“The Brain is Wider Than the Sky:”
Reflections on York’s General Education Reform Process
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Reading through the archive of York’s General Education Reform documents is a humbling experience. The beautifully written summaries of what occurred at meeting after meeting clearly show how much intellectual labor has been invested in the process, and how every conflict, obstacle, and challenge has been painstakingly identified and addressed. What is there to add?

Let me tell a story rather than hazard an answer: I was on the number two train returning from Brooklyn College where I was teaching as an adjunct while on leave from a tenure-track job as Assistant Professor of English in Georgia. It was 1996, the year before I started at York. The train was still fairly empty because we were only a few stops from the end of the line, headed toward Manhattan. I was deeply absorbed in reading Tim O’Brien’s book, The Things They Carried, when a young man sitting across from me noticed the book’s title and started talking to me: “I remember that story. That’s the story that begins with the description of what the soldiers are carrying. Oh, I remember that story. We read it in my freshman English class.”

O’Brien’s book is indeed memorable. A searing account of soldiering in Viet Nam, the collection of interwoven stories probes the anguish of war while meditating on the porous boundaries between reality, truth, and fiction. Most spectacularly, O’Brien employs the metaphor of carrying to convey the gravity of heartbreak, senseless loss, and war’s breach of moral ethics. “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey,” the first story begins. “They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack.”

Within the first two pages, O’Brien develops the metaphor further by listing the literal objects the soldiers wore on their bodies, hauled on their backs, and stashed in their pockets.

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between 12 and 18 pounds, depending upon a man’s habits or rate of metabolism.

The young man’s response when he recognized the O’Brien book while riding on the subway exemplifies the very best General Education can achieve. Something in the text, the reading, the discussion, and the college classroom experience entered into the student and became part of his world. Like the soldiers who carry the material and psychological weight of war, the student carries the book and the experience of reading it with him, and that is what inspired him to initiate connection with a complete stranger on a New York City subway.

The experience in the General Education classroom, I would venture to guess, provided the model for the interaction. The young man wanted to create connection about being moved emotionally, his discovery of the meaning of metaphor, and his memory of that experience. The interaction between the young man and myself sparked by the O’Brien text suggests that the General Education classroom fosters community building—even if it exists only between three subway stops. Unknown to each other, the young man and I are part of a community premised on the idea cont.’d on p.5
that learning, and communing about learning, are fundamental, unifying values.

Now, how do we assess this student’s learning? He could conceivably not have done well in his freshman English class. He could have failed the class, transferred to another college, or dropped out for a year or two. He could be a statistic on a chart. What this student learned, I propose, cannot be explained or quantified using assessment models and criteria that are currently in vogue. What this student learned is ineffable, as difficult to wrap our minds around as Emily Dickinson’s claim that the “brain is wider than the sky.”

“The Brain—is wider than the Sky—For—put them side by side—/The one the other will contain/ with ease—and You—beside—.”

In its notion of lateral reinforcement of intellectual competencies, and its grounding in complex intellectual inquiry, the proposed York College General Education curriculum honors the idea that brains are wider than the sky and deeper than the sea, “For—hold them—Blue to Blue—/ The one the other will absorb—/As sponges—Buckets—do.”

The potential for creating intellectual community in a variety of simultaneous domains is, in my view, what is most exciting about the General Education reform process. Change involves what Judith Viorst calls “necessary losses.” We give up the familiar, the comfortable, the known. The fear and discomfort change generates is what all our students, especially in General Education classes, experience. The General Education reform process gives faculty the opportunity to experience once again what it is like to be a student: pushed to confront risk, to leave the familiar, to grapple with the unknown. I see some colleagues expressing fear, suggesting that we are being railroaded, that the proposed new curriculum will cause hardship, diminishment, be detrimental to new faculty, cause the college’s downfall. I wonder: How can we harness this energy, this power, and utilize it in the service of learning, our own and that of our students?

In answering this question, we build community. For as faculty, what an amazing opportunity to convey to successive generations of students the love of inquiry, the pleasure of thinking. What an amazing opportunity to puzzle out how to make change happen collectively, democratically, to learn how to disagree, compromise, and make something that is larger than ourselves. Creating a new curriculum is akin to creating a work of art, and in the same way stories change with the telling, so, too, will the new General Education curriculum change as it is transformed from theory to practice in our classrooms.

Works Cited