Writing in the Majors: Using Backward Design of the Curriculum to Accelerate Students’ Growth as Disciplinary Thinkers and Writers

John C. Bean, Seattle University

Friday, September 13
1:30—4:30 p.m.
Room 50 Milton Hall

The premise of this workshop is that attention to the design and sequencing of writing assignments—both within an individual course and within the major curriculum—can accelerate students’ growth as interdisciplinary thinkers.

Workshop participants will develop ideas for vertical sequencing of writing assignments within the curriculum and for designing scaffolded assignments within selected courses. Such intentional curricular design can help students “think like experts” in the field, better able to do the discipline’s work. Disciplinary faculty need to teach new majors how to join the discipline’s discourse—that is, how the discipline poses questions, conducts literature reviews, forms hypotheses, gathers and analyzes evidence, looks at alternative solutions, and makes arguments.

The payoff will be more engaged students performing at higher levels of expertise.

Note: Participants are invited to attend the workshop with two or three department colleagues to stimulate discussion of the department’s curriculum for majors.

This workshop—drawing on novice/expert theory as well as research in deep learning and transfer of learning—will show why the traditional “term paper” or “research paper” is not very effective at teaching disciplinary writing and thinking. A better approach is to design the curriculum backwards so that scaffolded assignments early in the major give students the skills they need for sustained disciplinary writing as seniors.

John C. Bean (BA, Stanford; Ph.D University of Washington) is a professor of English at Seattle University, where he holds the title of Consulting Professor for Writing and Assessment. He is the author of Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom, 2nd edition (Jossey-Bass, 2011). He is also the co-author of three widely-used composition textbooks. Since 2003 he has researched and written on the development of institutional assessment strategies that promote faculty conversations about teaching, learning, and curriculum design.