Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar

Name: Andrea Opitz

Department: ENGLISH

Typically, participants are awarded a course release in order to make time for their participation in the seminar. However, in select cases, we will consider awarding a stipend instead of a course release if the applicant’s department can't cover the course release.

Please indicate whether you will be requesting a course release or stipend if you're chosen to participate in the seminar:

Course Release

Has your chair sent an email to the Director of the CTL indicating his or her support of your application and willingness to find coverage for your course reduction (if you are requesting one)?

Yes

In which semester would you prefer to participate in the seminar?

Fall

Project Title: Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

Project Proposal (500–750 words, including a rationale, project description, a discussion of the benefit to the Stonehill community, and your "community outreach plan") -- see full requirements on the CTL website.

Rationale

Last year I started directing the American Studies program. This fall I've had the opportunity to teach the intro course for the first time. While it's been an interesting experience I had to realize that teaching in an interdisciplinary program comes with its own challenges. My primary training is in English and Comparative Literature. And even though I would need to think back quite a ways to find an English course I've taught that didn't in some form draw on other disciplines (History, Film Studies, Sociology, or Geography, for instance), actually teaching a course dedicated not only to interdisciplinary content but also methodology, I have found, is a completely different story. For instance, two of the assignments in the course—"Current Events in Historical Context" and the final project—encourage students to draw on a variety of sources but what that in the end looked like turned out to be more a matter of chance than design on my part. And, the question of whether either assignment engaged students in interdisciplinary work I am also not too comfortable answering. More broadly, at the end of teaching my first intro course I have realized that I made very little room for actually talking about the methodologies that inform the various disciplinary on which American studies builds, or about what distinguishes, let's say, “doing” American studies from History.

To me, one of the main points of American studies is that it introduces students to the study of key questions in American culture and society—such as what it means to belong to America; who gets included or excluded in the nation at various points in history and for what reasons; and so on—from a number of different perspectives. These perspectives are expressions of different methodologies, of asking slightly different questions and arriving at their answers in different ways. And while I find that the questions I have had us contemplate and the readings I have compiled allowed for an exploration of multiple perspectives, I am not convinced that the course and its assignments actually offered a pedagogical space for students to practice interdisciplinary approaches.
A related, somewhat broader, concern has to do with how the American studies program is currently structured. Aside from the two required AMST courses—the intro and the capstone—the students primarily experience interdisciplinarity—or rather multi-disciplinarity?—by taking courses in a number of different disciplines. The intro and the capstone, then, offer most of our majors the only opportunity to practice interdisciplinarity in one course—studying subjects from multiple disciplinary perspectives and, more importantly, completing assignments or projects in which they practice integrating or otherwise bringing together these various disciplinary methods.

Project Description
In this seminar I would like to investigate the pedagogical literature that has emerged from interdisciplinary studies in order to find out how I can better teach a course meant to offer students an interdisciplinary experience. My primary focus will be on how, within such a course, I can design assignments that facilitate interdisciplinary learning so that the knowledge that students produce in this interdisciplinary learning environment is different from knowledge they would produce in a History, Sociology, or in an English class. It seems to me that interdisciplinary studies means to put students in a different (more aware?) relationship to knowledge production by, in part, addressing the nature of disciplinary epistemologies. But what does this actually look like in practice? In his Integrating the Disciplines: Successful Interdisciplinary Subjects, for instance, Clinton Golding suggests that “interdisciplinary students must learn to interrogate multiple ways of knowing and the structure of knowledge itself” (3). In his work Golding proposes that students must develop a “reflective and explicit knowledge of how disciplines work” in order to then figure out how to integrate them or see “possibilities of interaction between them” (3).

Benefit
As I am preparing to teach the capstone course in the spring, I hope that what I’d be able to figure out would be useful in my teaching that course as well as the intro course again in the fall. Moving forward I will likely teach these two AMST courses each year. In addition, I have had conversations with Peter Ubertaccio about possibly creating an Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies course that I would teach every other year, in addition to a topics course in the IND program also every other year. For these more broadly defined interdisciplinary courses it would be highly beneficial for me and for the students if I had a better sense of the pedagogy that informs interdisciplinary studies and of the learning opportunities interdisciplinary studies is able to offer students at Stonehill.

Community Outreach Plans
As director of American studies I would like to share what I learn about teaching interdisciplinary courses with my colleagues on the steering committee when we meet spring semester to discuss the state of the program and the proposal of adding a methods course as a third required course for the major. Secondly, I would be happy to lead a break out session on interdisciplinary studies at Stonehill at Academic Development Day in the fall.

Syllabus (optional) -- can also be emailed as an attachment to Patricia Neagle (pneagle@stonehill.edu)