

Introduction to Liberal Arts: Structural and Thematic Description For Exemplary Lives

Course Overview

“Exemplary Lives” is the new theme for Introduction to the Liberal Arts. We will examine how individuals and groups have discovered and defined meaning in their lives and the lives of others through the choices that they have made. This broad topic will allow us to explore a wide variety of topics in the human condition—including how human beings form identities, how we come to know and understand the world, notions of what has value, what consequences our actions and choices have and how we might think about our life’s journey in the context of other’s life’s journeys.

The description below is an outline of how we will investigate these ideas. The methods described are designed to challenge students to think more deeply and carefully. There are five common genres that could lead to five common texts or some smaller number of common texts with the remainder of texts being from a common lists or even freely chosen. Instructors may also add texts at will.

Structural Description

Discovery of Self

We begin the course with Barack Obama's autobiography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. This genre is appropriate because its very concern is self-discovery and identity-articulation. Writers of autobiographies are trying to form themselves through language to achieve a better sense of who they are and to express how they have become who they are to others. Just as many of our first-year students are "coming of age," twentieth-century autobiographies generally include sections dealing with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Analyzing autobiographies will help students to see the variety of influences that have shaped the narrator. In tandem with this kind of analysis, we will encourage students to examine and question who they are and what influences have shaped them. To facilitate this analysis we will provide some models for identity development that provide a more abstract analysis of the autobiography and help move them beyond a subjective, narcissistic experience of the world. Students will come to a better understanding of just how complex autobiographies are and appreciate their richness instead of only enjoying the narrative they provide.

Discovery of Others

Next, students will examine a biography, a more expository, narrative text that individual instructors will choose. Biographies are still concerned with self-formation, but they provide a mediating narrator (the author) who more overtly describes causes and effects of the subject's personality, destiny, and life. Students will examine the author's biases and predispositions towards their subject, clearly a higher level critical thinking skill, to learn how to identify and question assumptions. Since instructors will choose their own biographies, they can tie them to the theme and can explore a particular discipline as well. The content of the text (and the events of the subject's life) can become a rich area of discussion that instructors may supplement with more content/discipline-based readings geared to the sub-theme or other fields within the liberal arts tradition. For example, instructors who chose a biography of Charles Darwin might provide a supplemental reading on evolution.

Discovery in Time

In this section, students will encounter exemplary lives in the context of time and consider the evolutionary or revolutionary changes that might be associated with lives. The students will move on to a history text, a more material, expository, data-centered text that is influenced by more and different variables than an individual person. While the book will certainly include information on individuals and will have a mediating narrator similar to that of the biography, the book will be phenomenon-centered. It will cover an event, an era, or a trend that is related to the course theme. While with previous books students will have examined influences on a more narrow subject (a person), with this new book, they will examine influences on a broader, variable subject (a phenomenon). They will use the skills of analysis and critical thinking that they developed with the autobiography and biography and apply them to a work representing a less familiar kind of subject. In addition, the book should include references to issues related to more than one discipline in order to add to the interdisciplinary nature of the course and its degree of difficulty. Instructors might add readings related to the particular book and the sub-theme as well.

Discovery in the Disciplines

Students will next read a more expository text on a subject which provides students with opportunities to discern how different frameworks or approaches to understanding our world emerge from historical and social contexts and how certain claims are articulated, examined, and valued in particular academic disciplines. These disciplines or frameworks can be thought of loosely as fine arts, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences. Like the biography and history text, this book will be fact-based, but it will provide students an opportunity to compare how thinkers in particular disciplines conceptualize knowledge and truth and how they assess both the value of the truths discovered and the process by which they were discovered or constructed. Instructors should explore the narrators' awareness of their roles as mediating interpreters and/or purveyors of truth. For example, the book could involve a scientific discovery (i.e., evolution, DNA, electricity.) and inform us as to how humans have engaged in the process of discovery, valued the discovery, and how the discovery affected the human condition. Likewise a book centered in the humanities might explore a revolution in the study of humanities (i.e., higher criticism, existentialism, feminism) and explore how this change altered the way knowledge was made or conceptualized. A book in the social sciences could explore the development of a methodology or theory within a discipline (i.e., constructivism, the unconscious mind, laissez-faire economics) and how this disciplinary development led to the creation or discovery of meaning. A book in the fine arts might examine an artistic movement or revolution (jazz, impressionism, romanticism) and how the discipline constructs and values what is beautiful or truthful. Whatever book is selected, students should pay particular attention to how the author explores and draws conclusions about her/his subject as they should for all books. If the book does not address the implications of the subject on the larger society, class discussions and supplemental readings/media should examine the subject's influence on the larger world. Once again, students will use the analytical skills that they have developed all semester to explore this book, but in this case, they will apply them to a more unfamiliar genre that will require them to unpack the writer's assumptions even more carefully.

Discovery in Place

Students will be introduced to how exemplary lives might fit into place--into the larger world in which we live. Finally, students will end the course with a text that deals with some sort of global, non-Western perspective. Instructors will choose a common text with input from instructors who teach the Global Perspectives course, and the book will serve as a transition from ILA to Global Perspectives. This book will foreground the importance of issues like nation, culture, and ethnicity more than any of the other books they have read. It could potentially be an autobiography or memoir that takes students back to an exploration of self-formation, but that deals with it from a foreign or "culturally-othered" perspective that is not familiar to most of our students. Students will consider how a different culture, with all of its different ideologies and assumptions, can upset the apple cart of some of the conclusions they have been drawing throughout the course. At the same time, students will consider the similarities and resonances that they experience with this new cultural perspective and attempt to synthesize some general truths that they might support across cultures.

The "global" book will provide an obvious opportunity to discuss the intellectual move from self to cultural other that we want students to make when they move from ILA to Global Perspectives. While the GP course will represent a move outward, faculty should also make students aware of the subsequent move inward that the Reflections course makes with its attention to philosophy, ethics, and values, issues that they will have covered in their discussion of the autobiography in particular, but also the other texts in ILA as well. Instructors should also inform students about the way the Citizenship course, the final course in the Integrated Studies sequence, will call on them to take some sort of intellectual or practical action (indeed, some seniors might present their Citizenship work to ILA classes). Finally, faculty need to make explicit how the Foundations component of the curriculum (The Arts, The Sciences, Human Societies) provides a survey of different disciplinary perspectives to complement their educations, and to make apparent the ways some of the disciplinary content and assumptions of the course have been treated already in ILA to introduce them to the liberal arts. Throughout the course, instructors should help students make connections to all areas of the general education program, but at the end, students need to make the overt connections.

We believe that this theme and course model provides enough flexibility. It combines a coherent narrative that will help introduce students to a liberal arts education with the skills necessary to make the most out of their studies. It is flexible enough to provide instructors with a significant amount of freedom to develop their own themes. We argue that the genres described are broad enough to support an enormous variety of topics and disciplines while giving instructors a framework that helps students make meaning out of the course. Particularly gifted students might be challenged by an instructor with supplemental texts, activities and interactions with an ILA associate.

Thematic Description

How do people have an impact on their world? How do they overcome obstacles to accomplish great tasks? How do they survive tragic events, and come to inspire the rest of us? "Exemplary Lives" as a theme for Introduction to Liberal Arts would allow us to explore the lives or stories of many types of people in many different situations, who have in some way or another led admirable lives. Exemplary may refer to someone famous or relatively unknown; someone in a position of power or someone who struggled against authority; a story with a "happy" ending, or

one of ongoing struggles; and it may refer to a specific individual, a group of people working together, or even a fictional character. The exploration of others' stories and purposes can be a tangible, interesting, and even inspiring experience for our students, who are in many ways embarking on their own life journeys and working through their own struggles.

We are confident that "Exemplary Lives" will be broad enough for the development of sub-themes by instructors with various backgrounds and interests. It also lends itself nicely to the new progressive and developmental structure of the course, where we begin with an autobiography, proceed through biographical, historical, expository/empirical readings, and finally end with a reading which has a more global viewpoint.

Potential topics/texts for "Exemplary Lives" may include those such as Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Mother Theresa, Galileo, Gandhi, *Defending the Spirit* by Robinson, and a host of lesser known yet still exemplary people or characters (such as "everyday saints" stories). We expect that the faculty will be able to identify many texts/readings/films from variety of disciplines that will fit this theme.

<i>Discovery of Self</i> (CommonText)	<i>Discovery of Others</i> (Instructor Choice)	<i>Discovery in Time</i> (Instructor Choice from List)	<i>Discovery in the Disciplines</i> (Instructor Choice)	<i>Discovery in Place</i> (Common Text)
Dreams from My Father : A Story of Race and Inheritance by Barack Obama		Fanny Kemble's Journals by Fanny Kemble, Lincoln and Whitman : Parallel lives in Civil War Washington by Daniel Mark Epstein Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce by Stanley Weintraub Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis by Robert F. Kennedy 1831: Year of Eclipse by Louis P. Masur The Great Cat Massacre by Robert Darnton		Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga, Kwame Anthony Appiah