

Review of Fall 2008 Design Labs

Introduction

Design Labs were first introduced into the Bennington College curriculum in Fall 2007, following discussions with faculty and administrators during Field Work Term of that same year and earlier small group discussions in 2006. The main idea for the Labs was to create courses “where students and faculty come together to grapple with particular, urgent, real-world problems.” In addition, this work was intended to be collaborative, and the process was to involve “research, collection of evidence, analysis, contacts with experts in the field, and the design of possible solutions.” Although the courses were primarily intended for first-year students, all three labs did enroll some upper-class students. Three labs were offered initially. Students filled out the regular course evaluation form at the end of term; no evaluation of the Design Labs as a new course was completed at that time. Some faculty did talk with their students about the pilot project and the faculty teaching the Labs and developing Labs did meet regularly to talk about the courses. One of the first Design Labs (“Rethinking Education”) continued into the Spring term.

In Fall 2008, three more Design Labs were offered: *AIDS Pandemic: Science, Cultures, Politics of HIV*; *The Ocean Project*; and *Branding Britain: Nation Branding, Identity Perceptions and Foreign Policy*. The first two were team taught with faculty from different disciplines, the third was taught alone. In all, thirty-nine students enrolled. Led by Susan Sgorbati, the faculty met (along with Elissa Tenny and other administrators) to develop the courses and share teaching experiences. We (Ron Cohen and Wendy Hirsch) were asked to develop a way to evaluate the second set of Design Labs.

Method

We met once with the faculty (those who had taught Labs and those who planned to teach them) at the end of the Spring term to discuss the goals of the Design Labs. This discussion suggested that collaboration, research, and library usage / expertise were important to all of the faculty. We developed two questionnaires (attached as Appendix A1 and A2), one for students and one for faculty, both to be completed in the last weeks of the term. These questionnaires were circulated to the faculty for comment over the summer; all faculty agreed to use the surveys as developed. As part of the agreed upon evaluation structure, at the end of the term we led a discussion over dinner with the faculty to hear about their experiences teaching the Design Labs (notes attached as Appendix B). At the invitation of the head of the Student Educational Policy Committee, we also met with three students in the courses to discuss student feedback. Faculty in the *AIDS* and *Branding Britain* courses chose at the end of the term also to develop separate additional evaluations which they gave to students along with the common evaluation. (This report does not incorporate responses to those surveys, but we recommend below that faculty have the option of adding questions specific to their Labs.) Student and faculty evaluations were collected at the end of term. Almost all questionnaires were returned (95% from students; 100% from faculty, and all faculty teaching Labs were

present at the evaluation discussion). In addition, since the *AIDS* course included an FWT section, Tammy Fraser also submitted an evaluation.

Student responses to the questions were entered and summarized on a spreadsheet (Appendix C). We also reviewed the examples students provided of “one of the research questions [they had] developed related to the main topic of [their] design lab,” and coded each as either a viable research question or not. Finally, we listed the student responses to the questions about similarities and differences with other courses to identify any common themes.

This report will focus on the issues of collaboration and research, since it became clear that the issue of library usage varied so much among the three labs it did not seem useful to draw any conclusions from the questionnaires. We will also consider here the question of what makes these courses potentially different from others. Given that the purpose of this evaluation is not to rank the relative success of the Labs, we discuss the Labs as a group. At the end of the report, we include various recommendations for consideration.

Results and Discussion

Collaboration

We measured collaboration in the same way that the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) does in their research. Students were asked how often they worked with other students in and out of the classroom and how valuable those experiences were. Each Lab fostered some collaboration, but the amount of time varied considerably, as did where that collaboration took place. However, when and wherever collaboration did take place, the students found it valuable. Overall, 63% of students rated their collaboration with other students either “quite valuable” or “extremely valuable.”

The variations might well be from the differences in how often each class was taught (*AIDS* was taught just once a week; the others were taught twice), and how each class arranged the project work (some projects covered the full term, and others began midway; each project culminated differently as well). The issue of collaboration was complicated as well by the fact that two courses were team taught and one was not. Finally, each Design Lab used outside experts in very different ways (both in numbers and in expectations of participation with classes), so questions of collaboration with outsiders who played varying roles likely affected the students and faculty differently.

It became evident in the discussion with faculty that everyone agreed that collaboration could be a good thing. It was also evident that faculty lacked a clear and shared sense of what collaboration should look like in a Design Lab.

Research

Students were asked how effectively they thought they could develop a research question and they were asked to give an example. Overall, most students (76%) thought that they

could develop a research question either “quite” or “extremely” effectively, and this was true for a majority of students in each of the three Labs.

We were puzzled that almost one-third of the students (32%) did not provide an example. It’s not clear if this was because they could not do so, or if they chose not to do so, or if they simply failed to notice the question.

We examined 26 questions that were provided and judged whether they were reasonably well-formulated or not. Overall, almost two-thirds of them (65%) met this criterion, though there were some differences across the Labs.

When faculty discussed their experiences teaching the Design Labs, none focused on issues of research, although one mentioned students doing some unprompted empirical research and several did talk about “ways of learning and thinking” that are tied to research in general. The faculty seemed to be somewhat divided in their thoughts in their written evaluations about how successfully the students learned to develop research questions (their responses varied between “fairly well” and “extremely well”).

Library

Students were asked several questions about their comfort, understanding, and use of various library resources. Initially (Spring 2008) the faculty had thought that the Design Labs would generally integrate work in the library in some way with the classes and that there might be a particular benefit for first-year students if this were the case. As the classes emerged, however, the faculty did not consistently choose to use the library in the work of the class, so it is difficult to draw firm conclusions.

That noted, most students (83%) said that they felt comfortable in the library; most students (64%) thought they understand how to use the library’s resources, including the databases (73%); and most students (60%) found the study spaces “quite” or “extremely” valuable. Students may have been exposed to the library through other classes as well (during the term or in previous terms, since the classes were mixed), so again, it is hard to link library responses to the Design Labs as a group.

Perceived Similarities and Differences between Design Labs and other Classes

Students and faculty were asked to “describe the ways in which [their] Design Lab was similar to” and “different from other courses” they were taking or teaching during the Fall. Student responses were quite varied. As for similarities, several students said there were none. Those who did mention similarities noted a heavy workload, the centrality of discussion, and collaboration. Faculty noted that the classes were discussion-based and that enrollment of first-years dominated.

What did students think distinguished Design Labs from other courses? This is not clear. Several students in two of the Labs mentioned that they were either “interdisciplinary” or “collaborative.” Other differences mentioned by at least three students included “less

rigid structure,” “greater reading expectation,” “focus on a specific topic,” “amount of outside work,” “student presentations,” “the importance of the final project,” and “outside visitors.”

In response to the question about differences, faculty mentioned “collaboration,” “learning from other’s expertise,” the “number of visitors,” the “deconstruction” of a question or problem, the “focus on a problem,” the “project-based assessment,” and the “independent work.”

The main difference between Design Labs and other courses appears to be the varied attempts to construct a practical solution to a specific aspect of an identified problem. Design Labs – at least those offered in the Fall – seem similar to many other Bennington courses. These three differed to the degree to which they attempted to “solve” a “problem,” or “design” a solution, but all seemed to provide students the opportunity to explore a problem, understand several aspects of it, and in some cases produce something concrete to raise understanding of the problem or suggest a solution.

Recommendations

Given the significant variations in understanding and implementing the core conception of the Design Labs, it would be helpful to bring the faculty together again (those who have taught Labs, those who intend to teach Labs, and any other interested faculty) to discuss the goals of the courses apart from individual content. As we continue to develop this series of courses, it will be critical to come to a more precise consensus about the conception of the specific goals and what we mean by them. We think that the power of the idea for the Design Labs can only be helped by giving serious attention to its principles.

1. *We need to develop a shared understanding of collaboration in Design labs.* We think it is important to spend time discussing collaborative work and possible ways to build this into a Design Lab.
2. *While the library may be just one tool students use in conducting research, it is critical that deliberate exposure to the library’s resources be incorporated into the Labs as was originally intended.*
3. *We need to develop a shared understanding of what we mean by research (in different disciplines) as a common goal for Design Labs.* To what extent should it include the capacity to develop a well-formulated research question; to collect relevant information; and to analyze critically that information?
4. *We need to decide if and how FWT will connect to the Design Labs especially given the practical emphasis of the Design Labs and the initial idea of connecting the Labs to Field Work Term.* There was a lack of agreement among the faculty

who taught the Labs about the FWT issue. All were open to a connected FWT position, but only one required it.

5. *We need to address the challenges faced by the Fall Labs in balancing the exploration / design issue embedded in the final project. Several questions emerged from students and faculty about the final project. Did it consume too much time? Was it too ambitious? Many relished the independent learning and the opportunity to put theory into practice, but the faculty need to discuss the nature of the final project to bring some consensus to its goal. What is the right balance between exploring an issue and designing a solution?*
6. *We need to strengthen our support for the faculty in planning, organizing and developing their courses.*
7. *If we decide to evaluate another set of Design Labs, we think we should wait to do so until the faculty have a chance to revisit the goals of the courses. If we develop another evaluation based on newly agreed upon and well-defined goals, that evaluation should leave room for individual faculty to incorporate questions for their own courses. The earliest term it will make sense to do this is Fall 2009.*
8. *A copy of this report should be made available to the faculty and distributed to the Curriculum Planning Committee.*

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