

## CTL PROJECT REPORT

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### *Project Description*

My aim this year has been to learn more about experiential writing or "life writing" as a means of motivating students to articulate their thoughts, stimulate their imagination, and to promote writing beyond the classroom. By "life writing" I intend writing in order to understand something better, including oneself. Writing for a course or independent study is obviously primary in a liberal arts college. And students write all the time: They text, post on Facebook, use Twitter, etc... But this type of writing is less reflective given the nature of social media. Even the writing that students do for their courses frequently remains marginal to their "real" lives outside of the classroom. How can we make writing more central to their life? What if we begin to structure our courses and the curriculum in ways that promote life writing, outside of the classroom, as an important means for students' intellectual and emotional development.

Throughout the academic year, I've introduced regular posting/writing on the Moodle forum in four different courses: a First Year Seminar on *Cycling, Sustainability, and the City of Hartford* (co-taught with Johannes Evelein last fall, 27 students), *Italian Cinema* (16 students), *Food in Italian History, Society, and Art* (23 students) and in *Sustainability in Action* (14 students). For the purposes of this report, I will briefly describe forum topics, students' posts, and their reactions to frequent posting. I will also report on the Lesson Study Plan video experience and, finally, on my participation in CTL discussions and workshops.

### *Life writing in several courses*

In *Cycling, Sustainability, and the City of Hartford* students learned about the bicycle as a cultural artifact and as a practical means of transportation. Focusing on Hartford's long history with the bicycle industry, students learned about the history of Hartford, its neighborhoods and institutions. And they learned about the bicycle as a sustainable means of transportation and about other sustainability-related topics. Most importantly, students engaged with their new environment by riding the city streets on weekends. They also were enrolled in an extra .5 credit "term project" that was community related. As part of our pedagogy, Johannes and I implemented frequent writing. Besides the short paper due in late August, students wrote three other 3-4 page papers (including a "class letter" to President Berger-

Sweeney about Trinity's commitment to sustainability), a final paper (6-8 pages), and approximately 25 "posts" (of about 250 words each or 1 page).

Students wrote posts commenting assigned readings usually in preparation for class discussion. They also reflected on their cycling experiences, field trips, and on their term projects. Forum topics were often meant to stimulate thinking, rather than confirm whether or not they had done the reading. These topics were very effective. Here is an example: In the week of September 29 to October 3, students wrote about: "Livin' la vida loca: How I plan to live well and sustainably on a budget", "You and the Stuff You Buy", "Creativity and Education in a Consumer Society". Students ran with these topics because they sensed that the course material and ideas were embedded in things that mattered to them. Good, clear scaffolding of topics, as well as thorough topic prompts were crucial, of course. The principal idea was to compel students to make connections between classroom learning and their "real" lives.

The upshot of frequent "life writing" posts was that students found that they could write more freely and more easily. I'd like to think that they became better writers. But who is to say since writing is a craft/art that one develops in time and with lots of practice. And that was the point of the forum posts, to make them practice often. My main concern in having them write often and on different topics was, moreover, to encourage them to not fear writing, to just write, draft, and then edit. Students commented enthusiastically how they felt that they could just sit down and write. I'm sure the frequent writing assignments were also a burden at times. The result also is that shy students always had something to say in class, whether or not they actually did so. Whether or not they will write for themselves outside of class is another matter and time will tell.

In *Italian Cinema* and *Food in Italian History, Society, and Art*, as well as the College Course on *Sustainability in Action*, I used this model almost exclusively, I took this technique to an "extreme". The cinema course met twice a week and students posted twice a week. I kept the readings light and asked them to watch two films a week. In one forum topic, for example, I asked them to select a scene of a given film and analyze it, muting the soundtrack and dialogue, so as to encourage them to focus on the cinematography. Besides mid-term and final exam essays, they wrote 30 posts (again approximately 250 words or 1 page). In the *Food in Italian History ...* course, students wrote 34 posts! besides mid-term and final exam essays. From the first post about "What are my learning goals for this course this semester?" to the last topic "What are my food politics?", students wrote competently and with interest on many topics. I wrote for them, too, for example, not only by creating carefully crafted prompts, but by writing short

essays about different topics related to food, cinema, education, books, etcetera. In the College Course that Johannes and I taught this spring, students read a chapter each week of Donella Meadows' classic work, "Thinking in Systems" and posted about it, usually responding to a specific question. They reported on their projects and also commented on other readings.

Not all students posted all of the time. And in many cases as the semester wore on, some students posted after discussion, sometimes with much delay. Throughout the year, I encouraged students to write and to post in a timely fashion. I also made a point of talking about the writing (not only about their ideas) and I occasionally approached a student whom I thought needed some assistance. The "informal" and spontaneous nature of these "interventions" and feedback blurred the line between formal and informal, between corrective feedback, criticism, and support.

### *Lesson Study Plan*

The Lesson Study Plan video of two class sessions in the first year seminar about cycling dealt with "Effective Speed" (comparing travel by bike vs. by car). "Show me the learning" is the aim of the lesson study plan but it isn't so easy to do. I think that the experience turned out to be positive, however. I created the segment about "effective speed" based on a study by Paul Tranter, and Johannes Evelein was instrumental in recalibrating my lesson plan so that students would be able to calculate their own effective transportation speed. After the actual class sessions, I had little or nothing to do with the editing of the video, delegating that task to two students. One in particular went to town with it and devoted much time and energy to the exercise. At the CTL panel discussion in March, several students spoke pointedly and eloquently about the experience and about the course. Although the Lesson Study Plan was not originally integrated into my CTL fellowship, it ultimately lent another dimension to my project topic. Students calculated and wrote about their effective speed as a personal reflection and discovered that the simple and necessary practice of driving (vs. cycling) had a significant impact. The result is that students were more conscious of the economic, environmental, and personal trade-offs in different modes of mobility and they reflected on that experience in writing.

### *CTL Discussions/Workshops*

I tried to shake things up just a little bit. By asking colleagues to read James C. Scott's short book about "Two Cheers for Anarchism", I wanted to create a wide-ranging, free-flowing discussion. I hoped that CTL fellows would be able to apply some of Scott's observations to teaching. I often find that it is not the

pedagogy specific text that intrigues me, but the theoretical or experiential work from a seemingly unrelated field or discipline. As a professor of the Humanities, everything is fair game in my mind. It turned out that the discussion was ample, engaging, and we all learned something about the importance of anarchy in our daily lives. Applied to learning, anarchy invites individuals to be creative. And when we are creative, we feel free, and when we feel free we sometimes find meaning, have fun, blur the lines between work and play, and possibly be happy? Everyone, including me, has their utopias, I suppose.

Throughout the year, I found our discussions especially with colleagues from the social sciences to be fascinating. Besides reading articles and learning about the teaching and learning challenges they face (which are the ones that I face basically), I'll be able to continue our conversation. I am grateful to them.

And this leads me to my conclusion, by submitting this final report, I am now officially a former fellow. The CTL (if I may) needs to find the means to integrate former with current fellows, create a structure so that we can build on our experiences together.

In closing, I wish to thank Dina Anselmi and Chris Hager for their brilliant organization, gracious hospitality, thought provoking observations, and also for keeping us all on track. This has been a rewarding year for me in different ways and the CTL fellowship was a big part of it. Thank you, Dina and Chris!