

## Invent the Sustainable Future: Dreamers and Storytellers

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Sometimes I feel like a dreamer in a world of dream killers; in this world a “half century of unbelievable prosperity and ease” has resulted in the “end of nature,” or so argues Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* and *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. These feelings and observations provide the contextual foundation for the College of Natural Resources and Environment’s Pathways to Success program I direct for the College’s first-year students. Taught for the first time during Fall 2011, the course within this program serves as a student’s introduction to the College, so we discuss the realities of the global human and environmental condition – poverty, ecosystem decline, population growth, economic disparity, and climate change. We also discuss the fact that we live in unprecedented times in the midst of a sustainability revolution. The realities are often depressing, whether you are 18 or even much older. How do I teach first-year students at a critical transformational period in their development without killing their dreams? My dream is to make a difference in the life of each first-year student by nurturing his/her dreams. I believe in the power of personal narrative to motivate and create a sense of belonging, and that belief is among the influences of my pedagogical approach with this course. What follows are the theoretical underpinnings and the practical strategies I use as I teach first-year students.

Foremost, I challenge students to accept responsibility for their learning, and the future they want for themselves and future generations. Each week, they are exposed to inspirational stories of the people and organizations that are inventing the sustainable future. Students arrive on campus with a script, and as a first-year teacher I need to understand the script and challenge beliefs and support the dreams. One of my students wrote: “Imagine a world where everyone treated those around them - and all around the world for that matter - equally and with respect rather than being judgmental...” I can’t afford to kill this dream.

Like other First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, this course required a focus on inquiry, problem solving, and integrative knowledge and the use of Pathways Planner, ePortfolio, and the Common Book. What I learned from my first attempt at delivering a FYE course was that cramming too many lessons into the course left little time for students to develop their personal narratives or assess whether they are making wise choices on a daily basis. In *Life Mapping*, Bill Cohen describes life mapping as a five step process: (1) determining your beliefs; (2) developing your principles; (3) deciding on your goals; (4) dividing goals into necessary activities; and (5) assigning the schedule of activities. This seems simple and straightforward. Yet, until both the beliefs and life purpose are clear, the college experience will be a collection of courses and extracurricular activities and grades – an extension of high school. Until the student identifies the passion and purpose of college, he or she is simply taking college classes. As Carl Jung said “there is no change from darkness to

light or from inertia to movement without emotions.” Student emotions need to be engaged before they can meaningfully use their Pathways Planner or ePortfolio or understand Covey’s Quadrant II of time management.

Inquiry and problem solving strategies may be applied to meaning-making questions. The purpose of inquiry is to reduce doubt and clarify beliefs, and each student chooses their inquiry topic, which flows naturally from their story. I found that the rationale, pedagogical strategies, and real-life vignettes of Nash and Murray (2010) to be personally empowering to help me mentor students with the initial question “What gives meaning to my life?” Answer that, then answer “What major is right for me?” And then answer “How does the type of career you are preparing for give your life meaning?” and “How will you contribute to inventing a more sustainable future?”

Nash and Murray (2010) assert “what matters most in personal narrative writing is the conviction that the writer’s own life actually testifies. It matters (p. 120).” Students in the College of Natural Resources and Environment should stand for something, and it should show in their choice of major and extracurricular activities. Students struggle with many challenges in college, especially in their first year. The story writing activity I employ in this course helps them realize the transformation they need to make if they are to be successful college students. They arrive at William Perry’s (1968) “Garden of Eden” stage of knowing and look to me (the authority) to tell them what is right and what to believe. Yet when it comes to writing their story, choosing their major, and developing an academic and career plan, the student must transition to being the authority.

Stories reflect choices that students have made, and during the first weeks of college, they make additional choices that influence their emerging stories. In order to monitor the choices that students make, I have selected a 64-question self assessment of choices related to personal responsibility, self-motivation, interdependence, self-awareness, lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, and belief in self (Downing, 2011). This assessment provides students with a quick look at whether their personal choices will either *seldom*, *sometimes*, or *usually* keep them on a successful path toward their academic goals. Their mistakes and consequences of poor choices along the way become part of their story.

After the students have written their personal narrative, they may consider what the Virginia Tech aspirations for students mean to them and how living these aspirations will influence their goals and activities. Just as all US currency is stamped with our country’s values: Liberty, *E Pluribus Unum*, and In God We Trust, I hope our graduates exemplify uniquely Virginia Tech aspirations -- a commitment to unwavering curiosity, pursuing self-understanding and integrity, practicing civility, preparing for a life of courageous leadership, and embracing *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve) as a way of life. The first Aspire! Award winners were recognized at Virginia Tech last fall and their stories have the potential to motivate all first-year students.

Self awareness is a common struggle for the first-year student (Downing, 2011). Jerome Bruner, author of *The Process of Education*, believes the best way to understand the self is to think of the self as a storyteller. Yet, in our curricula, students are seldom asked to write this way. Students write for themselves, to make meaning. They also write so they have a story prepared for their first meeting with an academic advisor. In revising the narrative, I follow the guidance of Marshall Ganz, senior lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; Ganz promotes the power of the story of self, story of us, and story of now. Early drafts are invariably all about self and not much about beliefs or others. But as the story develops it should have a plot: a “challenge and choice and an outcome” (Ganz, 2011). Nash (2004) provides guidelines for writing scholarly personal narratives. From these guidelines, I have created a rubric more suited for first-year students to guide their narrative development with respect to a hook or the question, particulars and generals, larger implications or truths, background and experiences, passion, and clarity.

Mark Twain wrote that “really great people make you feel that you, too, can become great.” Those really great people are the faculty and other invited guests in the course. I have invited groups of faculty with interests in a similar theme to come to class. I provide little instruction except “no PowerPoint presentations allowed!” Students are given notice of the theme and the identity of the faculty panelists and use their inquiry skills to learn about the faculty and develop meaningful questions to guide our discussion. Without a PowerPoint, the faculty member will naturally resort to telling his or her story, about enduring beliefs, how they entered their field of study, and how they are engaged in problem solving or inquiry related to the theme.

Intrinsic factors play in a person’s happiness and offer promise for solving social and environmental problems (Kasser, 2012). Students explore their values in a variety of ways during the course: writing a personal narrative; taking Career Service’s My Plan inventory; survey and discussion of environmental beliefs; and faculty interactions. As the student’s story and dreams emerge, s/he is able to find others on campus with similar values and beliefs and join clubs and organizations. Student ambassadors present first-year students with stories of their struggles and experiences in the first-year at Virginia Tech. These stories help students deal with daily adversities, knowing that others struggled at first but eventually worked through it. Developing a sense of belonging influences a student’s academic motivation and achievement (Walton et al., 2012).

As each new fall semester begins and a new cohort of first-year students arrives, I will enact and realize my own dream of making a small difference in dreams and stories of first-year students. When I tell my story, I will end with the admonition of James Dean to “dream as if you’ll live forever, live as if you’ll die today.”

References

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