

“GREAT THINKER’S DAY”— OR CAPTURING THE LARGEST POSSIBLE AUDIENCE ON CAMPUS

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“Great Thinkers Day” is a day-long multidisciplinary event and an innovative active learning experience that involved an entire college community. This essay describes my experience with planning, organizing, and executing this event, including both the benefits and difficulties I experienced putting the day into action. I also share my thoughts on how I might do things differently the next time. The potential for an exciting, interactive, and integrative day is inexhaustible. The main criteria for success are sound planning and organizational work at the beginning executed with the help of a good support staff.

Challenges in College Teaching

Innovation in teaching comes in myriad forms: role-playing, history theatre, visual and audio cues to accompany lectures, and a variety of other interactive formats. Trying to combine any of these approaches, e.g. interdisciplinary and interactive with visual, audio, and sensory experience in a “traditional” structure, can be challenging. One way I have found to meet this challenge is to eliminate the class structure and, therefore, the expectations that accompany it. This did not mean canceling classes, however. Working with colleagues and students, I sought to create a more total and holistic learning environment. That challenge became an opportunity to organize a one-day symposium devoted to the history of ideas at a two-year community college where I taught for four years (Tunxis Community College in Farmington, CT). As I worked through the problems of how to make learning vital and compelling—something no one would want to miss—I created a learning community for my colleagues, myself, and our students.¹

In developing a living history symposium, I knew I wanted to do two things: 1) reinforce the integration of disciplines and 2) imitate early historical research methods, specifically information gathering. Learning traditionally has been a process of finding

¹The original idea for this day was formed when I attended the Barnes Seminar for Teaching Excellence in May 1999 at Madison, Connecticut. There, while exchanging ideas on teaching innovation, I met someone whose school had organized something like what would evolve into “Great Thinkers Day.” Ed Grippe, another community college faculty member, and I began to brainstorm the possibilities and laid down the framework for this multi-disciplinary event at our respective schools. Since my campus is extremely small and space constraints are the biggest obstacle to hosting an event of this proportion, it was some time before I was able to overcome the limitations of room availability and host what I had envisioned and planned. In the interim my partner in organization and planning, Ed Grippe, was able to put on what he called “Plato Day” at his institution. I presented a talk there and was able to observe his first-hand experiences. My observations there combined with my experiences with “Great Thinkers Day” on my campus make up the substance of this paper.

the foremost authority on a subject and listening to his or her expositions on the topic at hand—this has been the way of learning since organized schooling began centuries ago. It has been only relatively recently, with the push to make education accessible to all, not just the elite, that learning has been formalized and categorized and put into the modern form called the public college or university.

Change and transformation of teaching are rooted in keeping the connectivity among the disciplines obvious. Our students’ perceptions of the classroom experience and of the college experience as a whole remain primarily, stubbornly, in the realm of lecture, note-taking, and other familiar forms of learning. Their expectation is that each instructor will remain in a narrowly defined field of specialization. Students enter the classroom with the expectation that the instructor will do the breaking down and that what the instructor presents to students is the way it is “supposed to be.” Unfortunately, and most importantly, students fail to grasp the connections among the various courses in their general education curriculum, which in part defeats its purpose. This is an extremely important part of a college education and something that is not evident to students but extremely clear to teachers.

Premises

“Great Thinkers Day” is based on the premise that if students have an opportunity to see that their course work is inherently linked and that what they learn in one class can be transferred to another, then their education might seem purposeful. A liberal arts education is how most American students are taught from kindergarten on; however, in the traditional school system so much emphasis is placed on result-oriented teaching and learning that the connection between mathematics and sciences become weak, the relationship of historical developments to literature is disassociated, and so on. I am convinced that more students would be inspired during their years in school and college if they could see links between the courses in their curriculum, for example, if they learn that understanding Plato will clarify issues of politics and law long after they are through with school and might help to make them politically active citizens.

This ability to forge and build on the ties that bind all disciplines of study is what makes a liberal arts education more valuable than any other. Thus some questions I have asked students to address include: What was the connection between marriage contracts and the role of women in a particular society? What did the practice of medicine and the image of the human body have to do with the Enlightenment political structure and philosophy? Asking students to address these questions actively, I try to help them to see the connection between culture and history, between documents and values. This new type of interdisciplinary experiment in instruction has helped my students make that leap that is so difficult to make in a traditional classroom experience. I began with several premises: 1) students love to be challenged, 2) students love to have variety in the classroom experience, 3) students can exhibit their natural curiosity, which makes the human animal strive for knowledge, 4) students can value changes in the classroom setting—they can learn in a variety of settings, and if the learning

environment (the actual physical setting) is changed, knowledge acquisition will proceed more smoothly, 5) students want to be surprised by their teachers—they appreciate innovation, and 6) students learn better if they are part of the teaching experience—if they must become the teachers. From these premises came the development of “Great Thinkers Day.”

“Great Thinkers Day” in Practice

The overall theme for the first “Great Thinkers Day” was the Enlightenment, with the specific focus on France. In addition to academic presentations, we offered food, drink, music, singing, dance, and a theatre presentation, a dramatic reading in French of a French period work of literature (excerpts from *The Mad Woman of Chaillot*). The intention was to create a template for an interdisciplinary symposium that could become an annual event. “Great Thinkers Day” could become a hallmark, a unique feature of the college anticipated by the public and the students and one that would distinguish the college from others.

When guests entered the college on “Great Thinkers Day,” hosts handed them several items: a copy of the program, a map of the campus that indicated the presentation rooms, and a general timeline of the seventeenth century along with a two-page biography of Rene Descartes. In this way no one in attendance had to feel unprepared or uncomfortable without the rudiments of familiarity with the “Era of Descartes.” I asked student volunteers to provide on-the-spot support for anything we might need to do, from greeting the public at the main entrance and handing out programs and maps of the campus to hanging posters to rearranging tables and video projection screens. Student involvement, although an aspect of the event that was born of necessity, had the added bonus of making my students not taking Western Civilization that semester (I was teaching United States history survey courses as well) aware of and interested in an event on campus. This gave them a sense of ownership and pride in their college. My Western Civilization students were required to attend; attendance was in lieu of their classes for that day. Many of my colleagues supported the event by bringing their classes to the sessions.

Another aspect of preparing us all to “enter” into the period was to plaster Descartes’s portrait all over campus a couple of weeks in advance with no clue as to his name or reason for the posting. Perhaps a counter-intuitive measure, but the “dour faced man” elicited a lot of questions, which in turn sparked interest in “Great Thinkers Day.”

Critical to the success of the project was the voluntary support of other faculty members. I announced my intention to organize and present this event at a college-wide meeting and then prepared a flier to invite presenters among the faculty. All presenters were volunteers, yet incredibly the day was balanced in its offerings. Although I had no claims on their time, I found that simply by talking to everyone about the concept and asking for volunteers to present yielded a workable number of sessions (we ended up with twelve). The volunteers came not only from full-time faculty but

part-time faculty as well. This was a tremendous tribute to our adjunct faculty’s eagerness to contribute even more to our campus community than they already did.

My colleagues were eager to participate and were unanimously effusive about their positive experiences of the event. It was a thrill to have faculty who had *not* participated as presenters approach me afterwards and offer their services for the next “Great Thinkers Day.” One memorable comment came from someone eager to substitute chairing a committee for a presentation during “Great Thinkers Day” because that event was so much more fun and rewarding. The presentation titles included the following;

“The Science & Fiction Synthesis: Cyrano’s *Voyage to the Moon*”

“Get Out! Tom Hanks Isn’t the First ‘Castaway’”

“Evaluation of Infantry Weapons during the Seventeenth Century”

“The Emergence of the Scientific Perspective, *De Human Corpus Fabrica*”

“Descartes’s Scientism: Is Science on Sound Footing?”

I did not suggest assignments or ask for specific presentations. The only requirements I set were chronological—I asked presenters to prepare something on a subject in the Enlightenment, something they were familiar with and something that excited them. The topics and presentations offered a cornucopia of originality and inspiration.

Presenters exhibited outstanding innovation and creativity. For example, the presenter of “Castaway” handed out gummy worms to get the audience closer to comprehending the exigencies of survival in an unfamiliar place. The presenters of *De Human Corpus Fabrica* brought and passed around original period instruments of the medical profession as well as leeches in a jar. (They did not, however, ask for volunteers to come forward for a proper bleeding demonstration!) They also put together a power point presentation to instruct their audience better in the period techniques of doctors. The presentation on infantry weapons included an authentic musket along with a demonstration of how to load one. The presenters on music of the Enlightenment, a session that presented a general survey, surprised and delighted the audience because up until that moment students had known them only as “a math teacher” and “a computer science teacher.” They exhibited the breadth of their own talents—both are avid instrumentalists who promised to perform as well as play recordings of the period music next time. They taught not by the quality of their presentation alone but also by showing their students the multidimensionality that is part of living the liberal arts. This is a kind of education that students cannot acquire in the traditional way.

I also asked my Western Civilization students to participate; their participation would be linked to presentations they were required to make for our Western Civilization II class. Students who chose this option would present to our class for credit and then voluntarily for “Great Thinkers Day.” The topic could be anything on the Enlightenment and the mode of presentation was entirely up to the discretion of the student. I wanted to give them the freedom to present in whatever medium best suited

their temperament and personality. One student wrote and acted in a play, another prepared a multi-media presentation.

I was offered the ideal segue into the day by a Western Civilization student who wrote and acted in a one-act, one-man play with four characters. The setting was the dining room of a typical well-to-do home and the characters were a mother, father, brother, and sister. His props were a table, four chairs, one wig (the mom), a formal "top hat" (the dad), a baseball cap (the son), and a kerchief (the daughter). The "characters" sat at the evening meal discussing the fateful new ideas and new vistas on civilization offered by the increased contact and the more rapid spread of information in the seventeenth century. This student had the following to say in an evaluation of the day:

My nervousness passed as soon as I stepped away from the podium and put my first headpiece on! I didn't have to be professional anymore in the way giving a speech had to be presented. The audience let down a certain wall as they laughed at an occasional joke I had slipped in The skit format, as opposed to giving a speech, made it feel a lot more relaxing and made me feel as though I could be myself. My skit portrayed the Enlightenment as it was, a time devoted to questions and also the timidity to ask those probing questions A good example of this is the book, *Voyage to the Moon*, presented by Steve Ersinghaus in the 1:00 session.

This student not only learned from his own presentation but also was able to recognize the connection between a history class assignment and a presentation on literature!

Utilitarian Aspects

"Great Thinkers Day" served both practical and pedagogical purposes. The practical aspects of the project were quite ordinary: We needed administrative support, e.g. funding for honoraria and food etc., room reservations, maintenance support (to set up extra chairs and tables), advertising, and technical support for media requests as well as technicians to videotape the session. The event appealed to the administration because we created a special link with the community. We fulfilled our service commitment to the community by inviting members of the local population to the presentations as both presenters and as audience for the day's proceedings. "Great Thinkers Day" was educational in the traditional sense, but the community also provided a cultural component.

The name of the program can easily be altered to use either periods or famous figures of history without losing the draw of the touchstone phrase "great thinkers day." Thus we could plan to have "Great Thinkers Day: The Era of Plato" or "The Era of Marcus Aurelius," and so on. With each year I would move toward increased involvement from the community—ideally they might suggest possible directions as well as provide cultural elements. For example, I would hope the Greek community might

help to define “The Era of Plato” from their point of view; the Italian community similarly might define “The Era of Marcus Aurelius.”

Benefits

The practical aspects of tying in the college’s desire to attract more students led to the decision to invite “feeder” high schools in our area. The benefit for the college would be increased enrollments and the benefit for the high school students would be a pain-free opportunity to get a taste of college-level work and a glimpse at our campus. Letters of invitation—and later programs—were sent to teachers of French, history, and social studies, science, guidance counselors, and principals in twenty high schools. We offered students and teachers the opportunity to become participants in “Great Thinkers Day.” This part of my organization was the weakest link in the plan of events. The turnout was less than satisfactory. The timing of the event might have presented difficulties for the teachers and their spring semester lesson plans.

Certainly the value of this method—a living history symposium—is not limited to a two-year institution where we started the program, but could also be utilized by four-year colleges and universities. It fulfills many of the functions associated with the multiplicity of roles schools in general and scholars in particular are called on to play. Increasingly, professors and administrators find themselves working in non-traditional ways to increase enrollments and to keep and increase ties to their local communities. “Great Thinkers Day” is an excellent vehicle for this kind of goal. It is an endeavor that leaves both teachers and students satisfied—not to mention administrators! Since the community college’s educational mission is tied to service to the community, this symposium was fully in the realm of that mission. “Great Thinkers Day” educated, entertained, and welcomed individuals who might be reluctant to visit a college campus under normal circumstances.

For the campus-wide community this living history symposium permitted us to display our prowess as an extremely talented faculty. It opened venues for faculty collaboration and increased normal levels of collegiality. My colleagues were excited preparing for and anticipating the event. “Great Thinkers Day” became a topic of hallway conversations, which can be extremely fruitful in forging bonds among faculty—measurably more fruitful than formal means of community. This assumption is based on my personal experience and the anecdotal evidence of my colleagues.

“Great Thinkers Day” provided our students with a model of education that involved them in their own education. They saw the interdisciplinary connections for themselves, but by participating as presenters they became role models for other students and gained a new understanding of how to learn in the process. “Great Thinkers Day” served many purposes at once. Students would stretch their critical and analytical thinking skills. They would have an opportunity to learn “stress free.” In other words, their professors would not have to hear the dreaded query—“Will this be on the test?”—and students would find that learning could be intriguing and stimulating and effortless.

Problems

Because it was the equivalent of organizing a small conference, this symposium required enormous demands on my time as well as the time and effort of various support staff at the college. It is not a project to get into without considerable time off—I highly recommend getting a course release! This was not a consideration for me on this occasion, but it will be a priority before the planning for another “Great Thinkers Day” gets under way. Getting funding and approval from the president of the college were relatively simple compared to the intensive organizational and preparatory work necessary.

Practically speaking, there will be a gap between the ideal symposium scenario in one’s mind and that which is possible to construct. For example, although I could envision it, I was not able to persuade faculty colleagues to do a dramatic reading in French or convince the Alliance Francaise to do a presentation of French dance or music. Getting outside groups involved required an enormous time commitment and necessitated beginning the communication process months in advance. When the Alliance Francaise could not participate, we hired a guitarist for the day to perform in the same room where we served refreshments.

The Results

Although the college sent out press releases, made up a poster, and included information on the symposium on our web page, the best advertising we received was free of charge and far reaching. An older student of mine, with connections in the radio industry, arranged to have me interviewed about the symposium on a popular morning talk show. We had a captive audience of at least 100,000 listeners. One listener from as far away as Binghamton, New York, called and asked for the program to be faxed to her. The media attention was augmented by an article and photograph in Connecticut’s largest newspaper, *The Hartford Courant*. In other words, the school got lots of free publicity. Next year it will be an even bigger success in terms of community participation and attendance and getting greater name recognition for the college.

Even though I could expound on the educational value and benefits to the audience, I believe that there were a variety of intangible benefits as well, which are difficult to categorize yet are key to this kind of experience for students. Numerous student comments are illustrative of those intangible, beneficial aspects of “Great Thinkers Day.” These appeared in audience and student reactions. One student saw the symposium as a way to spruce up the last few days of the semester. The new ideas and the presenters’ ability to capture and keep his attention genuinely stimulated him. His description of “Great Thinkers Day” as “a shot of mental adrenaline” is one, which, on reflection, made all my efforts worthwhile:

In the last few weeks of the second semester, a student may find the college experience to be as dull as dishwater. Classroom lectures may seem like a sleep fest. One may desperately seek ways to stay alive mentally in order to pass the

final exams. Ironically, Descartes Day was like a shot of mental adrenaline. The ideas presented in the lectures hit me like a ton of bricks. From start to finish, the lecturers had my attention hooked as they did a great job presenting the material. ... Gambino and Cenet’s presentation was not too shabby and I learned to make out Baroque from Classical music So the next time I’m vegging out and those long songs start playing on National Public Radio, I’ll know the scoop on the background of the music. ... I’d have to conclude that the discussion in room 326 [He sat through “The Emergence of the Scientific Perspective,” “Descartes’s Scientism: Is Science on Sound Footing?” and “The Science and Fiction Synthesis: Cyrano’s *Voyage to the Moon*.”] were beyond the value of a standing ovation from even the greatest of Tunxis’s intellectual elite ... I’d say that Descartes Day was a positive event; the experience was profound.

Another student’s very honest response to the day suggested that this had been a new experience for her—to witness the transformation of her own ordinary teachers into dynamic presenters with a fervent message and something they are really excited about:

Great Thinkers Day at Tunxis Community College was a unique experience. I expected some boring lecture, but it was actually very informative. All the speakers seemed very proud of their work and I enjoyed being part of such activity because it was something important to them.

Two other students were also surprised that learning could be enjoyable or something to anticipate with pleasure. They were resigned (my judgment) to yet another indifferent educational experience but in the end found it was worthwhile and engaging. One noted: “This was definitely a fun day. I wish I could have stayed longer You should do this again next year and your classes will definitely like it.” The other added, “The presentations were extremely interesting ... the event was educational with its aspects of fun.”

While the students expressed enthusiasm, I wanted to survey the faculty for more practical and useful feedback. The faculty participants, without exception, were eager to contribute their expertise for next year, and a few sent me written comments. For example, one wrote: “I would characterize ‘Great Thinkers Day’ as a success. A diverse group of enthusiastic presenters offered an eclectic set of topics on seventeenth-century European society and culture Many faculty, staff, and students to whom I spoke said they enjoyed various of the presentations Many people enjoyed the period music presentations: would it be possible to serenade the campus, or at least some part of it, with such music during the next ‘Great Thinkers Day’?” Another faculty presenter commented: “It was quite hectic to get the presentation ready, BUT it was one of the most satisfying things I have done for my teaching in a long time. I had been looking for an excuse to try out a power point demonstration, and you gave me a really

meaningful reason to try one I am looking forward to being able to do something similar next year."

The Next Time Around

What would I do differently? Next time I would ask for lots of help. I would ask for volunteers to help organize. I would get more of the faculty involved, not only by asking for their participation as presenters but also by asking them to incorporate the symposium somehow into their class requirements. For example: Could the communication program students, those who want to go on to become television and movie producers, be assigned the task of videotaping our day as part of their semester assignment? Could the graphic arts or theatre department prepare "sets" or backdrops for oral or aural presentations to set the mood and make it part of their course assignments? Or perhaps could they make it an assignment to photograph still shots of the sessions? A culinary arts program could show off their skills in conjunction with the period we focus on. The possibilities for integrating "Great Thinkers Day" into the curricular life of a college are endless. "Great Thinkers Day" offers the finest kind of opportunity to show off the beauty of a liberal arts education.

“Great Thinker’s Day” Schedule

| TIME | NAME | EVENT |
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| 9:00 AM | Dr. Mari Firkatian President Addy | Welcome & Introduction Opening Remarks |
| 9:45 AM | Roger Johnson Writer/Director/Actor | “The Family Meal: An Opportunity to Discuss the State of the New World” (one act play) |
| 10:00 AM | Prof. Laura Gambino & Prof. Jean-Marc Cenet | Bach, Handel and Vivaldi: A Look at Baroque Music |
| | Prof. Susan Bacon | Get out! Tom Hanks isn’t the first “Castaway?” |
| | Prof. Fran Coan | The Evaluation of Infantry Weapons during the 17 th Century |
| 11:00 AM | Dr. Betty Michalowski | Down to Earth in 17 th Century European Painting |
| | Dr. Mari Firkatian | Women in 17 th Century Society |
| | Prof. Rom Byczkiewicz | The Emergence of the Scientific Perspective |
| 12:00 PM | Mr. Harris Becker | Baroque guitarist |
| | Café au lait & sweets | |
| | Dr. Ed Gripe | Descartes’ Scientism: Is Science on Sound Footing |
| 1:00 PM | Prof. Steve Ersinghaus | The Science & Fiction Synthesis: <i>Cyrano’s Voyage to the Moon</i> |
| | Prof. Kim Karath | Newton, Leibnitz & Pascal: The Calculating Genius of Math, Science & Religion |
| 2:00 PM | Prof. Lynn Laskowski & Prof. Linda Navitsky | De Human Corpus Fabrica (On the Fabric of the Human Body) |