

# Teaching First-Year Seminar to Artists through Project-Based and Self-Directed Learning

**Dr. Erin Garcia**

*This project was good, because where bookwork gives you the knowledge, the project gave us practical application. It gave us hands-on practice of important skills with deadlines that mattered. Instead of leaving with short-term knowledge, we are leaving with long-term experience.*

*-Catherine Saunders, Illustration Major at Nossi College of Art, Nashville, TN.*

With an infinite knowledge available at student's fingertips, it has become even more important to provide them with opportunities to promote application of their learning in real world environments. Students entering college are in one of the biggest transitional periods of their lives and need opportunities to learn developmental skills in a way that is natural to their generation. Placing students in a position to learn in an experiential setting, where they can learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills effectively, is imperative for their growth. All students learn differently, but these differences can easily be addressed in a problem-based learning environment.

## **Nossi College of Art**

Beginning this fall semester, 2020, amongst the Coronavirus pandemic, it became even more important for me to create a meaningful experience for each of my students. Nossi College of Art is a small, proprietary institution art college tucked away in Nashville, Tennessee. Founded in 1973, the school is nationally accredited and averages about 280 students. With classroom sizes aiming for no more than 15, the college presents ample opportunity for teachers

to be creative and engaging. Students obtain a four-year bachelor's degree and have the option to major in Graphic Design, Videography, Photography, or Illustration, which presents challenges when trying to create projects individually geared towards student interest. Through the *Nossi Access* program starting their sophomore year, students have the opportunity to voluntarily take on projects in the community for clients who propose and submit work for students. It is difficult for first-year students to work with Nossi Access since they have not gained the necessary skills in class to do high levels of work.

### **Students at Nossi**

The college has grown from the type of students it began with in the seventies. Like any traditional university setting, the number of students straight out of high school is higher than ever. Many students travel over 2 hours to attend classes from neighboring states, such as Alabama, Kentucky or the surrounding state of Tennessee. The inclusivity of the campus brings in a wide range of demographic factors, as most students feel they can be themselves on campus, as it promotes a safe space.

Some students aspire to work as an independent freelancer picking up projects of interest, while others aim to work for a company such as DC Comics or Marvel. Throughout their time at Nossi, students are given the opportunity to explore their interests, learn new techniques in and out of the classroom and work within their communities.

### **Background of Author**

The past 10 years in education have put me in a variety of roles from graduation project teacher at a high school to working with inmates in Tennessee to bring them higher educational opportunities. However, teaching Success Strategies at a private art school in Nashville has come with its share of personal growth and challenges. I found there was a pivotal need for students to

learn in an “on the job” fashion, as most art students identify as kinesthetic learners, learning best in a hands-on environment. I am an adjunct professor who has just completed my dissertation on self-directed learning in a gap year program, providing me with a new lens, in which to view my students. It has become evident through my years of teaching (at both secondary and post-secondary levels) and this experience, that there is a direct need to apply learning through an experiential framework in combination with student interests. Each term since I began teaching this course, I was able to reflect, grow and slowly move away from the traditional teacher-centered paradigm of lecture-based and prescribed textbook. with a prescribed book.

I have found that allowing the students to take control of their own learning, as well as the learning of others in the course, allows them to gain content knowledge, confidence, problem-solving and critical thinking skills and personal growth. Teachers in any setting can instill a self-directed learning approach for their students at any age and on any subject. Through this project, it has reinforced the idea that all students need to work in groups, solve problems of interest, be in charge of their own learning and learn to overcome a variety of obstacles.

### **The First-Year Seminar**

Traditional first year seminar courses date as far back as 1882, and were created to teach students confidence, motivation, study skills, time management skills, institutional resources, and to begin to build a relationship with their college campus and, more recently, to increase the retention rates between the first and second years of college. College Success, Success Strategies, and Freshman Seminar are examples of the same type of courses offered on college campuses throughout the country. The aim of these courses vary college to college, but after their rebirth in the seventies, they have steadily increased to becoming a pivotal part of a student’s success.

The contemporary version of these courses was developed by Dr. John Gardner, who is the founder of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, as well as the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. He has written numerous books on the subject and is the creator of “the first-year experience” concept through over 40 years of research and served as my intern supervisor and career mentor. Dr. Gardner believes the first-year seminar serves in a capacity similar to that of a support group where students are grouped together to acclimate and learn in a new environment, being led by “a survivor of the transition.” Each institution, department, and teacher then must determine the most effective approach for their student body, as there is a vast amount of different needs for each college and student.

At Nossi, the Success Strategies course aims to provide students with resources on campus, as well as a deep dive into skills necessary to be a successful student. Traditionally, the course was taught in coordination with a text and a variety of papers, assessments and small projects to enhance student learning. It is the term of Fall 2020, that the semester-long project was introduced.

### **Learning Through Doing**

Dr. Phillip Gardner, the founder and Director of Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, believes students learn most effectively in a variety of different contexts. In our interview he stated, “Any place where you can put students in situations where they take the helm of their own learning . . . the better off they will be.” This educational view coincides with Dr. John Gardner’s work in helping students successfully transition to college.

Dr. John Gardner believes it is more important than ever to give students the opportunity to learn through group work and to learn to interact with one another. In lieu of his traditional work, it became pertinent to adapt other educational frameworks theorists have developed when putting students at the center of their own learning. In developing a classroom approach, I decided to base my pedagogy on Experiential Learning Model (ELM), Project-Based Learning (PBL), and Self-Direct Learning (SDL), which became even more important to implement effectively during very unsure times. These models help to alleviate the uncertainty of today's world, as students are able to gain back much of the control they lost when beginning their new lives as college students. With or without the pandemic, having students self-direct their own learning allows them to use the project and their group members, as a way to learn within a semi-structured environment. However, the project is not so structured, that they lack the ability to be as creative as they see fit, in a way that makes sense to their interests and style of learning.

My approach consisted of allowing students to manage their own learning (Self-Directed Learning), work on a semester-long project to gain skills and answer challenging questions (Project-Based Learning), and learn cognitive concepts through active experimentation (Experiential Learning Model). All models call for reflection, observation, and self-assessment, but none give stipulations on the experience itself.

Then began the task of creating a well-rounded project, where students can work in groups, reflect, grow, and learn, with the variety of talents they bring to the table. The project consisted of the following design:

- All course sections were divided into three groups: Videography, Graphic Design, and Photography

- Students from each class work with a shared client to learn the skills necessary to thrive and survive in the real world
- Students would be responsible for managing their own learning through a variety of roles with mandated deadlines
- The client’s sole responsibility would be to provide feedback and answer any questions the groups encounter, as well as provide any materials necessary. The client receives artistic materials for their own use.
- Students will compete against other classes to demonstrate the competitiveness of the industries they have chosen for industry recognition
- Reflection will be built in at intervals throughout the semester with open-ended prompts provided by the instructor.

This approach gives artists the opportunity to grow as individuals with other students in the same circumstance. However, the challenge of finalizing the project came when making it “Covid-friendly”. We began the semester in the classroom, but the uncertainty of the classroom provided me with the task of choosing a client who would be available online, teaching students skills to work successfully in an online setting, and giving students who got sick, the opportunity to work with their groups from home at any time. Dr. John Gardner believes, “You have to focus on what is certain. What is known versus what is not known, because the what is known is the reality of what students have to work with.”

Due to increased levels of stress, as well as students who are each coming in with a different set of skills, I was able to scaffold the project to build student confidence. Lessons were taught on:

- Setting up group communication through group email and text

- Assigning responsibilities for each group member
- How to use our online learning platform to create presentation materials and turn in assignments
- Time management of the individual student and the group
- Writing professional emails through a structured lesson with the Career Services Director
- Question and answer period with the Marketing Director
- Reflection check-ins with the instructor to ask questions and get performance feedback
- Proposal submission to properly format and submit product ideas to the client
- Presentation of the final product through descriptions of the creation process and student reflection

All lessons were taught in coordination with the text and other daily activities and assignments, but all had the ability to be taught in an online setting. Students were given 30 to 45 minutes of a four hour class period each week to work on their group projects and interact with the client through email.

### **Working with a Client**

The client chosen was dependent on their ability to work with a large number of students, be open-minded to different ideas, and to be in the start-up phase of their business, to potentially use the student-created materials. The client chosen was MakingMandy Custom Flags out of Charlotte, North Carolina. Mandy Dennis makes “Spotters” which were created to help families to find their strollers in large crowds by attaching attention grabbing flags to the strollers. Selling through her Etsy and personal website, Mandy is beginning to expand, “I’m going from making custom flags to working with more brick and mortar businesses, such as educational institutions and other businesses.” In the proposal stage, students worked with Mandy to determine her

needs, clientele, and the type of logo, video, and photo products that would be useful for her thriving business.

### **Student Project Reflections**

Throughout the project, students were given opportunities to reflect about their experiences within their groups and the project itself. Student Andrea Kerbs commented on her ability to overcome obstacles, “I gained friendships and the ability to move past mistakes during this project.” Throughout a student’s academic career, they receive constructive criticism and sometimes struggle to overcome many obstacles thrown in their way. When given the opportunity to see these obstacles as momentary, instead of the end of the world, students are able to increase their self-confidence and thrive in difficult environments. Student Emily Allison reiterated the importance of growth, “It gave me more hands-on experience, which led to better understanding. It also pushed me out of my comfort zone and helped me grow as a person.” Learning through experience forces people to get to know different parts of themselves, as they are pushed into situations they have never encountered before.

The importance of learning through a project in correlation with the textbook was shown in several student reflections. Student Claire Seiber stated, “I think it really helped us learn and actually apply what the book was covering. If we just graded by [mastering] the content of the book, I think the longest we would retain it would be a semester; but instead the project can help us retain it for life.” Student Dallas Hickman had a similar experience and commented on her ability to use her artistic skills, “Going straight into a project instead of normal bookwork was a completely different ballpark for me. I truly enjoyed the project and I was able to be as creative as I wanted to be!”



Working with an actual client not only gives students an idea of the Nossi Access program on campus, but also gives them a glimpse into what their real work will entail. Student Monica Wingard stated, “Having an actual client to give feedback and critique really helped a lot in the design process, and I can honestly say that I’ve taken more from this class than any other class so far.” Not only did Monica gain a new perspective on working with a client, but she was able to lead her group throughout the entire project. Though each of these students came in with a direct skillset, not every student was able to be put into a group that was within their own major. Most students in that scenario reported learning a skillset they can apply to future projects, learning how their skills fit into their group, or reported that they did not want to focus on a particular genre within their own major.

### **Teacher Reflection**

I design my own teaching style the same way I design my student’s learning process for learning. At the end of this semester, I met with each group in every class and received feedback on areas they think would have enhanced their learning. Students requested future classes:

- Receive instruction on how to set up videoconferencing software on their own for outside group meetings
- Provide biweekly meeting check-ins with the instructor to have honest group conversations
- Provide more responsibilities for each member of the graphic design team
- Provide opportunities for video conferencing with the client
- Provide written self-designed and appointed roles for reach team and its members and adopting changes when needed

### **Conclusion**

Students in a STEM field should not be the only students in first-year courses learning through the project-based learning model. Any group of students at a college or university can create opportunities in the First-Year Seminar to enhance learning in ways that are adaptive to the students they are serving. It is important to give students the ability to manage their own learning through a variety of contexts, while at the same time being guided by their instructor throughout the entire process.

Next semester this course will be taught through the reflection of the students and myself, the instructor. I always want to change and grow and through that lens, as students can see change as a positive. They may be in a new and scary transition in their lives, but this project gives them the opportunity to build friendships, learn about themselves, see their own potential careers, grow into adulthood, and develop their self-authorship. As Dr. John Gardner stated, “The most important thing in college is what you do.”