



## “Exploring Complex Questions” and “Making Powerful Arguments” at Whitman College

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

Mary Raschko, Associate Professor in the Department of English at Whitman College, has been integral to the planning and development of the newly re-designed First Year Seminars (FYS) program on campus, in which she is serving as the first Director of the re-vamped curriculum. In each FYS section, faculty from several disciplines collaborate to offer themed courses, meeting shared student learning objectives in multiple ways.

### First Year Seminars

The two-semester course sequence—required of all first-year students—is a “faculty-driven initiative,” says Susanne Beechey, Associate Professor and Chair of Politics at Whitman. Raschko emphasizes the idea that the FYS course sequence encourages entering college students “to discover the potential of a liberal arts curriculum; it offers them the experience of the liberal arts” within the year-long sequence.

The fall term, “Exploring Complex Questions,” is dedicated to helping students learn to ask better questions in themed learning communities led by interdisciplinary faculty teams. The goal is to have students think about “interesting topics and big questions in innovative ways,” as the FYS web page states. Helen Kim, Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean for Faculty Development at Whitman, appreciates the fact that the fall term focuses on exploration, saying that “We need some time before we go to argumentation.” She emphasizes the idea that a more explicit focus on

information literacy is also a key component of the fall courses. Each learning community is paired with a librarian to help the sections complete a required information literacy assignment. McDermott explains that this exploratory semester focuses on pre-writing and helping students to find their own voices, as well. Additionally, Raschko points out that the fall term helps students learn to “value different perspectives.”

The spring term, “Making Powerful Arguments,” focuses on persuasion “with the support of rigorous, research-based evidence,” as the web page states. Lydia McDermott, Associate Professor and Chair of Rhetoric, Writing, and Public Discourse at Whitman—as well as First-Year Writing Coordinator—points out that the second semester, with its focus on thesis-driven writing, relies on the work of the first semester; as she states, people “can’t form good theses without having good questions.” Raschko says that students also learn to engage in “reflective revision” of their work in the spring seminars.

### Skills

The new course design foregrounds the skills of reading, writing, and discussion, and professors have discretion to pursue and explore these skills in a variety of ways. Through interacting with texts from a variety of disciplines and genres, students learn to read for details and nuance across many types of texts. Additionally, the current course design gives much more explicit attention to teaching writing than the previous one had done. McDermott has guided FYS professors to develop skills in writing pedagogy, teaching them how to give targeted writing advice and scaffold writing assignments. According to Raschko, students are allowed to be “playful and exploratory” in the writing as they generate compositions for different purposes. Lastly, the professors teach students how to participate in discussions most productively; Raschko articulates the hope that students will continue these habits throughout their time at Whitman. She explains that the faculty are



trained to facilitate discussions in ways that could lead to students reconsidering their ideas; they explore topics collaboratively and engage in thoughtful debates.

Kim says that having students get into these foundational skills and expectations from year one makes sense and allows professors to “build from these core competencies.” As Raschko explains, one of the goals is to have professors “stretch” as they mentor students to “discover.” Moreover, when proposing FYS courses, professors must address how the course is culturally inclusive and presents contending perspectives. To be approved, proposed courses are required to address issues of power, race, and justice, addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion concerns.

### Learning Communities

Fall term learning communities focus on a single topic as viewed from different perspectives, and each one has between three and

six professors from at least three different departments. For example, the “Time” learning community currently has faculty members from physics, geology, creative writing, and computer science; it included a musician in the first iteration of the course. Each learning community has flexibility in how they have students interact with one another and the disciplines of the various faculty members involved. Beechey says that some learning communities have a common syllabus for four or five sections; others use common texts or across more autonomous sections. One learning community, called “Thinking Together, Thinking Apart,” had students send post cards to one another to help strengthen connections with one another even as they were forced apart by the pandemic.

Beechey taught in a learning community titled “Inventing Others,” and she saw it as a “great opportunity to collaborate.” This learning community’s faculty included

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representatives from theatre, dance, English, Film and Media studies, and French, with race and ethnic studies. In this particular learning community, the professors taught individual sections but brought all the students together for three plenary sessions focused on a common text. However the faculty teams choose to achieve the learning objectives, Raschko says, the goal is to build professional community, which is foundational to student learning.

### Developing the New Program

The General Studies Committee took the 2018-19 academic year as a “year of deliberation,” according to Beechey, so that they could “re-imagine the first year course.” Moira Gresham, Associate Professor and Chair of Physics at Whitman, chaired the General Studies Committee when the new FYS program was in its final stages of development. The previous year, when she served on the committee, they started with both internal and external reviews of the previous first year course. The group wanted to keep commonality and “allow faculty to build on their expertise,” Beechey says. When Raschko joined the committee, she soon asked for more “homework,” according to Gresham. The committee set a timeline and goal

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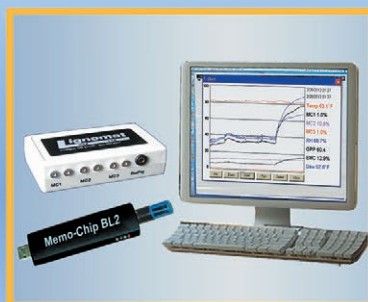
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to have a vote by the end of the calendar year. Gresham says that everyone on the committee was “passionate about creating a good course.” To gain faculty buy-in, they make a conscious decision to facilitate faculty conversations rather than polling on specific ideas; they presented conversation starters rather than finished models. Beecham reports that, over the course of “lots of conversations,” the faculty worked together to develop a common vision for the First Year Seminars.

Early in the process, the committee lead the faculty in structured reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the previous program. After they determined that improvements could be made, they had a series of faculty brainstorming discussions to explore ideas about the goals and essential elements to be included. At the annual faculty retreat, the committee lead a directed conversation in which the faculty discussed more specific ideas such as the course’s structure and syllabus.

At one point, the committee members thought they were ready to design the courses, but Raschko pressed them to step back to think about

the learning goals and develop a clear purpose, according to Gresham. They then hosted an additional series of faculty round tables at which they presented a “messy list of possible goals,” according to Gresham. Raschko had pushed for not refining the list first. Gresham says that it was critical to the process to have the multiple perspectives of faculty members from across campus.

Once they had sketched out three potential models, the committee presented them at a mini-retreat, then took a straw poll after discussion. Because the faculty split evenly, with a third voting for each model, the current program takes elements from each. Gresham says the key to securing the final affirmative vote was that they invited feedback at many stages in the process, and they continually updated faculty on previous and next steps. Gresham hopes that, in modeling this collaborative process, Whitman’s faculty will continue to use such structured opportunities for dialogue for group decision-making—though, she admits that collaboration has been hampered by not being able to meet in person during the pandemic.

Raschko states that they “wanted to keep the professors collaborating” with the new curriculum. Beechey agrees that the course design fosters “an ethos of collaboration” in which faculty feel freer to brainstorm with colleagues in other fields. She feels both “an invitation to be more creative as well as cross-pollination in engaging” with other disciplines.”



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Gresham says that Raschko participated throughout these “intense” stages of developing the course and that “Everyone on the committee is thrilled to have her and her deep knowledge” of the course and its development. Kim notes that the committee and faculty have “created something good that will continue to grow.” The program launched in Fall 2020—all online. Raschko says that the professors have been “pleasantly surprised by student investment and enthusiasm” even though the program launched during the pandemic.

### Collaboration

One of the elements upholding the program, according to Beechey, is “peer-to-peer faculty development.” She says the design of the program, with common learning goals, faculty collaboration, and continuing professional development, has helped her “be at her best” in teaching, and she notes that it is “invigorating to teach with colleagues in other disciplines” and see how they approach fundamental questions differently. Raschko states that they “wanted to keep the professors collaborating” with the new curriculum. Beechey agrees that the course design fosters “an ethos of

collaboration” in which faculty feel freer to brainstorm with colleagues in other fields. She feels both “an invitation to be more creative as well as cross-pollination in engaging” with other disciplines.”

Beechey is thankful that Whitman has supported the program materially by giving a course release to Raschko for directing it, along with stipends for faculty members participating in professional development. Beechey says that such support not only “helped to build a robust launch”—even in the midst of the pandemic—but also demonstrates that the Provost recognizes the value of faculty collaborations.” Participating faculty members also receive support in writing instruction; as First-Year Writing Coordinator, McDermott reads the course proposals to see how professors are planning to use composition, then offers feedback, guidance, and workshops to help them teach writing more effectively within each section.

Additionally, Raschko explains that Whitman wants to get as many tenured and tenure-track professors involved as possible in teaching FYS. Currently, almost every department on campus is involved in at least one of the courses offered.



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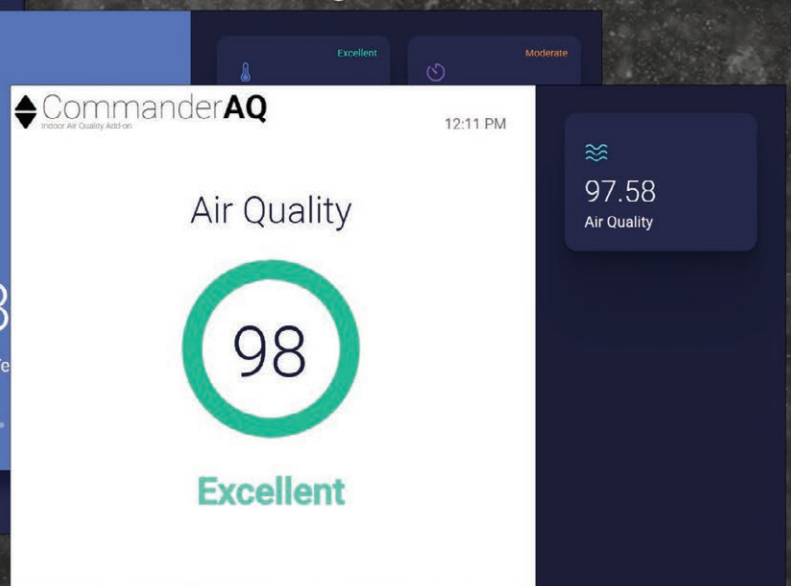
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## Professional Development

Raschko began organizing professional development opportunities well before the program's launch, with the goal of helping faculty members learn new classroom skills. Many of the professional development workshops "offered opportunities for people to learn from

each other," according to Beechey. She goes on to say that Raschko "has served admirably as the first director" of the new program and that this model "allows for creativity in teaching, building on each instructor's strengths, but with enough structure" to make the program cohesive.

Because the faculty had developed a course focused on specific learning objectives, not all professors "felt immediately able" to teach the new curriculum. There was definitely increased interest in learning to teach writing, McDermott states. Currently teaching in the "Justice" community, Kim reports that the faculty feel and appreciate the support they have received.

Beechey says that the targeted professional development has percolated to her other classes—she now finds herself "thinking more intentionally and building writing assignments with more opportunities to do low-stakes writing" in classes other than her First Year Seminars. She also says that her writing pedagogy has improved, and she has now developed a "deep appreciation" of writing specialists like Raschko and McDermott. McDermott has been pleased that they have been able to offer professional development in writing; according to her, the turnout in the professional development workshops has been "amazing." Learning to better teach writing "continues to be something the faculty are interested in improving, and they are open to suggestion."

## Director

As director of the program, Raschko visits classes to see how things are working; she "gathers stories" plus "serves as a conversation partner" for continual improvement. Kim says that Raschko, as FYS Director, is doing a "spectacular job" in delivering the faculty development component embedded in the program, specifically around subjects such as writing, leading discussions, grounding coursework in anti-racism, and helping faculty learn to lead difficult conversations. Kim also notes that Raschko has done a "great job at building in assessment," which can be challenging, since faculty members from different disciplines approach assessment in a plethora of ways.

Kim says that Raschko is available to the faculty teaching FYS, both as individuals and in group settings; she is "not only a resource for individuals but also a creator of the faculty community." McDermott states she is happy that Raschko is the first director, saying that "she is logistically on top of things, well-versed in composition pedagogy, an excellent leader, and empathetic to both instructors and students. She is an excellent choice to launch the program."

As a key partner in the creation of the re-envisioned First Year Seminars program, Raschko continues to support and guide faculty members in bringing it to fruition in her role as Director. ■

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. Cynthia Mwenja teaches Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Montevallo.

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