Pygmalion, *Prometheus*, and the Art of the Capstone

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Investigations into the growth and nature of capstone experiences in college education emphasize the importance of integrating and synthesizing knowledge, often hard to achieve across disparate courses and disciplinary emphases. Melissa Vosen, in "The Case of the Capstone Course: Reflection and the Commonalities between English and University Studies (BUS) Students" settles upon "reflection" as the best "common element" for helping students with disparate course histories to effectively transition from their academic to their future careers (8). Kristi Upson-Saia likewise considers the challenges inherent in providing a culminating experience to students in religious studies, a multidisciplinary field in which a wide range of strategies are employed and little consensus has been reached with regard to best practice (6-7). She concludes that "the capstones that are most successful are those that are carefully linked to their department's major curriculum, pedagogies, and staffing, that set out to achieve a reasonable set of objectives, and that are aligned seamlessly with the institutional mission, culture, and expectations for assessment" (4). Given the multiple outcomes built into the English major at my own institution, accomplishing these goals posed a challenge, yet the results of our efforts have been encouraging. The capstone seminar I have developed is one in which "creativity," widely

defined, is the overarching theme, the capaciousness of which allows for related topics and requirements that have effectively served our graduating seniors as well as the department.

Ours is a small department with a curriculum that consciously integrates the study of literature with the study of writing, and so our capstone course must address the needs and interests of students with a variety of curricular emphases. In the course, students synthesize and expand upon what they have learned throughout their English major, producing an extended written project within their chosen genre and constructing a portfolio of work from their major, including a hands-on-learning assignment that is published on campus. Weekly meetings consist of readings, discussion, presentations, and writing centered upon the related themes of creativity, re-creation, adaptation, influence, appropriation, and "repurposing." Drawing upon the disciplinary skills highlighted in "Introduction to English Studies," writing, and other courses, students reflect upon writing and literature as powerful and evolving forms of human expression and upon their own participation in practices that emerge from English Studies.

While reflection, as in Vosen's course, is an important and recurring component of our capstone seminar, the overarching theme that allows the disparate students in the room to share a productive common experience is "creativity." For English students and scholars, and for writers past and present, the topic and the dilemma of creativity and creative inspiration have long been of intense interest and the subject of lengthy rumination. Two of the most recent explorations of the topic come to us from the fields of psychology and architecture. In *Wired to Create:*

Unraveling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind, Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire posit that "[C]reative people have messy minds' (xiii). Kyna Leski employs a weather metaphor to describe mental processes that seem bafflingly disordered: "Like a storm, creativity is bigger than you. It begins before you know it. It is beyond your complete control" (8). The tumultuous messiness of capping our curriculum has certainly been part of our own experience, but in the end, the very open-endedness of the theme of creativity has helped me to gain some control over the multiple, sometimes incongruent demands of a culminating course in English Studies.

As indicated in this article's title, students read *Pygmalion* – the George Bernard Shaw version – as one of a number of texts that evolve from "creation" stories that go back to the early myths of Pygmalion and Prometheus, including the Shaw play, its multiple adaptations in film, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and a number of poems and secondary articles. We talk about writing as activism and also the latest developments in creative expression, including writing in the digital age and controversy over "uncreative" writing that relies heavily on digital technology (Zangrando et al. B18-B19). This reading and film viewing are frontloaded in the course, to establish students' familiarity with the topic and to spur ideas for their projects. Our goal is less to emphasize the specific importance of any one of these texts than to consider the ways in which writers build, adapt and innovate upon the work of previous writers. We read works from all genres, as students have been required to do throughout the major, and we read a book specifically on writing, since our curriculum foregrounds the connections between reading

literature and writing practice. We aim to make certain that, once again in the capstone, students exercise the various skills we have highlighted throughout the major, and that readings and discussion lead them to an idea for a project that best showcases their own individual strengths.

Again, our department is a small one and our capstone must accommodate students with a variety of interests, so the project is the place where students have the opportunity to write in the genre that best reflects their own curricular emphases. Many students write standard critical analyses of literary texts, often on the works we've discussed in class, but we also encourage them to range more broadly and to write on topics that relate to their broader interests, especially since so many of our students have double majors and minors as well as compelling extracurricular activities. A few project titles provide a sense of how students take advantage of the open-ended assignment to write about topics that matter to them: 1) "From Freaks to Greeks: Disability in *Frankenstein* and *Pygmalion"* (by a student applying to a graduate program in disability studies); 2) "The Weight of War: Moral Injury in British WWI Poetics"; 3) "Holocaust Writers and their Works: Inspiration through Experiences"; 4) "Will Shifts in Climate Change Lead to Shifts in Literature?" (ecocritical analysis of Shakespeare, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley); 5) "An Analysis of *Pygmalion*: Gender and Language." Since our department's learning outcomes include explicit reference to students' ability to "engage with difficult questions of ethical reasoning with respect to civic, environmental, professional, and intercultural

responsibilities," many projects engage with cultural and historical contexts, in addition to demonstrating the more standard learning outcomes regarding critical reading and analysis.

Some of our students who have taken a number of writing courses beyond the ones that we require of them to complete the curriculum choose to write projects in a range of creative genres that include short stories, poetry, narrative nonfiction, screenplays, and even a comic book. Students' topics vary widely but, as with the critical analysis projects, they tend to foreground the creativity theme, and I have seen work that incorporates the topics of biotechnology, spoken word and hip hop poetry, censorship, robotics, and punk rock. To ensure that these culminating projects demonstrate all our learning outcomes, we require students to also write a "critical foreword" that includes peer-reviewed research, citation, thesis-driven analysis, and the annotated bibliography required for all projects. The critical foreword helps bring parity across the assignment and allows the instructor to apply a common grading rubric to all projects.

Two other significant components to our senior capstone seminar are the HLA (Hands-on-Learning Assignment) and the portfolio. The HLA is announced in the gateway course, Introduction to English Studies, is encouraged throughout the major, and comes due in the senior seminar. Students must publish an article for one of four campus organizations: the campus newspaper, public relations, the theatre program, or our Center for Career and Civic Engagement. While some students wait until their senior year to seek out and complete this assignment, many more rise to the challenge much earlier and find a venue for their work that

engages them throughout their college career. Some thus get significant practical writing experience, while all the students end up with at least one published article for their portfolio. This portfolio includes four previous works from the major, with reflective statements, the project, the HLA, a resume, and a culminating reflective essay. The portfolio is submitted digitally, providing the department with a means for assessment and the students with comprehensive documentation of their progress and accomplishments in the major.

The senior seminar and the resulting portfolio provide what we hope is a helpful bridge for students as they move beyond the campus and classroom to engage in the multiplicity of opportunities that are open to English majors who approach their commencement with flexibility and confidence. As we emphasize in the section of the course devoted explicitly to career investigation, English majors may well be the "hot new hires" (Martinuzzi), especially when they combine the creative thinking inherent to their discipline with the reflective life of "principle," advocated by writers like Henry David Thoreau and many others. A creative capstone may help launch our students into a world that is increasingly mechanistic and conflict-driven, with the skills and values that bring the humanities to bear upon their lives and work.

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