

Creativity and Collaboration in the Small College Department

Wendy Moffat

Small?

Size matters.

What small departments can achieve, and how they go about it, depends on understanding the political economy of their stature in an institutional context. Defining a “small department” depends, of course, on factors extraneous to the department itself: the *relative* size of the department, administrative structures of personnel and reporting, the number of student majors, tensions between expectations to support general education and the discipline, how full-time equivalencies for faculty teaching lines are calculated and distributed, and so on.

It’s a mistake to think that a faculty head-count alone determines a department’s size, for there are also more ineffable measures of a department’s scope. Departments can feel smaller than they are — a downward trend in the number of student majors can transform a giant into a helpmeet department. Often faculty unconsciously measure their discipline against some other moment in its history (I write this having just read Patricia Cohen’s [2009] front-page article in the *New York Times* about the recent plunge in enrollments in humanities courses.) Conversely, small departments that constitute a signal outpost in the curriculum — a language or a humanities department at a technical university, for example — can derive some status from being essential though not central to their school’s wellspring of prestige. Beyond prestige, there is passion: both individual students and their teachers often

find a small department in a large school to be an oasis — a place to develop intellectually on a humane scale.

I begin with this somewhat abstract disquisition on size as an invitation to keeping our eyes open for surprise and possibilities. The years I served on the Executive Committee of the Associated Departments of English (the branch of the Modern Language Association devoted to the effective training and support of department chairs) offered humbling views of hard-working small departments, in permutations I could not have imagined from the narrow and privileged position of the liberal arts.¹ One department chair at a community college was the *only* full-time faculty member in her department, though she hired, supervised, and assessed the work of more than twenty adjunct faculty. (Is this heroic enterprise a small department or a large one?) Most common is the departmental structure of a full-time faculty of between three and fifteen people, supplemented by “contributing faculty” in other disciplines, or regular use of adjuncts as demand rises or falls.

In small departments faculty must rely on each other. The exigencies of a small department pull in opposite directions. The first is that faculty must always do *too much*. The sensation of coming to teach in a small department from a big research university (where most of us earned our degrees) can be daunting. Sometimes we fight the overwhelming feeling of faking it. There is too much here to *cover*, the little voice says. Who can be more than superficially adept at *knowing*, much less *teaching*, all this material? Even if we want to stay in our area of expertise, we can’t afford to do so. Elsewhere (Moffat 2003) I have written, not facetiously, that faculty in small departments must become experts in two-and-a-half subject areas.

The corollary to the creeping sensation of faking it is: *get real*. Someone has to teach the material. Might as well teach as well as one can. Small departments press faculty into pedagogical adventures to survive. In small departments, faculty cannot afford to be narrow in their course offerings. Faculty adapt to lopsided class enrollments — small upper-level advanced classes for majors; larger general education classes; independent studies — by teaching beyond their expertise and making other accommodations to enrollment demands. Often faculty will teach a student in more than one course. (This means one must be careful not to tell the same joke too many times.) On a trajectory to tenure, it is likely that junior faculty in small departments will have to work up courses at multiple levels, to multiple audiences, in several subject areas. These are excellent — if stress-inducing — raw materials for effective professional collaboration.

Collaboration, etymologically speaking, is about *laboring* together.

We can stipulate that all faculty in small departments do this. Like Moliere's hero in *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, who was delighted to discover that all his life he has been speaking prose, it is wise for us to recognize that in its daily operations the small department engenders collaboration all the time. In a small department, faculty are always asked to adapt and help out. Someone goes on sabbatical and that course needs to be taught; a new hire must work up syllabi for the first time; the chair is always scrambling. A functional definition of a small college department might be: an ideal laboratory for collaboration. In a small department, faculty can feel their agency.

Collaboration as Efficiency

An individual teacher is wise to begin by collaborating with *herself*. The best habit is to face facts and plan for maximum efficiency. The cycle of developing a new course or a new area of interest can become recursive. A teacher might begin by offering a general education course as a survey of a new area — say, nineteenth-century British literature — and eventually develop one aspect of this course for a more specialized constituency at a more advanced level — say, a course named Jane Austen in Her Time for junior majors. Alternatively, she might first develop an aspect of specialized work — say queer theoretical approaches in a senior seminar on modernism — and then adapt that theoretical frame as a part of an intermediate course on literary methods. (I have found that I need to teach beginners *after* I have taught more advanced students: one must be very sure-footed to explain things simply and clearly.)

When teaching three or four courses in a given term, not an unusual occurrence for faculty in a small department, it's good practice to recycle a given text through several courses. A mere tap of the kaleidoscope can turn a text like Jane Austen's *Emma* from an example of the historical conditions for nineteenth-century British women in society to a complex narratological problem in point of view and sympathy in a theory course. The key is to be receptive to the pedagogical possibilities, to amortize the effort of reading, thinking, and planning. With some forethought, even in a very rigidly constructed curriculum, faculty in small departments can explore and consolidate new knowledge through economies, reframing course syllabi and assignments. It's often during the third or fourth time of teaching a familiar text that its pedagogical possibilities widen.

In the hum of demands, it seems difficult to find time to talk and share ideas, even to think ahead to plan a sequence of courses. But with a bit of forethought and coordination, even very simple administrative structures can be enlisted to make a virtue of necessity. One can pollinate a syllabus

merely by cross-listing it for the purposes of registration. Faculty in very small departments—with only two or three full-time members—can offer courses that extend the reach of their teaching and simultaneously balance their enrollments. If there are not enough advanced students in a major—say, Russian—faculty might work up *The Russian Novel in Translation* or a course called *The Films of Eisenstein* to meet student interest. This kind of stretching—in effect, the collaboration between a teacher and students from different constituencies—can be salutary. The self-consciousness demanded by teaching in a one-room schoolhouse clarifies course goals. One can become a more effective teacher by facing different kinds of beginners.

Another simple way to collaborate by sitting still is to forge alliances with faculty by offering to teach cognate or elective courses in multiple programs. In my English department, I often teach courses that have films as central texts, or that examine literature written by women. These are routinely listed as electives for the film studies minor, or the women's and gender studies major, bringing students with a variety of backgrounds and approaches to class discussion. In reaching out to cross-list a course (often simply by phoning another department chair or co-coordinator), I gain triple dividends: close colleagues in new areas of expertise; a chance to offer a course that might not have been bruited if it were useful only to English majors; and the eternal gratitude of the registrar. This practice is quite common in interdisciplinary programs and in the sciences, which often require cognate courses in a secondary field.

Coffee together, the shared responsibility of observing classes for personnel reviews, the loan of a good book, a chance meeting at an event or a lecture, informal discussions around the water cooler about whether a new edition is worth ordering for a class—small departments present myriad opportunities to find out what one's colleagues are doing and to benefit from their experience and ideas. It's important for departments to nurture the tendrils of informal collegiality. Often they take root in the simplest kind of faculty collaboration, team teaching.

Pairing Up

There are many permutations to this rudimentary structure, but all have the benefit of sharing expertise and lighting out for new territories. Team teaching can be as simple as inviting a colleague in to a single class session to speak about her expertise. Or a course can be organized as a series of rotating units, taught in sequence. Two creative writing courses could be scheduled in a single time slot, and faculty in different genres could swap at midpoint to

extend the range of material for students. Some courses can be arranged as a series of visiting lectures by faculty with shared interests. An early version of Dickinson's introductory women's studies class was taught this way before we could afford to hire full-time faculty positions in the field; student interest helped to persuade the college of the viability of a permanent position.

Of course even ships-in-the-night structures require thoughtful framing and communication on the part of faculty. But merely tinkering with logistics can reshape a course in innovative ways to the benefit of students. It's just as important to think about empty time slots as shared ones. Opening holes in a busy teaching schedule — planning so that all faculty teaching a certain course do not teach at a certain time — makes a golden space for occasional discussion.

Unitary courses taught in thematic clusters can yield a sense of community and shared enterprise. Within a department, faculty can arrange to teach “sections” of a single course by offering multiple versions on a theme. An introductory methods course, for example, can be offered to students in different time slots and taught idiosyncratically by individual faculty. There is no reason that faculty must teach the same textbooks or frame the same writing assignments; but a self-conscious dialogue about the goals of such a course (for faculty and students) can become a tutorial in its own right on developments in a discipline. It's easier to assess a course's success (for one's department or for accrediting bodies) if its goals are patent. Both the swap-as-collaboration and the thematically linked series of courses offer simple, elegant scheduling solutions that do not demand extra resources. In its barest forms, collaboration is communication between teachers; these kinds of economies please deans and department chairs. It's easy to extend these modest experiments into good news to share with deans, provosts, and presidents.

Probably the most common form of collaborative teaching in small departments is the course team-taught by faculty with shared interests across departments or programs. I'd like to highlight the example of two innovative team-taught courses developed by colleagues at Dickinson. Todd Wronski (theater and dance) and David Kranz (English and film studies) designed a year-long sequence that focused both practically and theoretically on the concept of *performance*. Students could enroll in both courses — Shakespeare: Text toward Performance (2007) and Shakespeare: Performance from Text (2008) — or choose only a single term. Their joint syllabus effectively outlined the course goals — to “let students become active collaborators in [an] interdisciplinary project.”

The focus of the course will be on Shakespeare's late romance, *The Tempest*. We shall read it closely, read about the critical controversies surrounding it, put the play in the context of other Shakespearean dramas, develop a sophisticated concept of it, develop a theatrical design for it, and eventually perform this dramatic romance as the Theatre and Dance Department's spring theatrical offering . . . We'll be thinking critically and dramatically simultaneously throughout the course. The goal, then, will be to know *The Tempest* (and through it something of Shakespeare) from inside out and as a text and performance. (Kranz and Wronski 2007, 2008)

The fall term students and faculty explored *The Tempest* from formalist, post-colonial, and new historicist critical perspectives. The second term implemented the conceptual frame for the production through experiments in staging and performance. But the play was not allowed to stand alone, even as it was being rehearsed and the dramaturgy was being developed. Rather, the process juxtaposed four other Shakespeare plays (*King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Winter's Tale*) to draw out thematic parallels and problems in performance. Kranz and Wronski devised interdisciplinary assignments from design notebooks to critical analyses of the text, from acting projects to essay exams.

This creative collaboration culminated in a college production of *The Tempest*, using students in every role from actor to dramaturg, in every aspect of performance from front of house to building sets and sewing costumes. The enrollment size for each term was thirty-five students, ten more than the cap for an individual intermediate drama or literature course. (Institutional support could be measured as a net "loss" of places for fifteen students.) The constituency of students came from both majors and beyond; and the production was far more informed and technically ambitious than it would have been if it had been presented simply as a cocurricular event. The process of moving from text to performance and to performance from text highlighted transdisciplinary theoretical issues: the boundaries of the text, the role of the author and culture in determining meaning, how audience shapes an artistic work, embodiment and temporality in performance.

A second example of an organic team-taught collaboration of this interdisciplinary type was a case study of early American culture titled *Witchcraft in Salem*. Conceived by Bob Winston in American literature and Clarke Garrett and Walt Woodward in history, *Witchcraft* was cross-listed in three departments: English, history, and American studies. Salem's trials were examined in the context of primary sources from the Puritans, as well as the work of historians, psychologists, medical historians, religious scholars, and

sociologists. From Hawthorne to Arthur Miller, from Winthrop to Wicca, the emphasis in the syllabus was on the “social and intellectual context of New England Puritanism, Salem’s place in the comparative study of witchcraft, and the episode’s legacy in literature and historical writing” (Winston and Woodward 2003).² Both Shakespeare and Performance and Witchcraft in Salem showcased cultural studies and disciplinary methods of inquiry. But they also self-consciously highlighted the pedagogy itself, enacting the *team* part of team teaching as a kind of Socratic dialogue.

Collaboration into the Community

Collaboration can extend beyond departmental dyads. In the case of Josh Kupetz’s introductory English course *The Dismodern Body* (2005), a service-learning component opened the door for students to discover resources in the local community. Kupetz had taught the course once before as a thematic American literature survey of issues in disability, identity, and representation. But in fall 2005, his second go-round, he added more labor for himself and his students:

Research shows that people learn best when their reading, writing and thinking relate to challenges and needs in their communities. In this course, you will have the opportunity to interact with people who have various disabilities in a variety of settings. By working on site with impaired people and social-service providers you will acquire context for thinking about representations of the body in our texts, as well as new opinions on people with disabilities and the assumptions dominant, normative culture espouses regarding them. . . . (Kupetz 2005)

The course combined disability theory and film and literature representing disability into innovative forms of student work: a collaborative wiki page on each service-learning location and a service journal documenting the student’s experience.

At Dickinson, *The Dismodern Body* catalyzed student interest in the field of disability studies. It also coalesced a collaborative moment between academic and nonacademic divisions of the college (disability support, volunteer services, physical plant, student life) which, goaded by student interest and a widening visibility, began to attract campuswide attention. The course was at the forefront of a series of initiatives, from expanding advising for students with disabilities, to systematic retrofitting of campus buildings, to a faculty working group on disability studies in the curriculum.

Beyond the complexity of organizing and coordinating the service-

learning aspect of the students' work, this course was identical to other introductory-level English courses. It had the same class enrollment (thirty-five students) and a single instructor to conduct class discussions and evaluate student work. But the students' experience was immeasurably deepened by the requirements of engagement. Deeply appreciated by the department and the college, the course drew in student majors and was a foundational moment in a then-fledgling commitment to service learning at the college. The course also demonstrated how innovative collaboration can enrich scholarship. Working up this course led Professor Kupetz to his first conference papers on disability studies (a new field for him), and eventually to the publication of several articles in the field.

Complex Collaboration: The American and Global Mosaics

My final example of collaboration in small departments is unusually ambitious and complex. In the spring of 1996, three colleagues with shared scholarship and teaching interests in cultures of the United States and field work conceived an interdisciplinary semester-long class in the small Pennsylvania town of Steelton, half an hour's drive from the campus. Faculty in sociology (Susan Rose), American studies (Sharon O'Brien), and economics (Chuck Barone) led twenty-five students in research described on the course's Web site as "an experiment in multicultural education."

During the first six weeks of this course, readings, lectures, workshops, and field trips provided students with theoretical foundations and methodological training for their future fieldwork, actively engaging them in reading and writing memoirs and narratives. The basic premise is that everyone has a story worth telling, and in order for students to be effective listeners, recorders, and interpreters of others' stories, they need to be aware of and value their own. In discovering and telling other people's stories, students may learn both what it means to talk to other people and listen deeply.

Students enrolled in three interlinked courses — ethnography methods, the political economy of capitalism, and a creative writing course on memoir — which in the second half of the term moved full-time on-site to the town of Steelton. Some of the remarkable work of students is published at the Web site. Two of the original faculty participants, Sharon O'Brien (1998) and Susan D. Rose (2003), have published valuable essays on the experience — the first on the intersection of memoir and oral history as pedagogy, and the second on teaching diversity and democracy.

The model of the Mosaic was a response to other successful immersion programs that Dickinson had long sponsored globally. Soon the Mosaic

collaboration extended to other “intensive, semester-long programs designed around fieldwork and immersion in domestic and global communities,” engaging faculty in a variety of disciplines, including English, American studies, sociology, anthropology, history, music, geology, religion, and economics. Subsequent Mosaic courses have been offered on Family Work and Migration — tracing migrant families from Adams County Pennsylvania to Peribán de Ramos, Mexico, and back; and on Patterns of Migration and Culture in Patagonia, Argentina; on the response to the disastrous volcanic eruption on Montserrat; and to comparative black liberation movements in the Mississippi Delta and South Africa. The American Mosaic programs formed the core of a burgeoning interdisciplinary collaboration of scholars and students under the aegis of the Community Studies Center (www.dickinson.edu). The innovative work of the center has been successful in attracting outside funding.

Harnessing What We Already Do

While the Mosaics seem to be (and are) quite labor intensive, some collaborations actually *save* labor through synergy. All senior English majors at Dickinson complete a rigorous two-semester capstone — a senior seminar on an advanced literary topic in the autumn and a senior thesis in the spring. Students compose and revise the thesis — an independent piece of critical writing of about fifty pages — in the challenging and supportive company of the senior workshop, which is comprised of the same group of students and the same professor with whom they studied in the fall. In workshop each student works on what she chooses; both students and the professor critique and edit sequential drafts of work in progress. This is a lot of work.

But the work has been, until recently, complicated by the fact that no two students come to the senior year with the same preparation. Many students study abroad in a variety of programs, often for the whole of junior year; they have a great range of choices, since the middle of the major consists of electives. Consequently, the faculty began to lament that the students’ knowledge on research practices at the beginning of senior year was discomfitingly uneven. Enter the librarians.

On the other side of campus, our able librarians were lamenting something rather similar. Students were not aware of the range of materials available to them, particularly in the expensive database indexes and journals. They asked librarians — often at the last minute — about how to cite sources properly. They were less skilled at bibliographic work than we had hoped.

Once the department faculty began to hear from librarians what was

actually happening on the ground, we put our heads together to devise an elegant structure — at once instruction and reinforcement of methods — that would efficiently use faculty, librarians, and the resources at hand. This two-session program occurs outside of class time and is undertaken by students at the point of their first advanced literature class, immediately after the methods class required to declare the major, Critical Approaches and Literary Methods (CALM). The CALM lab allows students to apply their work in the English 220 gateway to the major into research and to writing expectations for 300-level courses. The CALM lab adopts current best practices for using Dickinson’s library resources; it also helps students to understand the tools, applications, and proper citation form for all subsequent research in the English department. Students are taught how to shape a research prospectus, find materials in our electronic databases, and properly annotate sources in an MLA works cited list.

The lab itself is taught by the English department librarian, Christine Bombaro; it is attended by both faculty teaching the advanced courses and students enrolled. (Not surprisingly, faculty take notes on new shortcuts and techniques for using new library resources.) The exercises for CALM lab — an annotated bibliography and a research plan — are adaptable for any research assigned in an advanced literature class, so it’s not make-work for the students. Ms. Bombaro and the literature faculty work together in assessing student work. She assesses the prospectuses and annotated bibliographies, assigns an informational grade, and delivers the graded assignments to the faculty to distribute to the students. Students are able to revise unsatisfactory work to demonstrate competence. Our early assessments from a dry run this semester have indicated a great deal of student support, and we will institutionalize this as a pass/fail research module beginning next year.

This is a bit more work for all, but only a bit more. Both librarians and faculty are beginning to report improvement in high-level research skills for the students, and a marked jump in the use of databases and bibliographies in the field. CALM lab is a good example of pedagogical synergy.

It’s also a good lesson in looking at the systems a department has in place, then thinking about how to collaborate in effective teaching. Even in the absence of a coordinated plan to make collaboration a goal, by undergoing periodic reflection departments can increase communication and legibility to breathe fresh air into their teaching practices. The key to collaboration, in even its simplest forms, is communication. To collaborate you must learn what someone else is thinking and doing. Perhaps because faculty are so

pressed for time in small departments, often they forgo the chance to share and celebrate the work their faculty members accomplish. As an outside evaluator of departments, I have been surprised to see how often the decanal reviews of curricula and practice can bring to light latent possibilities for collaboration.

It's efficient and often encouraging to use established structures to educate department members about the work of their colleagues. If classroom observations are a part of personnel evaluations, department chairs can assign pairing of observer and observed faculty with an eye toward shared interests, opening possibilities for future collaboration. Peer writing tutors can be effective partners in collaboration. Reading groups for work in progress, especially for younger faculty, can provide support and mentorship.

At its best, collaboration is deeply creative. A good collaboration can represent a huge investment of time and energy yet yields far more than the sum of its constituent parts. It can transform the scholarly lives of faculty and students; it can reshape the curriculum; it opens new avenues in teaching. In a small department, collaboration can teach us about the best work and best impulses of our colleagues and model a creative path for teaching, research, and scholarship. The intellectual culture of collaboration can be transformative and, even in an ephemeral form, make a lasting mark.

Notes

Thanks to my Dickinson colleagues who generously shared their syllabi and talked with me about the planning and implementation of these collaborative ventures: David Kranz, Josh Kupetz, Sharon O'Brien, Susan Rose, Bob Winston, and Todd Wronski.

1. At Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, where I teach, English may be a small department, but it is the largest at the college with fourteen full-time faculty members. In a graduating class of about six hundred students, fifty to sixty will be English majors, and this proportion has held firm for the last fifty years. Fully a sixth of Dickinson's alumni have graduated with an English major. When the list of the largest majors is intoned by the provost at the final faculty meeting of the year, English is always one of the top-five majors measured by number of graduates.
2. This syllabus was an iteration of course of the same title conceived by Bob Winston and Clarke Garrett (history) in the mid-1990s and jointly taught until Professor Garrett retired in 1997.

Works Cited

- Barone, Charles, Susan D. Rose, and Sharon O'Brien. 1996. Steelton mosaic Syllabus. www.dickinson.edu/academics/distinctive-opportunities/community-studies-center/content/Steelton-Mosaics (accessed 13 January 2010).
- Cohen, Patricia. 2009. "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth," *New York Times*, 25 February.
- Dickinson College American and Global Mosaic Semester Programs Web site. www.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/mosaic/index.html (accessed 13 January 2010).
- Dickinson College Community Studies Center Web Site. www.dickinson.edu/academics/distinctive-opportunities/community-studies-center (accessed 13 January 2010).
- Kranz, David, and Todd Wronski. 2007. Syllabus for English 339/Theater and Dance 302: Shakespeare: Text into Performance.
- . 2008. Syllabus for English 339/Theater and Dance 302: Shakespeare: Performance from Text.
- Kupetz, Josh. 2005. Syllabus for English 101: The Dismodern Body.
- Moffat, Wendy. 2003. "Figure and Ground: The Transformation of the Dickinson College English Department's Faculty and Curriculum." *ADE Bulletin* 133: 11–16.
- O'Brien, Sharon. 1998. "A Short Reflection on Teaching Memoir and Oral History." *Oral History Review* 25, no. 1–2: 113–17.
- Rose, Susan D. 2003. "Teaching Diversity for Democracy: The Crossing Borders and Mosaic Programs." *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations* 3: 227–37.
- . 2010. "What Is a Mosaic?" Dickinson College Community Studies Center. www2.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/PDF_files/WhatisaMosaic.pdf (accessed 13 January 2010).
- Winston, Robert, and Walt Woodward. 2003. Syllabus for American Studies 301, History 311, and English 358: Witchcraft in Salem.