**Notes on Faculty Development Workshops:**

**Sharing Approaches to the English 12 Capstone Assignment**

Wednesday, October 1, 2014

Attending: Rick Armstrong, Lesley Broder, Lisa Freedman, Rachel Ihara, Anna Kosierkiewicz, Benjamin Villarreal

We began this workshop by discussing what we saw as challenges to designing effective Capstone Assignments and/or what seemed to be particularly difficult for students. These were some of the observations:

* Several people spoke of the challenge of getting students to avoid creating “reports” or simply listing resources they had found, even when the assignment explicitly emphasizes the importance of having an argument and notes that the only difference between this assignment and other essays is the requirement to include sources in addition to the shared class text.
* Ben spoke the challenge of getting students to “analyze” by showing the relationship of a given claim to the evidence provided.
* Lesley raised the question of wording, noting the potential for students to misinterpret a series of questions as a list of directives.
* Rachel noted the technical difficulties students experience when dealing with multiple texts, and the need to provide instruction on introducing and framing quotations.

Rick began by sharing the Capstone Assignment he gives in a section of English 12 linked with a history class. This assignment asks students to use at least one source from class and at least three sources from library databases and offers 12 possible essay topics. Participants noted the following strengths of this assignment: it offers students many options; it is similar in format to earlier essays and the topic directions note this continuity; the topics make use of MLA conventions in quoting; students have ample time to work on the project since the first draft is due mid-November. One suggestion was the assignment handout might group or name the topics to make it easier for students to choose between the many options.

Ben shared his handout, which included the assignment and several preliminary assignments intended to prepare students for the Capstone. Participants commented that this provided helpful scaffolding for students. For instance, the first “feeder” assignment asked students to annotate an article and explain how it related to the essay being revised to form the Capstone. Completing this preliminary step could help students be better prepared to move on to the next step, integrating the new source into the Capstone. Participants also commented favorably on his decision to design a hybrid class around themes of digital literacy and online identities, thereby creating continuity between the course content and the mode of delivery.

Rachel shared her approach to the Capstone, which asks students to choose one of three previous essays to revise by incorporating at least one additional source located through the library databases. Participants discussed both the value and the challenges of conceiving of the Capstone as a revision of an earlier essay. On one hand, students would be further along in their thinking about the topic and could choose a strong essay; on the other, beginning with a “complete” essay necessarily narrows the number of appropriate sources, making research more challenging.

Anna shared her assignment, which asks students to use the course readings (*Brave New World* and *1984*), their own personal writing on an imagined utopia, and independently resources sources to “take a position on the topic of control.” Participants in the workshop were enthusiastic about the course theme and saw this topic as one that would interest students. Discussion centered around questions of how students might go about comparing the different examples of societies, since they were being asked to discuss fictional societies, their own imaginary societies, and real world situations they might learn about through research. Thus questions about the “effectiveness” of a given mode of control might vary depending on the type of example being considered.

Wednesday, October 2

Attending: Nicole Beveridge, Lesley Broder, Jen Cortijo, Rachel Ihara, Joanne Stein, Amy Washburn

This session also begin with a general discussion of the Capstone Assignment and what instructors found to be challenging in designing effective assignments. Some of the same topic emerged, with people noting the challenge of being clear and concise while also providing enough direction. Participants also discussed the need to be clear about terms like “analyze” and the benefits of restricting the number of texts students could write about in order to encourage them to really put those texts in dialogue with one another.

First, Lesley shared her assignment for an English 12 class focused on food issues. For the Capstone, students are required to analyze a marketing campaign, commercial, print ad or series of packages to evaluate the ethics of that set of ads or campaign. Participants commended Lesley for the layout of the assignment, which used headings and bullets and included a checklist of things to review before submitting. People thought the list of possible topics was useful and liked that students were also able to propose new topics of their own. One suggestion was that students might benefit from some discussion or reading on the topic of “ethics” in order to be better prepared to write about what made something ethical or unethical for them.

Amy’s Capstone Assignment for her linked class asks students to focus primarily on the shared class reading, bringing in one peer-reviewed article assigned in class and one additional article of their own choosing. Participants were impressed that Amy provided such detailed information about the Capstone at the very beginning of the semester, thereby giving students a sense of what to expect from the class. There was a suggestion that formatting and/or titles could be used to distinguish among the various the various elements of the assignment: the main description of the task and its objectives, suggested topics, and basic formatting requirements.

Nicole, Jen and Joanne shared drafts and ideas for their Capstones leading to a more general conversation about the issues they raised. Nicole talked about offering students a list of general themes instead of composing essay prompts, and Jen suggested that students might be able to come up with prompts of their own from the themes. Jen expressed reservations about using graphic images in an online format, even though such images made sense in the context of a class centered on the KCC Reads book *Just Kids*. Participants reassured her that the material was appropriate in context and could be framed to minimize the possibility that students would take offense. Joanne talked through ideas for a Capstone Assignment as an drawing upon both her first essay on gender and her second on language and technology. The group brainstormed possible points of connection.