

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 10
Number 1 *Forum Theme 1: Cornerstone, Forum
Theme 2: Shakespeare Alive Cluster, & Theme
3: The State of Higher Education Cluster*

Article 4

3-2015

To Build a Foundation

Nicole Zumbach Harken
University of Northern Iowa

Rachel Morgan
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you](#)

Copyright ©2015 Nichole Zumbach Harken and Rachel Morgan

Recommended Citation

Harken, Nicole Zumbach and Morgan, Rachel (2015) "To Build a Foundation," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol10/iss1/4>

This Forum Theme 1 is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.



To Build a Foundation

Part of the journal section “Forum: Cornerstone” [Contribution to Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

Nichole Zumbach Harken and Rachel Morgan, “To Build a Foundation”

Just like a cornerstone was once placed to square and level a building during construction, a successful Cornerstone class provides a UNI student with the skills of communication, civility, thinking, and success - the same skills he or she will need to be a citizen in a college community and beyond. The image below appears on almost every Cornerstone syllabus, and it also reminds us that as college instructors we’re in the business of building professional, prepared citizens.



While professors from various colleges and departments teach in Cornerstone, most of the instructors are from the Communication Studies and Languages & Literatures Departments, and all instructors spend hours in professional development learning each other’s craft and discipline.

Communication Studies: A Perspective By Nichole Zumbach Harken

One of the early struggles of Cornerstone was developing a common language between disciplines. We found early on that we were essentially teaching the same ideas - but using different words and methods. Consider the rhetorical situation. In the Communication discipline we refer to the ‘speaker, audience, and message.’ In Languages and Literatures the parts are referred to as the ‘writer, reader, and message.’ Notice our likeness – the message. The speaker is the writer and the audience is the reader. Instead of allowing those differences to define us, we

came together to create something stronger, something better, something more effective than we could ever be individually.

A surprising additional benefit of Cornerstone was that after wearing a mask of another teacher's discipline, it often becomes ingrained within the teaching of other classes. This combination of skill makes us stronger teachers. As the famous teacher of literature, Andre Berthiaume, said, "We all wear masks, and the time comes when we cannot remove them without removing some of our own skin."

The impact of that can be seen throughout our department. Cornerstone has strengthened Oral Communication, Interpersonal Communication, and Communication Theory courses. Now professors in these courses are more equipped and willing to assign (and assess) writing pieces as part of a student's coursework. The focus is back on communication itself, instead of just the mode.

For many of us in Communication Studies, our first love was words. We fell in love with words in the written form and came to appreciate and study the word in spoken/performance form. Berthiaume was famous for his simple style and attention to detail. Teaching Cornerstone is just that - getting back to our roots, back to the study of the word, in making and creating meaning while using detail to define our sense of place, describe a moment, or create an argument.

Languages & Literatures: A Perspective
By Rachel Morgan

The academic life of a college professor is often described as "silo-ed." Indeed we spend time gathering and contributing to our respective disciplines, and we work together on university-wide committees, but rarely do we combine silos. The business of combining disciplines can be exciting, messy, frustrating, and fruitful. To teach in Cornerstone is to constantly question process and product.

Cornerstone instructors meet throughout the year and over the summer to discuss course outcomes and assessments. In such meetings, a business professor may share strategies for teaching a presentation, then the challenge for those outside business is to figure out what "presentation" is to his or her respective discipline. My background is in writing, so a "presentation" could easily translate to "essay." However, after two years of teaching in Cornerstone, discussions of pedagogy and best practices have altered my classroom, so a presentation means a student panel talking to UNI administrators about relevant topics such as college debt and the safety of female students on campus. Students are encouraged to use innovative, multi-methods to communicate: essays, videos, interviews, info-graphics, research, and analysis.

While the medium we use to communicate may change, the message we hope to convey does not. Speech and language have always existed to create change and confirm understanding. As we teach students to communicate, we must balance the firm traditions of our disciplines with the plasticity of innovation, while remembering a good portion of teaching is asking questions.

Both Voices

Returning to the metaphor of a cornerstone, instructors must simultaneously envision the blueprint and building, but if a larger circle labeled “community” is drawn around the triple Venn Diagram of course objectives, the focus is clearer. Recently, the AACU published a study assessing employers’ priorities and college learning, and not surprisingly, employers are seeking innovative, adaptive, and critically aware employees: “More than 75% of employers say they want more emphasis on 5 key areas including: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings” (AACU, 2013). The weight of these “five key areas” is most certainly achieved through an amalgamation of professors and classes, and likewise, relevant learning most likely takes root in shared, inventive classrooms.

References

“Andre Berthiaume. Quotable Quotes” Goodreads. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/27394-we-all-wear-masks-and-the-time-comes-when-we>. Accessed November 18, 2014.

“It Takes More Than A Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success.” (2013). The Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust/compact/2013SurveySummary>. Accessed January 1, 2015.

[Go to the narrative [Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community](#) article.]



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).



