

Example of a Well-Designed Course:

First Year Seminar with a Focus on “Sustainability”

1. Specific Context

- The subject matter: First Year Seminar with a focus on Sustainability
- The title of the course: Buy, Use, Toss?¹
- Typical class size: 25
- Level of the course: for first year students (Freshmen or transfer students)
- Mode of delivery: Class meets 2 times per week in a traditional seminar-style class
- Type of institution: Four Year University—Appalachian State University

2. General Description of the Course

The goals of the First Year Seminar as articulated by Appalachian State University are:

- Introduce students to the rigor of academic study at the University level through interdisciplinary engagement with a variety of disciplines and perspectives, the foundation of the university’s new General Education program.
- Students and faculty engage in a shared process of inquiry around a broad, interdisciplinary topic or question.
- Help first year students make the transition to academic life at Appalachian by developing creative and critical thinking abilities, cultivating effective communication skills, and introducing students to a variety of research tools and methods.

Provides students the opportunity to make connections with faculty and other students, to discover the wide range of resources Appalachian provides its students, and to become part of the university and local community.

3. Big Purpose of the Course

- This course will explore the “Materials Culture” by encouraging students to analyze issues related to consumption patterns of themselves, their communities, the larger society, and differing societies around the world.
- Students will realize the interconnected nature of their everyday activities, which may seem disconnected at first. What they watch and see can (does) affect what they buy. What they buy affects people and places around the world as well as the processes and systems of how “stuff” is sold and distributed. They will

¹ This curriculum has been modified and adapted from *Buy, Use, Toss? A Closer Look at the Things We Buy* created by Facing the Future, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to engage students in learning by making academics relevant to their lives. Find out more at <www.facingthefuture.org>

investigate their consumer power, impact, and limitations. Knowing the story behind the things that are bought, used, and tossed can help students to consume in ways that improve their lives and the lives of others. The intent of this course is not to discourage students from buying “stuff ” but rather to equip them with knowledge and skills to help them be informed and empowered consumers.

4. Important Situational Factors/Special Pedagogical Challenge

Nature of the Subject and Characteristics of the Learners (Special Pedagogical Challenges)

- **Challenge #1: Interdisciplinary nature of the course.** As specified above, FYS is designed to be interdisciplinary. Exploring the “materials culture” involves investigating the way things are made, distributed, consumed, and disposed which in turn incorporates a wide variety of disciplines including economics, environmental studies, geography, civics, contemporary world problems, history, communication... the list could continue. This convergence of subjects has the potential to overwhelm students, especially first year students. Which brings me to the next challenge.
- **Challenge #2: “fresh-”men (and women).** For a course designed specifically for first year students, there will undoubtedly be challenges associated with the “adjusting-to-college” phenomenon. As stated above, “introducing students to the rigor of academic study” presents a learning-curve challenge, which should be adequately addressed by the instructor. Additionally, **student perception** of the course should be taken into account. Although I lack proof to back up the following assumption, I have a suspicion that many students will view this course as a mere hurdle to leap—something to get through—rather than an opportunity to improve their cognitive processes and construct their own knowledge.

Characteristics of the Teacher and Potential Solutions to Situational Challenges

- **Response to Challenge #1: Background of instructor.** I have experience teaching and learning about complex interdisciplinary concepts as a student of Geography and Sustainable Development and an instructor of the latter. I value what I like to call “supreme dot connecting”. This skill comes from a broad knowledge spectrum that is “an inch deep and a mile wide”. Using this teaching and learning paradigm will aid in the digestibility of complex, interdisciplinary information.
- **Response to Challenge #2: Meet them where they are.** I begin this response by stating the reason why I love to teach: *It is rewarding to witness students’ discovery of their own love of learning.* The best way to encourage this realization is through an engaging teaching style in which the students **realize the classroom is relevant to their personal life**, thus becoming an enjoyable experience rather than a burden of “having to sit through another class.” I am aware of what tactics engage students: participatory classroom

discussions, using technology which is relevant to their generation, meeting them halfway so that class presentations and discussions appeal to their way of learning.

5. 3-Column Table

Note: The following chart has been categorized using the key below to highlight significant learning activities (Activities are identified using colors and abbreviations):

- **Active learning activities (AL)** enable learners to:
 - acquire new information and ideas,
 - have doing and observing experiences, and
 - reflect—individually and collectively—about the meaning of their learning experiences.
- **Educative Assessment activities (EA)**
 - Create two major assessment events that have forward-looking *tasks* for students to perform.
 - Identify mechanisms for these forward-looking tasks to provide students with frequent and immediate *feedback* on the quality of their work.

Learning Goals:	Assessment Activities:	Learning Activities:
<p>Foundational Knowledge</p> <p>1a. Students will be able to identify and explain the steps of the materials economy.</p>	<p>1a(1). IRAT and GRAT</p> <p>1a(2). Creative writing assignment.</p>	<p>1a(1). Individual Readiness Assessment Tests and Group Readiness Assessment Tests will be given after reading assignments to gauge student comprehension.</p> <p>1a(2). Students research the product trail of an item beginning with the raw materials required, the processing, assembly, distribution, stocking, purchasing, disposal, etc. Students then write a first-person product trail from the point of view of the item.</p>
<p>Application</p> <p>2a. Students will be able to analyze issues related to consumption patterns of themselves, their communities, the larger society, and differing societies around the</p>	<p>2a. Case study and role playing</p>	<p>2a (1). Students will research different extraction scenarios and their impacts on society, the environment, and the economy by considering multiple viewpoints from various stakeholders. Ex:</p>

<p>world.</p> <p>2b. Students will be able to critique the process of how stuff is advertised, sold and distributed.</p> <p>2c. Students will suggest points of intervention and possible solutions to prevent the “unintended consequences” of our current materials economy.</p>	<p>2b(1). Group discussion</p> <p>2b(2). Creative arts: skit creating or visual representation</p> <p>2c. Culminating end of semester research project</p>	<p>gold mining, timber extraction, coal mining, coffee production, and petroleum acquisition. (AL)</p> <p>2a (2). Students take on perspectives of different stakeholder groups involved in determining how to deal with a community’s growing trash. Stakeholder groups are encouraged to form alliances in order to reach consensus on the plan that will be best for the community. (AL)</p> <p>2b(1). Students begin by considering the purpose of advertising by discussing their critical analysis of an advertisement that appeals to him/her, weighing advertised information against their needs as consumers. Students discuss whether additional information should be included in product advertisements and how advertising connects to consumption choices. (AL)</p> <p>2b(2). Students produce two different commercials (TV commercial/skit or a print ad) for the same product—one telling only the positive side of a product and one revealing its negative impacts. (AL) (Educative Assessment #1)* * Feedback Mechanisms: rubric creation, self evaluation, group evaluation and peer evaluation</p> <p>2c. The final research project will draw upon all of the course’s investigative activities and culminate in a critical analysis of each stage of the materials</p>
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		<p>economy and suggest points of intervention and possible solutions for each of the five major steps of the materials economy: extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. For each of the five steps, students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoroughly explain <i>why</i> the current system is unsustainable by expanding on the hidden impacts discovered throughout the course. • Factors, explanations, and insights as to <i>how</i> it has come to be this way. • Suggest points of intervention and possible solutions to prevent the aforementioned 'unintended consequences'. • The source of their inspiration for their proposed solutions and current examples of successful attempts of the proposed ideas. • Realistically analyze the feasibility of their proposed 'solutions' to demonstrate that they understand that there is no such thing as a 'silver bullet'. (AL) (Educative Assessment #2)** <p>**Feedback Mechanism: Students will keep a Journal throughout the semester in which they will use a combination of self-evaluations, one minute reports, journaling, "future questions to find out", doubts, frustrations, and curiosities.</p> <p>The journal will also help them assemble their final project as it will be organized into five sections: Extraction, Production,</p>
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		<p>Distribution, Consumption, and Disposal—the chronology of the class and the format for their paper.</p> <p>The instructor will check the journal on a regular basis and provide feedback, suggestions, and grade with a “pass”, or “re-do”.</p>
<p>Integration</p> <p>3a. Students will be able to illustrate environmental, social, and economic impacts associated with everyday items.</p> <p>3b. Student will be able to compare and analyze consumption patterns temporally and geographically.</p>	<p>3a & b. Group investigation project and web diagram (poster) creation.</p>	<p>3a. In groups, brainstorm and diagram all of the resources, processes, and impacts associated with one everyday object, such as an item of clothing. (AL)</p> <p>3b. Each group will choose a country/geographic area and investigate how ecological footprint size has changed throughout history in their chosen region. (AL)</p>
<p>Human Dimension</p> <p>4a. Students will gain an awareness of the injustices involved with the current material culture.</p>	<p>4a(1). Personalized research assignment and reflection paper.</p> <p>4a(2). In class small group discussions utilizing photographic-interpretation and empathic-inducing</p>	<p>4a(1). Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s “Population Finder”, students will investigate the demographics (race, education, primary language, income) of where their hometown’s garbage is taken, compare their findings to surrounding zip codes, and reflect on the results of what they found. (AL)</p> <p>4a(2). Using the book <i>Material World: a Global Family Portrait</i>, students will examine the material goods owned by representative families all over the world. In small groups, they will discuss the differences between the photographs and how it would feel to</p>

<p>4b. Students will begin to realize their consumer power, impact, and limitations.</p>	<p>questions.</p> <p>4b(1). Field-work investigation and group discussion.</p> <p>4b(2). Personal reflection in the form of an Ad-diary</p>	<p>live in “their shoes”. (AL)</p> <p>4b(1). Students will analyze the contents from dormitory trashcans in order to define “luxury” and “necessity” for themselves. They will read an article about trash typically found in a modern US dump. Using information from this reading and their field-work, students will discuss conclusions about how these artifacts reflect the lifestyle of those who use and disposed of the items. (AL) (EA)*</p> <p>4b(2). Students keep an ad diary for 24 hours in which they record the number and types of ads that they encounter during a day and reflect on the possible implications of their findings.</p>
<p>Caring</p> <p>5a. Students will be able to ponder philosophical questions such as “how do you define happiness?” and “does acquiring more stuff lead to happiness?”</p>	<p>5a. Research and On-line reflection forum</p>	<p>5a. Students will compare their ideas about quality of life to national statistics related to how Americans spend their time. They also evaluate their own progress toward the “good life” and how their personal consumption habits impact their progress. (AL)</p>
<p>Learning How to Learn</p> <p>6a. Students will be able to effectively analyze their sources of information including a multitude of media mechanisms. By investigating the sources and tactics of the information they receive, students are better able to assess <i>how</i> they have developed their beliefs and understandings.</p>	<p>6a. Class discussion and response paper.</p>	<p>6a. Students critically analyze the main film associated with this course, persuasive techniques used, and bias. Students fact check by further examining the data presented in the film, crosschecking references to analyze the accuracy and reliability of the film. Students are given a list of focus questions to guide their critical analysis.</p>

<p>6b. Students will develop their own plans necessary for meaningful understanding of how stuff is made, how they fit into consumer culture, and how they'd like to alter their consumer habits.</p>	<p>6b. Creative writing reflection and futuristic.</p>	<p>6b. Students will write a letter to themselves in 50 years about the kind of consumer they'd like to become and the reasons why they will value what they deem necessary. In addition, we will discuss what future generations would ask of our current generation if they were to write a letter from the future. Environmental, social, and economical issues gained from the semester's investigations will be used to support these letters.</p>
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6. Weekly Schedule

		Day 1		Day 2	
Week 1	In Class	Welcome Activity		IRAT/GRAT over materials read Into Film: Story of Stuff	
	Out of Class		Read Syllabus "Introduction" in <i>Story of Stuff</i>		Read: "A Word on Words" Watch: <i>The Corporation</i> (Ch 1-5 on YouTube)
		Day 3		Day 4	
Week	In Class	What is a Corporation? • Group Discussion		Role Playing	
	Class				

	In-class workshop: "How to read, study, and stay organized" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice outlining, taking notes • Introduce class notebook requirements 		workshop [activity 2a(1)] (Active Learning Activity)
Out of Class	Read- Ch 1: "Extraction" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice taking notes using techniques learned in class 		Read: "Rethinking and Transforming" Ch 1. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a different note-taking technique learned in class and reflect on which method works best for you
Week 3		Day 5	Day 6
	In Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coltan Case study • "Invisioning Solutions" Workshop 	From Global to Local: MTR Investigation "What is Coal, MTR, and how am I connected?"
Out of Class	Homework: Find "solutions" (2 organizations, programs, or policies) and post your results using AsULearn Forum		Begin reading Ch 2 "Production". Prepare for IRAT/GRAT for next class

7. Teaching strategy

I constructed the teaching strategy for this course with four main goals in mind:

1. **Foster inter-group and intra-group dialogue:** For this, I use the teaching strategy of Team-based learning.
2. **Emphasis on analysis and reflection:** The students are required to keep a reading journal in which they are encouraged to reflect on each assigned reading requirement.
3. **Community engagement and action-based:** The class is required to participate in numerous activities which engage them with their local community, e.g., community art project, parade for International Day of Peace, recycle trash at home football games, etc.
4. **Final Culminating Project:** The final project of the course will require them to design an outreach project which will positively impact their community, thus focusing on the idea of using "action" to become "agents of change".

Sequencing:

Because this is a freshmen course and many of the students will not have a background in the material presented, students will begin by "starting where they are" with what they know by:

- analyzing contents from campus dormitory trashcans,
- investigating the demographics of where their home town's garbage is taken,
- keeping an "advertisement diary" and considering how advertisements impact their everyday life

Students will also conduct research in order to "make knowledge" through analysis and critique by:

- Finding evidence of past and present lifestyles and consumption patterns of the U.S. and other countries and analyzing those changing patterns throughout history.
- Researching how advertisements have changed throughout history.
- Exploring "national happiness" statistics and comparing their findings to consumption pattern timeline.
- Construct a persuasive argument from varying stakeholders' perspectives.

By first realizing they are connected to the information presented in this course and then employing research tactics to foster knowledge from gathered information, students will ultimately be able to engage in true analytical thinking and academic research, thus be fully prepared for the final research project.

The final research project will draw upon the above investigative activities and culminate in a critical analysis of each stage of the materials economy and suggest points of intervention and possible solutions for each of the five major steps of the materials economy: extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal.

8. Evidence of Impact and Most Exciting Aspect of the Re-Designed Course for Me

The most exciting aspect of designing this course was coming up with creative activities for the students to engage in that stepped outside my normal repertoire of teaching/learning strategies. By engaging in this process, I was encouraged to expand my idea of the possibilities in which to engage and assess students.

I have now been teaching the class in this new fashion for over a month and have seen an increased level of involvement and excitement from the students. They particularly enjoyed the I-RAT and G-RAT exercises as it created a sense of competitiveness and encouraged group collaboration/cooperation.

9. My Contact Information

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