

Questions for Professor Deustchlander

1. What is the specific assignment for this essay?

In my FSEM (Bird Obsessions), each writing assignment gave the students an option of topic and sometimes style for their essays. Our second essay assignment dealt with the science of ornithology and particularly the study of bird song and migration. We read several books that told the stories of birds and, more importantly, the scientists who study them. Mike, inspired by Miyoko Chu's Songbird Journeys, chose to write an essay on the struggles that birds face in different migration strategies. However, Mike approached this assignment from a very creative and interesting perspective. The assignment was as follows.

The Struggles of Bird Migration

What are some of the struggles migrating birds face? Are the challenges worth the end result (or what are the advantages)? Make your arguments by examining a few specific species of birds that differ in their migratory strategies (e.g. a long distance migrant versus short distance migrant, a day migrating hawk versus a nocturnally migrating songbird, a migrant versus a non-migrant). You will need to consult additional sources about the birds you choose. I suggest starting with birds that you already know something about from your readings, field trip, or movies. Then learn more by consulting specific sources (texts, journals, the Birds of North America Online) that have family of species information regarding life history and migration.

2. How does this assignment fit with the goals of your course?

Two of the main goals for FSEM are that they are reading and writing intensive. In my course, I tried to foster different styles of writing and analysis through focusing each writing assignment on a different aspect of bird-human interactions. We focused on four main topics: the hobby of birding, the scientific study of birds, birds in religion and art, and conservation of birds. By providing multiple options for students in terms of style and content on each assignment, I attempted to allow students to pursue areas from the course and topics that most interested them. My reoccurring theme throughout the course was about passion, and how passion for something can change and shape a life. We examined the lives of people passionate about birds and the birds themselves as an example of lives shaped by passion and appreciation for nature. However, we spoke often in class about developing our own passions. Therefore when students showed some sign of passion for a particular topic, assignment or project, I tried to foster it within the context of the goals for the FSEM program. The topic of how birds struggle during migration and the amazing journeys that make each fall and spring fascinated many of the students. This particular writing assignment attempted to foster that fascination by getting students to consider alternate strategies taken by migratory birds during migration through species-specific examples. By becoming more intimate with a few species, students could learn more about the wonders of migration, and critical similarities and differences between bird species.

3. Why does this student's essay stand out for you as strong writing?

This was the second essay for the course. The first involved writing from their own experiences in comparison to two novels we read and discussed as a class. My intention for this second assignment was that students would write a rather straightforward analysis involving sources from class as well as additional sources. This was the first assignment involving independent

research. At the time students were drafting their essays, I was away at an international conference for ornithologists in Mexico. Mike sent me an email message requesting to write the essay from the perspective of the bird. I was hesitant and thought that Mike's angle on the assignment would result in a "watered down" essay without much factual content. But I wanted to promote his creative thinking and his desire to create something different. So I allowed Mike to proceed after a few words of caution about content. Not only was Mike successful in providing good content, but also I found his essay to be quite beautiful in its approach. He chose two birds: Bicknell's Thrush, a long distance migrant with very restricted breeding and wintering ranges, and the Common Redpoll, an occasional migrant that stays north for the winter migrating only when food dictates. I was amazed at how well Mike mixed science with literary expression and emotion. For example, his phrase, "There is a change coming. You can sense it. Your muscle are tense and you can see it in the changing light", captures the science of birds perceiving it is time to migrate and becoming restless as they do each fall and spring. Yet Mike's choice of words and phrases leaves one feeling the bird's anxiety and possibly excitement of the trials ahead.

I read the essay after both my teaching and writing colleagues had seen it. They both praised the work encouraging me to read it as soon as I returned from Mexico. It truly was one of the most creative examples of student writing from the semester, and it exceeded all of our expectations for this particular assignment. To me it was one of many lessons I learned during the semester about the joys of teaching in the FSEM program.

Questions for Michael Ellis

1. How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

I didn't have any idea where to begin when I started this paper. After staring at my screen for a while I just stopped thinking about it and started typing. I came up with a rough version of the introduction and fell in love with it. I knew it was different from what was expected for this paper, so my next step was to ask Dr. D if it was okay to take the paper in this direction. After that everything just gushed out. Of course, there was some research to be done...

2. What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

This was, in essence, an academic paper, so my biggest challenges were to stretch the boundaries of an academic paper while making sure I didn't get overly creative, and to write with detail and facts.

3. How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

Well, my FYS had a few goals to fulfill, and I think that I reached a few with this paper. We wanted to use birds to understand passion, the workings of science, a whole bunch of other things like culture, and, of course, we wanted to learn about birds themselves! I definitely achieve the last of those with this paper, and the science bit as well. I think I let some of my own passion into this paper, too. And another goal of FYSems in general is to get us to write better and more effectively. Did that, too.

4. What is the most important thing you learned from doing this essay?

I really think I learned quite a bit from this experience. The biggest thing was probably that it never hurts to ask a professor if you can explore other options. Who knows, it just might work out for the better. I learned a lot about myself as a writer as well.

5. If applicable: Describe the way your Writing Colleague supported you in the process of writing.

My WC was always great in making me think about my papers and giving me a little confidence. For this paper, she had a few suggestions on how to clean up my draft, but more importantly, she suggested that I add a third part. As it was, I only had Part I and Part II for my paper. She recommended I find a way to wrap everything up, and from that idea my little “Afterword” was born.

Questions for Alexandria Hanson, Writing Colleague

1. Describe the way you supported the student in completing this writing project.

When I first read Mike's paper I couldn't believe it because it was something completely different from everyone else's. I really tried to emphasize how much I valued the uniqueness and how he should stick with the individual idea he had going. When it came to making suggestions for his paper and improving it, I only suggested the afterward that he now has at the end as a way to tie it all together. With a paper like this, I think it's really important to support the student in taking a different angle and writing from a different perspective, to take a risk and run with it.

2. What did you find to be the most challenging aspect of this assignment?

I thought that taking the paper topics and making them interesting would be the most difficult. It's often hard to take facts and then put them into a paper and make it intriguing. With Mike's paper specifically, I thought it would be really difficult to weave the facts into the overall story and not take away from the story that made up the paper, but he managed to do just that with no problem.