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A Curriculum for the Selfie Generation



Katie Currid for The Chronicle

Jennifer Rosti, a lecturer in the English department at Roanoke College, leads a course called "The Crossroads of Revenge," in which students are encouraged to reflect on what it means to live well.

By Dan Berrett | JUNE 02, 2014 ✓ PREMIUM**SALEM, VA.**

Students seldom relish required courses. They are often seen as a burden that everyone would rather get out of the way—a bit like flossing.

Some colleges think they've found a solution: They have adopted a curricular approach fit for a generation of oversharers and made the courses all about the students.

Courses with names like "Making Life Count,"

"The Meaning of Life," and "Concepts of the Self" appear in the pages of course catalogs, often as general-education or required offerings. Dozens of colleges list courses in "the good life"—helping students recognize, realize, and maximize it.

While the term originated in philosophy, it has popped up as the central theme of interdisciplinary humanities seminars, film-studies courses, and history classes at community colleges, small elite institutions, and large research universities.

More me-centric courses are coming. The National Endowment for the Humanities is awarding grants to faculty members to develop courses organized around what it calls "enduring questions" that have "long held interest for young people." An NEH-funded course at Middlebury College includes readings by Aristotle and Confucius, which are intended to encourage students to live more thoughtfully. The creators of the course anticipated that its focus could sound shallow. "We welcome students," they wrote in their proposal, "who might argue that the very question, 'What is the good life and how do I live it?' is naïve and narcissistic."

The student-centric approach reflects recent curricular trends and scholarship. Many colleges are revamping entry-level survey courses that introduce students to a body of disciplinary knowledge. Similarly, some experts in teaching and learning are urging professors to avoid pedagogical methods that seek to stuff content into the heads of students. They encourage professors to instead draw from what students already know—their prior knowledge—and help them reconcile that material with new information.

Researchers are gathering new evidence that traditional-age college students inhabit a phase that is socially, neurologically, and developmentally distinct. As not-quite-full-fledged adults, they yearn to find their place in the world. Colleges, particularly small liberal-arts ones, are seizing on that developmental stage as a pedagogical opportunity.

A few research universities and lawmakers see the value of personally relevant curricula, too. A state law adopted in Florida last year led to the creation of "What Is the Good Life?," a required course at the University of Florida. Students explore that question through art, architecture, history, literature, music, religion, and philosophy.

The course's chief backer is J. Bernard Machen, the university's president, who sees it as a throwback to the sorts of introductory humanities courses that were required of previous generations of students.

The university encourages students to take the course during their freshman year, and the bill recommending it specifies that it should be for first-time students, in part because people of that age are ripe for self-examination. Mr. Machen made that point to students in a lecture for the course. "Your time in college remains the single-best opportunity for you to explore who you are and your purpose in life," he told them.

But taking advantage of that phase in students' lives also carries an obligation, says Michael B. Poliakoff, vice president of policy for the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which advocates for high academic standards with a traditionalist bent. The courses, he said, must be properly structured and expose students to rigorous material.

Texts like *Antigone*, by Sophocles, and *Siddhartha*, by Hermann Hesse, which are assigned in Florida's course, serve as a good example, he said. "Readings that, by their nature, force the student to move out of his or her familiar contemporary context to connect with the human experience at a broader level," he says, give that course "a much greater likelihood that it won't be solipsistic."

If the readings are not sufficiently demanding, he added, the courses will probably fall short. "Students," he says, "already receive plenty of training in being self-referential."

But too often, says Randy L. Swing, executive director of the Association for Institutional Research, something like the opposite occurs: Professors make only cursory efforts, if any, to connect the course material to students' lives. Much of what students are exposed to, he adds, especially early in college, strikes them as abstract or meaningless.

"Learning would happen more often if we got the context right."

"Most general-education courses are really guilty of assuming people want what's coming at them," Mr. Swing says. "Learning would happen more often if we got the context right."

Many professors wage a continuing battle against students' apathy, seeking to motivate them to do cognitively demanding work. Twelve years ago, faculty leaders at Roanoke College looked at data from the National Survey of Student Engagement and found they were losing the fight.

Their students reported doing higher-level intellectual tasks like analyzing, synthesizing, and making judgments about arguments, ideas, and information less often than the professors wanted.

"It really disappointed us," says Gail A. Steehler, associate dean for academic affairs and general education.

The college overhauled its core curriculum five years ago to "meet the students where they are," says Ms. Steehler. Survey data for subsequent years have shown an increase, she says, of more than 10 percentage points in the higher-level tasks.

The new curriculum extends through all four years. In the first year, students choose courses that satisfy two requirements, one in "intellectual inquiry" and the other in "living an examined life."

"Freedom, Ethics, and the Good Life: Do We Decide?" is one course that fulfills the latter requirement. It was taught last semester by Melanie E. Trexler, a visiting assistant professor of religion and philosophy. Her students explored how Islam and Christianity approach issues of terrorism, war, and peace. They read books like *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* and *War and the Christian Conscience*.

Rather than dive into religion or history on the first day, however, Ms. Trexler has her students analyze the lyrics to "Billionaire," the pop tune sung by Bruno Mars.

The song frames a class discussion about the good life. The students list what such a life means to Mr. Mars—buying new things and appearing "on the cover of *Forbes* magazine/Smiling next to Oprah and the Queen."

And what, she asks her students, do you want for yourselves? She says the answers are typically less grand but express similar desires: They want professional success and money.

Then comes a third question. Think of a hero, Ms. Trexler says she tells her students. It can be someone they know or a historical or fictitious figure. Why do you admire them?

Most of the students, she said, cite their parents or grandparents because of their work ethic, loyalty, and courage, often demonstrated through service during war.

She repeats a previous question, What do students want in their own lives? Their answers change. Many say they want love, a support system, and community, or a sense of connection to something larger than themselves, like their country.

A few classes later, Ms. Trexler assigns two essays about suicide bombing. The writers are both Muslims; one abhors the practice and the other approves. The one who endorses it invokes loyalty and nationalism, which are some of the ideals her students said on the first day that they valued.

Ms. Trexler, who starts at Valparaiso University in the fall, has taught the same essays in courses at other institutions, but not in a me-centric way. She says she noticed a deeper reaction in her students at Roanoke. "My experience here is that it works better because

students can engage with the ideas because they can see themselves in them," she says. "They can see the internal logic."



Katie Currid for The Chronicle

Roanoke College students in an English course on revenge began the semester with presentations on personal experiences of seeking revenge before moving on to examples in literature and other genres.

The process of shifting students' focus from themselves to bigger ideas is not always smooth or direct.

To prepare for one midsemester discussion, Ms. Trexler's students read an excerpt from *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, by Amin Maalouf, and responded to it in a class blog. The reading described the 1098 siege of Ma'arra, a city in what is modern-day Syria, and the Crusaders' cannibalism of its Muslim residents.

In class, Ms. Trexler focused on a part of the reading that had struck many of her students. A few survivors of the massacre are exiled and find refuge with a religious judge, or *qadi*, who interprets their suffering. "A Muslim need not be ashamed of being forced to flee from his home," he tells them. "Was not Islam's first refugee the Prophet Muhammad himself?"

"What's going on here?" Ms. Trexler asked her class. "Can you put this in your own words?"

Several students thought the *qadi* was being opportunistic, using the trauma to peddle false hope and attract new followers. By trying to place a positive spin on the refugees' horror, other students added, the *qadi* may have been engaging in a process of rationalization.

"Do you think we have to rationalize in our daily lives?" asked Ms. Trexler.

One student did. "Last night," she said, "I ate half a bag of Cadbury Mini Eggs and I rationalized it by saying I didn't eat lunch."

Another student drew a more-substantive analogy. The *qadi*'s reassurance, she said, was a lot like what her high-school teacher said during the throes of the economic crash: The nation has survived hard times before, and it will again.

Later, a student highlighted how the Crusaders viewed the Muslims as less than human. That observation prompted further connections.

Alexandra DiFelice, a psychology major, brought up a parallel to another course. She described the Milgram experiment, the famous Yale study that demonstrated the ease with which people can submit to authority, even when doing so clashes with their values.

Emily Pearcy drew an analogy to another well-known social-science experiment, by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University, in which some students were assigned to be prison guards and others prisoners in a mock jail on campus. It is often used as a cautionary tale about how quickly "civilized" people can slide into barbarism.

"It comes down to us and them," Ms. Trexler said. "That's a good connection."

College is tailor-made for the journey of self-discovery that traditional-age students are ready to pursue, says Jeffrey J. Arnett. "They want to know who they are and how they get there," says Mr. Arnett, a professor of psychology at Clark University. He pioneered the theory of "emerging adulthood" in 2000, and has arguably done more than anyone to advance the notion that people in their late teens to mid-20s occupy a distinct developmental stage.

Social and economic shifts in industrialized societies over recent decades, he says, have delayed marriage and the starting of careers and families. Instead, twenty-somethings focus inward and try to find their place in the world.

As the process of finding themselves gains momentum during college, he says, the curriculum can help it along. "The American college environment is set up for that," Mr. Arnett says. "You have two years of general education where you sample things."

The quest to define the self continues into the workplace, he says. Previous generations saw work pragmatically, viewing it as a means to earn enough money to survive.

"Now people are looking for identity-based work," says Mr. Arnett, adding that their goal is to match their ideals with the ability to make a living. "That's an awful lot to ask out of work."

Some evidence suggests that students want college to serve similar multiple purposes. They expect that it will set them up for professional success while also providing personal satisfaction.

More than 86 percent of freshmen said being able to get a better job was "very important" in deciding to go to college, according to the Freshman Survey produced by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Not far behind, though, were other desires. Nearly 82 percent said that learning about things that interest them was also very important. So did about 70 percent who identified gaining "a general education and appreciation of ideas."

Some curricular experts note that students' professional preparation, academic training, and personal development need not be separated as much as they often are. Colleges' student-affairs offices, for instance, rarely overlap with the classroom.

The personal and the scholarly parts of students' lives shouldn't be separated either, says Marcia Baxter Magolda, a professor of student affairs in higher education at Miami University, in Ohio. In her view, each informs the other.

"Personal development is really part of the foundation of complex thinking," she says, because students learn most effectively when they see the relevance and applicability of course content to their lives. "If you can connect them to their own experience and get them on fire, they'll learn more."

While many faculty members don't object, in theory, to connecting students' experiences to course material, Ms. Baxter Magolda adds, other priorities tend to come first. In practice, many professors prefer to cover content and stay out of the messiness of students' lives. They aren't trained to deal with what might come up.

For many professors, a me-centric curricular approach also looks like a sop to millennial narcissism. But it has roots in academic tradition, says Lisa R. Lattuca, a professor of higher education at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "Historically, when we think of a classical liberal education," she says, it concerned "character-building and readying people for their place in society and leadership."

But, she added, organizing a course around students also requires skilled teaching. "There's a tension between wanting to make education real and visceral for students," Ms. Lattuca says, and making sure the course content "reaches them beyond their heads."

Shifting students' attention from their own heads to the world beyond requires professors to pull off what can be a difficult pedagogical pirouette.

College is often a deeply alien environment during the first year, one that causes many students to question their assumptions. When handed an opportunity to stick to the familiar terrain of their own experience, many students will choose to remain there.

Champlain College, a career-focused four-year institution in Vermont, has built into its core curriculum a transition from an internal focus to an external one. The core has a dedicated faculty of three dozen professors and is designed to follow the developmental stages of its students.

"What does every 18-year-old want to talk about? Themselves," says Elizabeth Beaulieu, dean of Champlain's Core Division. "And then we widen the wedge."

Students in their first year take courses in their majors, which tend to be in fields like accounting, education, and game design. They also take two required courses, "Rhetoric of the Self" and "Concepts of the Self," in cohorts of 20 during the first semester. In the second, the emphasis widens; they take "Rhetoric of Community" and "Concepts of Community."

As the students get older, the topics grow still broader—democracy, human rights, science. The fourth year features a capstone project that incorporates what students have learned across courses.

The students' first effort to pull together disparate strands of thought comes at the end of the first semester, in "Concepts of the Self." Students write a paper that integrates their readings from the literature of Edgar Allan Poe and William Shakespeare, and from case studies in sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. What does each disciplinary tradition and way of thinking have to say about who they are?

They must also create a self-portrait to represent what they have learned. For many, it's a tall order.

Some in a recent collection were aesthetically coherent, if straightforward, like a hand-drawn outline of a body on a long scroll of paper, a painted self-portrait, or a photo. Others were striking as creative objects. One student made a terrarium inside a bottle. Another baked a cake. A few created original video games.

The organization of the course sometimes strikes students as a mishmash at first, says Ms. Beaulieu. That was the impression that Emmalee Osborne, a psychology major, originally had. The disparate material finally coalesced in her mind, she said, when she was writing the paper describing her self-portrait—a dream catcher made out of a hula hoop with a web strung inside. The idea came from a Chinese proverb that her mother used tell her about how we are all connected by an invisible red thread that never tangles or breaks.

The personal focus of the essay made the assignment difficult, not easy, Ms. Osborne said. She had to make connections among wide-ranging disciplines and tie them to herself. "It forces you to look at yourself and ask who you are and what made you who you are," she said.

On the last day of class, the students presented their self-portraits to their classmates and explained their creations' connection to the readings.

Marissa DeRose, an education major, produced a small rocking chair with a silver Mylar balloon tied to it. Red, yellow, and green translucent tubes snaked around the chair's legs and connected to a picture of a brain, which lit up. She alluded to the Myers-Briggs personality tests, and the works of B.F. Skinner and Julian B. Rotter, who articulated the idea of internal and external loci of control. Ms. DeRose also quoted from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. While perhaps not gelling creatively, her project reflected an earnest attempt to pull together disparate texts and ideas.

A few presentations veered toward the confessional. One student gave a spoken-word performance, referring to her battles with mental illness and her "serotonin-sabotaged mind." Another cried as she showed her self-portrait, an orb divided into four sections, and recalled a woman who had encouraged her to attend college. A few professors have stopped assigning these presentations, seeking to spare students from feeling pressed to divulge sensitive secrets.

As the semester winds down, Stephen Wehmeyer, an assistant professor, reframes the students' intense internal focus. He acknowledges their individuality and then makes a larger point about the billions of other unique individuals who also inhabit the planet.

Their projects show how different they all are, he tells them. How, then, he asks, do we manage to get along?

"You have to lead the students," Mr. Wehmeyer says, "from the familiar to the foreign."

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