would have been an intellectual vacuum without the men? Your begging me to write more papers? Dorm life? 8:00 classes? Think about everything that might shape you as a student in this class.

Be as creative as you wish in writing your paper. There are no restrictions on what you should include or how the paper is to be written. The paper should be from two to three typed pages in length. It should be cohesive, interesting, and educational. Obviously, you cannot answer all of the above questions. They are intended only as guides. You should determine the focus based upon your own observations of yourself and your experiences this year. It is likely that everyone’s paper will be significantly different, given that we all look through our own lenses at our experiences and interpret them accordingly. This paper will be due at the beginning of the final on Monday, hard copies only. Don’t be late!!

Dualism

• I do not intend to change any of my values, beliefs or ideas that I already have. I intend to share these with others in the class and see their reactions to them, and also to hear their values, beliefs, and ideas. I am open minded and do not believe that anyone else is wrong in what they believe, but I am very strong in what I believe and do not intend to be swayed into something else just because that is what everyone else says is correct. My view of myself as a strong, independent, stubborn person who will listen to what others have to say but if they tell me that something I believe is wrong than I will fight them (verbally) to the death. Since I feel so strongly I do not feel that something little will change my view of myself. Unless this semester brings me to a near death experience which in which some god comes and
talks to me and brings me to an epiphany I do not think that this semester will bring a large change my view of myself.

- I see the first semester as having a great impact on me. Not just by making me realize that I am in the real world and am on my own, but it will change my view of the world around me that I have always known.

**Multiplicity**

- We tend to want to stay in our own little bubbles, consciously blocking out world news we don't care to hear about.
- It is amazing the startling facts I have learned about the world around us, and now that I know these things, I feel obligated as an educated student to do what I can on a personal level.
- I will not lie when I state that this particular course may have changed the way I view my life, as well as others, for the remainder of my time on earth.
- Being led to thinking such an in-depth manner is what I am attributing to my successes, so far, at Elon.
- The most important thing I have learned is the value of the actual letter grade I receive in my classes does not matter as much as I always thought. What matters is how I have grown to be a much more knowledgeable person who truly cares about the things I am become more and more educated about.
- I didn’t know what I had in store for me when I arrived on campus in August. I wasn’t aware that I would be challenged to this extent to form decisions on what I think about the world around me. It’s so hard to make decisions on topics that are so broad and ever changing.
- Another change that has occurred in my life because of Global is that I have a totally different view point on things. I do not think that I changed what I believe about every topic but I did change how I viewed every topic that arose in class. I came into college living a pretty sheltered life. I knew there were problems around the world and in the United States but since they did not really affect me I did not think about them.
- After the events of September 11, I had held hostile thoughts about the people of the Middle East and Islam. I considered them all to be as evil as the attackers who killed our people. But once I was exposed to Benazir’s comments, I realized how, in fact, Islam is a peaceful religion, and the many people of the Islamic faith grieved for our country when we were attacked. I learned that it is only a small percentage of people in the Middle East who support the destruction of the United States, and as strange as it may seem, it is not fair for us to judge their beliefs either. I am thankful for the opportunity of seeing and listening to Benazir Bhutto because she not only made me think differently about people in the Middle East, but about people of different countries as a whole. I now look at cultures and religions with an open minded perspective and I know now that it is wrong to judge them based on my own culture and religion because they are not just like me. They have been brought up in their own culture and no matter how different it may be when compared to my own, and no matter how badly it may clash with my beliefs, I cannot condemn it in any way because it is what they are taught to believe. Just as how, I believe what I am brought up to believe.
- One of the stronger impacts of the first semester was learning that things are not always as you see them. That everything is not always black and white, but there are some very gray areas in the things that we often think about. I have been challenged to think, observe, learn, question, and form opinions all in my first semester of college, and most of these tasks have been put upon me by the countless number of papers I have written for this class, and the even more countless number of discussions that have taken place at 8 in the morning.
• Instead of looking at something from one point of view, I now try to understand the culture that is involved and base a rational explanation of why things are the way they are from several points of view.
• I now look at situation in life and the world in many different lights than the initial one it is presented in. This course has changed the way I view the most trivial and complicated issues of the world. I will never look at anything the same because I will always be thinking about everything that is going on with the situation and why.
• This class has more or less taught me to think in a new way. It seems as though in the past I was taught to develop an opinion, and then argue it uncompromisingly. However, one of the first things I learned in this class, and at this school, was to be open-minded and willing to accept other views.

Relativism

• I think my greatest difficulty in this course has been what you recognized that I had been failing to do at midterm: coming up with my own solutions and opinions to problems that we face in the world. I struggled with this for a long time because I figured that the problems, which we had been discussing, had been analyzed and discussed by some of the smartest people in the world yet they still were not solved. How could a college student come up with these profound solutions that no one else could come up with?
• I never imagined that so many aspects of the vast world around us could come to me in such a little place as Elon, but I now have a deeper appreciation for all the different kinds of people in the world, their culture, their ideas, their beliefs, their ways of life, and why some people do better than others.
• Not only did I learn about new issues of the world, I truly questioned them; and in doing so, many times I questioned my own values and practices.
• I think coming to my own conclusions about the issues brought to my attention through assigned articles and text helped me better understand our society as a whole.

When thinking about what has developed me into the person that I am now, I was not able to pinpoint one specific aspect of life that has done it. It is amazing that all the little things of your life that will change you in a profound way. Roommates, classes, skipping classes, boys, Red Sox, family, death, playing “mom,” illness, weight gain, weight loss, friends and much more has affected me and gradually changed me, making me into who I am today. They have changed my one voice, made it loud and made it proud. My one voice is what I have and my one voice is what I will use. I will use it wisely, something that I have not always done, and I will use it for important things. My one voice will spread my words to whoever is willing to listen. I now want to use my one voice.