

Faculty Perspectives on Advanced Seminars at the University of Denver, 2017

Former Director Doug Hesse provides an analysis of faculty perspectives on DU Advanced Seminars collected at workshops held from June-7-13, in 2017.

Methodology

Twenty four DU professors who had taught ASEM courses in 2016-17 each participated in one of three 3-hour workshops, held June 7, 12, and 13.

There were three components to the workshop::

1. First was an exercise in which participants were asked to rank 10 anonymous ASEM proposals in terms of their alignment with the letter and spirit of ASEM.
2. The results from that exercise led, second, to small and large group discussion of the goals of ASEM, its place in the curriculum, its features and characteristics, and student performances in the course.
3. Third, the group reviewed different ways of making writing assignments and responding to them, and discussed (albeit briefly) an article “What Meaningful Writing Means for Students” (<https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2017/Winter/Eodice>).

At the end of the workshop, faculty were asked to choose and write 20 minutes about one question (their choices were the questions at 10, 2, and 4 o'clock in the image below), and upload their writings to a google doc. This report lists participants, summarizes themes gathered from writings, and illustrates those themes. The final portion of this research presents the raw,

individual responses. Professors enjoy the “crowning” experience that ASEM provides to the common curriculum. On the whole, they enjoy teaching their passions to students who a) come from outside the professor’s discipline and b) carry their own expertise to draw on in class discussions.

Findings Summarized:

Main strengths of ASEM are getting students outside their majors, encountering new topics from multiple perspectives, and making connections between different courses and ways of knowing. Writing presents challenges, including in understanding just what kinds of approach to take. Teaching advanced students outside the discipline forces professors to rethink assumptions and approaches—and this is good.

Participant List:

- Angelo Castagnino, Languages and Literatures;
- Naomi Reshotko, Philosophy
- Josh Wilson, Political Science;
- Bernadette Calafell, Communication Studies;
- Dheepa Sundaram, Religious Studies;
- Daniel Melleno, History;
- Li Li Peters, Languages and Literatures;
- Mitchell Ohriner, Lamont (music theory);
- Sandy Dixon, Religious Studies;
- Markus Schneider, Economics;
- Michael Brent, Philosophy;
- Christy-Dale Sims Communication Studies;
- Sara Chatfield, Political Science;
- Luis Leon, Religious Studies;
- Nichol Weizenbeck, English;
- Amie Levesque, Sociology;

- Lisa Pasko; Sociology;
- Taylor Nygaard, Media, Film, and Journalism;
- Shawn Alfrey, Honors Program;
- Rachael Liberman, MFJS;
- Arthur Jones, Lamont School of Music;
- Aaron Paige, Music/Lamont;
- Beth Campbell, History;
- Jodie Kreider, History;

Summarized Themes

The ten most common themes that emerged from coding the open-ended responses were:

- **1. Students benefit from getting out of their majors, especially late in their careers at DU, and from encountering new topics and ideas, especially from different angles. Most of them like the change, while for some their disciplinary mooring are so st**
 - “[T]he best moments were when students encountered a topic they had never thought about before and were able to look at it from a different angle.” (B)
 - “A forum for advanced-level students from a variety of academic backgrounds to get together and read, talk, think, and write about a topic that is outside of their major yet of interest to them and, with any luck, a wider academic, social, and political importance.” (G)
 - “The ASEM offers an opportunity for students to engage with diverse ideas, topics, and cultures. I see the ASEM as a way to provide students a chance to discuss something they would never have studied or learned in another class.” (J)
 - “Based on my experience, the strongest aspects of ASEM courses is that, while the goals and outcomes describe ASEM as

‘designed for nonmajors,’ these courses help students embrace ‘different perspectives’ that they eventually overlap with their main fields of specialization.” (K)

- “I think the challenge of leaving their majors and wear[ing] multiple disciplinary hats as they inch toward degree completion is important.” (O)
 - “[T]hey are ensconced in disciplinary research habits. I was surprised to find this especially in terms of how students put creative texts in dialogue with the particularities of social, historical, political ‘reality.’” (P)
 - “[T]he multiple perspectives of nonmajors is incredibly rewarding, but it puts a lot of pressure on the instructor and their conceptualization of the course topic to make sure all students have a common foundation and can operate with similar vocabulary as they move forward.” (R)
 - “[A]im to teach students how to integrate knowledge gained from multiple disciplines and perspectives as a foundational basis for both critical thinking and communication.” (U)
- **2. Looking at topics from multiple perspectives (one of the ASEM requirements) or from outside perspectives is valuable and productive (C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L, Q, R, U, S)**
 - “I think a crucial task for the instructor is to develop students’ skills to convey those ideas through different forms of writing and text creation, learning how to effectively express ideas to a variety of audiences.” (F)
 - “If we are going to think outside the box part of that should be perhaps reading and engaging work that may be outside of our comfort zone. It has always been my belief that the university should have a diversity requirement. I wonder if inclusivity as a

part of the ASEMs might be one way to address this and work to create a more welcoming community?” (D)

- “The goal and act of explicitly and compellingly yoking the practice of writing to the act of reading, discussing, and thinking about a broad variety of topics is what makes the ASEM so compelling to me as a teaching model.” (E)
- “ASEM tilts their gaze upward, allowing them to see beyond the limitations inherent within their academic home, and to apply their critical reasoning skills with the aim of integrating divergent perspectives and synthesizing ideas.” (G)
- “[I]t brings together students from across the university with most of their college experience behind them. As juniors and seniors, the students know things!” (I) “In a sense, they expand what I’m able to teach in the classroom and then force students to take responsibility for their learning.” (J)
- “The importance of multiple perspectives cannot be stressed enough here; one of the major goals of my course(s) is to introduce ideas/knowledge that may be overlooked due to many factors, but are nonetheless an important part of the conversation around scholarship in the area of the course.” (Q)
- “[I]t asks students to take their interests and expertise (whether that be finance, biology, hospitality, theater, etc.) and apply it as a critical lens onto the texts we read.” (S)

- **3. Having upper-division students from different majors in each class benefits the common curriculum. (A, C, D, F, G, I, K, R)**

- “[I]t is especially nice that they are near the end of the 4 year college experience because we spend some time discussing that experience and it’s supposed goals in a theoretical and rigorous way with help from various authors...In general I think it is great to

have students have this intended academic experience late in their college career.” (A)

- “I tend to think of it as a capstone class that lives outside of any particular major.” (G) “I was very clear at the beginning that within the broad scope of the class, I had no particular agenda and that the class as a whole would determine the direction and specific topics to explore.” (I)
- “When I first taught my class, I assumed that the simultaneous presence of different backgrounds would be the most difficult challenge, but the ability to make meaningful connections between the ASEM and one’s major has now begun one of the main things I look for.” (K)

- **4. Students vary greatly in ability as well as writing training in their discipline, which makes balancing the amount of teaching needed and introducing new disciplinary approaches challenging. (A, B, D, O, P, Q)**

- “It has taken me a long time to figure out how to design assignments and discussion questions around the novels and films that I use in my ASEM.” (A)
- “[T]here was a pretty sharp divide in writing skills across the business majors and AHSS/science majors. I’m not sure how I could best deal with this in a future course, since the idea is to be writing intensive – so of course I want to focus on these skills, but it felt like I was at once providing too little scaffolding/instruction for the low-skill students, while some of the higher-skills students would get bored or feel a little patronized by the amount of skill-building type activities we would do in class.” (B)
- “In my experience the intense writing focus can be a challenge...I wonder if a turn to composition and rhetoric work on cultural rhetorics and other forms of literacy may be something to consider

in the future as a way to address the question of whether the intensive writing focus is really serving the students well?...when students come to the ASEM 99% of them don't know anything about citation and they don't want to learn it." (D)

- **5. Professors enjoy teaching their passions and think students benefit from learning about them. (F, H, J, O, R, S)**

- "there is still (and should be) an ability to add something to students." (H)
- "I like to teach students usable skills such as learning to present, learning to research, critical reading/thinking, formal writing, synthesizing information into concise, relatable chunks without compromising style or form, etc." (J)
- "Developing a course based on one's expertise (which usually contains a bit of purity from one's own discipline) for nonmajors and from multiple perspectives (requiring instructors to divorce themselves from such purity for awhile) can be tricky and is not always easy to achieve..." (O)
- "...Overall, though, as an instructor of ASEM courses for several years now, it is one of my favorite courses to teach." (O)
- "I love that these courses allow professors to teach their passions. One of the major takeaways from teaching an ASEM is that my students are inspired by my own passion and enthusiasm for these issues we discuss." (R)
- "What I found particularly attractive in the ASEM course description itself was the notion of choosing a subject in which I am knowledgeable and passionate." (S)

- **6. Shorter assignments, or multimedia ones, might work better than long writing projects. (A, D, J, Q, R, V)**

- "I have gravitated toward focusing on the diversity of ideas and approaches and having many shorter writing assignments. Most

of the writing assignments focus on smaller pieces of text and are rigorous in their demands for clarity, detail, and application to lived experience, rather than asking students to do independent research or attack a coherent thesis through multiple pages...and seems the most natural way to allow students with diverse (though advanced) academic backgrounds to be challenged and to improve their writing.” (A)

- “Rather than worrying about how much formal writing they do, I focus on getting them to write each week and do different types of writing assignments that focus on developing each of the skills” (J)
- “The focus on traditional paper writing somewhat limits the exploratory potential of this course at times, particularly because my class examines media texts. I believe students could pitch or produce their own forms of media in order to get a better understanding of the challenges facing the producers they are critiquing or learning about.” (R)
- “Do they have less experience with this kind of writing than in the past? Was this particular group unique, or have high school curricula been changing? Or even DU courses before they get to ASEM? Do WRIT courses teach this kind of analysis in more traditional research papers? I really don’t know, and am now wondering if I even should be assigning this kind of paper in the ASEM.” (V)
- **7. Teaching upper-level students in a course like ASEM forces professors to change their teaching approaches and also their assumptions about the centrality of their knowledge and disciplines.**

While this can be difficult or disconcerting, it’s also rewarding and productive. (C, D, H, J, L, N, O, A?, F)

- “I’ve had to develop ways of analyzing music without formal training, and ways of explaining an array of concepts from music theory and digital audio well enough for students to survive the reading. I suspect that, in years to come, this will in turn impact my teaching of majors.” (C)
- “[I]t seems to me that ASEM, sitting somewhat outside the usual hierarchies of departments and schools, might have some implicit goals for faculty. Practice in teaching non-majors can have lasting impacts on teaching generally. While I appreciate the opportunity to reflect continually on the curriculum, I think it’s also OK to say, sometimes, that what we’re doing is actually achieving appropriate goals.” (C)
- “The idea that as instructors we should be willing to push ourselves even further. Have I done enough of that?...The challenge of teaching an ASEM at times can be teaching both content and a research method to students who may not have familiarity with either. Within each students’ majors there may be specific methodologies that are prominent or students may already have some familiarity with.” (D)
- “[C]lasses have taken directions I never would have guided it towards, but was very pleased it did because of the way I was able to learn along with students, and how it led students to explicitly draw on how ideas from across their learning tied together with real-world examples.” (F)
- “Prompt professors to stretch, pursue things that interest them but are in some way new to them, and invite the students to come along. Make them into collaborators or contributors as everyone in the room explores something that is new in some capacity.” (H)

- “1) it takes more than my own enthusiasm and interest to make the class interesting to students, 2) ASEM topics need to be both broad and specific at the same time, 3) How to make things that are ‘fun’ to me, ‘fun’ for them. In my course focused on a topic rather than a critical organizing concept, the diversity of perspectives I think is easier to foster.” (J) “[R]equired a lot of flexibility and willingness to provide more scaffolding along the way” (N)

- **8. ASEMs enable, support, and sometimes require connections to other courses or ways of knowing, even synthesis, though sometimes students have great difficulty with it. (F, K, L, O, P, U, W)**

- “I imagine ASEM as a forum for exploring ideas outside of one’s major, with a diverse collection of peers and perspectives.” (F)
- “Explicitly addressing how to synthesize diverse perspectives and ideas, students should be encouraged to bring in resources, perspectives, ideas from outside the class.” (F)
- “Often, teaching ASEM feels more like facilitating a discussion in which students explore their own and others’ perspectives and knowledge.” (F)
- “ASEM becomes a place for students to investigate why their discipline follows particular practices, through seeing others ways of being and doing.” (F)
- “The structure of the course allows for the discussion of, for example, organized crime from the perspective of environmental studies and the effect that toxic waste has on the environment and on public health, while incorporating an analysis of its effect on the economy.” (K)
- “I focus more on the integrating of different perspectives than on synthesis. I do this because, ‘synthesizing’ seems to me to

indicate that we come out with a single answer to a complex issue...Integration, as I think of it, allows the articulation of various perspectives to remain visible. What intersects with what? How? Why do we think letting these things intersect in these ways makes sense?" (L)

- **9. The kinds of critical thinking that ASEM invites and requires are important. (J, P, S, K)**

- "Another aspect of our goals and outcomes that I find pivotal (and that we have briefly discussed during our workshop) is the connection with the reality outside of the classroom and 'the demands of contemporary life.'" (K)

- **10. Students feel invited to perform agency and engagement—and do (F, I, S).**

- "Because the students were prepared, the discussions were rigorous and I used them for inspiration for follow-up lectures that helped maintain the academic level of the class. It also meant that they engaged in the writing assignments in a way that surprised me and really impressed me. Students who were used to just sending in their essays and getting good grades took the revision process seriously; students who had always been lauded for their writing in their home disciplines had to contend with different audience's stylistic preferences." (I)
- "[I]t asks students to take their interests and expertise ... and apply it as a critical lens onto the texts we read. I find that this produces more invested writing and makes the course more enjoyable for all as the exchange of ideas and information increases the depth of the texts and course." (S)

Individual Responses

A

I worry that the two mentioned goals, 'synthesizing diverse ideas,' and 'writing intensive on that topic' where the writing produces an academically substantial outcome (like a longer, well-written, researched, term paper) do not dovetail will with the (wonderful, I think) mix of students that we get in ASEM courses. I have gravitated toward focusing on the diversity of ideas and approaches and having many shorter writing assignments. Most of the writing assignments focus on smaller pieces of text and are rigorous in their demands for clarity, detail, and application to lived experience, rather than asking students to do independent research or attack a coherent thesis through multiple pages. This intensifies the students' engagement with the literature that we are reading (and some films) and really enhances the class discussion and seems the most natural way to allow students with diverse (though advanced) academic backgrounds to be challenged and to improve their writing.

The intensity of engagement is what makes ASEM an exciting part of my teaching opportunities and it is what the students respond to most enthusiastically. This is fostered by the close reading of different kinds of texts and the drawing together of a solid group of themes from philosophical and psychological literature, fiction and film. One of the challenges for me, and something that I have become increasingly comfortable with over the years I have taught my course is 'teaching' fiction and film. I studied these very little in college and have no graduate school or teaching experience with them. It has taken me a long time to figure out how to design assignments and discussion questions around the novels and films that I use in my ASEM.

Now that I have come to handle the goals and outcomes for ASEM in the way that I do, I find that I like teaching in this curriculum and feel that I do a responsible job. I think the key elements are having a group of student from various majors who are advanced in at least one area (and usually a few). For me, it is especially nice that they are near the end of the 4 year college experience because we spend some time discussing that experience and it's supposed goals in a theoretical and rigorous way with help from various authors. It also helps that they are immersed in thinking about what to do next and are at a moment in their lives when they are making significant decisions and reflecting back on the significant decisions they are already made (like to go to DU and their choice of major). I also like to have the number of students that I usually do who have just returned from study abroad as we try to do some cross cultural comparisons. In general I think it is great to have students have this intended academic experience late in their college career.

B

Overall, I think the goals are valuable ones – in teaching my ASEM, probably the best moments were when students encountered a topic they had never thought about before and were able to look at it from a different angle. However, I felt like that ended up coming out more in discussions than in writing assignments – in my class, I had about 50% business students, and there was a pretty sharp divide in writing skills across the business majors and AHSS/science majors. I’m not sure how I could best deal with this in a future course, since the idea is to be writing intensive – so of course I want to focus on these skills – but it felt like I was at once providing too little scaffolding/instruction for the low-skill students, while some of the higher-skills students would get bored or feel a little patronized by the amount of skill-building type activities we would do in class.

I also tried to incorporate multiple types of content/media (besides just readings) – so film/video, podcasts, a visit to the University Archives to examine primary source documents, a museum visit, etc. which I think was mostly successful and added an extra dimension to the multiple perspectives side of things. I think this is something to encourage in general in ASEM – to the extent possible, to get students off of campus, and thinking about topics not just from an academic lens but also how these topics relate outside the classroom.

C

The current goals, to engage multiple perspectives and synthesize diverse ideas through writing, are appropriate goals for ASEM. Happily, I think I am actually meeting these goals through my course. As for the more general nature of ASEM, I found planning my course easier when I stopped thinking of it as a course on my topic and starting thinking of it as a writing course that engages my topic. This led me to designing three writing assignments that are quite different from each other: one is analytical in nature, in which students must analyze a song against the backdrop of what is expected from an artist in a particular genre. The second is a personal narrative, detailing how students believe they acquired their music preferences and what those preferences reveal about their personality and identity. The third is an argumentative paper, addressing whether recent developments in music discovery and transmission are to the benefit of artists, producers, industry, consumers, and culture.

These topics inherently require readings from a number of disciplines. To my own surprise, sociology has been the richest wellspring for readings in the course, but we also read quite a bit from cultural studies and music information technology. What has made the course successful has been ensuring that we find a way to listen to some music in every class—the introspective component of the course has also been a benefit, as students, and people in general, are satisfied with talking about themselves. What has been unexpected is the ways in which my own teaching has grown through teaching non-majors. My ASEM this past winter had no music majors in it, which means, most significantly, I was unable to expect the students to read music and consequently couldn’t really engage with the classical music tradition that forms the core of most of my teaching. I’ve had to develop ways of analyzing music without formal training, and ways of explaining an

array of concepts from music theory and digital audio well enough for students to survive the reading. I suspect that, in years to come, this will in turn impact my teaching of majors.

I doubt I am alone in this regard. Rightly, we usually discuss the goals of a course or program in terms of what the course might do for students, but it seems to me that ASEM, sitting somewhat outside the usual hierarchies of departments and schools, might have some implicit goals for faculty. Practice in teaching non-majors can have lasting impacts on teaching generally. While I appreciate the opportunity to reflect continually on the curriculum, I think it's also OK to say, sometimes, that what we're doing is actually achieving appropriate goals.

D

One of the most attractive goals of the ASEM is that it allows faculty to draw on their creativity to create a space where faculty and students are encouraged to be creative and think outside the box. Faculty are encouraged to work through new ideas or constructs that may initially seem disparate but come together in new, meaningful, and beautiful ways. This was one of things that really stood out in our discussion today. The idea that as instructors we should be willing to push ourselves even further. Have I done enough of that? I am pushing myself to consider this question in regards to my current FSEM as well as ones I have taught in the future or even ones I have taught in the past? The challenge of teaching an ASEM at times can be teaching both content and a research method (which will be used for their final research paper) to students who may not have familiarity with either. Within each students' majors there may be specific methodologies that are prominent or students may already have some familiarity with.

In my experience the intense writing focus can be a challenge. I came to DU before this became a requirement. The focus on writing can at times elude other forms of knowledge, such as art, oral tradition, and performance. I wonder if a turn to composition and rhetoric work on cultural rhetorics and Other forms of literacy may be something to consider in the future as a way to address the question of whether the intensive writing focus is really serving students well? It has also been disappointing to me that when students come to the ASEM 99% of them don't know anything about citation and they don't want to learn it.

I have been able to address the writing focus by having students write short papers over the course of the quarter. However, there is always a challenge in getting students to take peer review seriously, just like citation patterns. Perhaps I would be worthwhile to have someone from the Writing Center come in and discuss peer review before students do this.

By the way, please do not take any of my comments in any disrespectful way. I appreciate the hard work that has been done. I am mostly just thinking aloud about the prompt we received.

Another potential goal of the ASEM should be that it addresses or performs inclusivity. If we are going to think outside the box part of that should be perhaps reading and engaging work that may be outside of our comfort zone. It has always been my belief that the university should have a diversity requirement. I wonder if inclusivity as a part of ASEMs might be one way to address this and work to create a more welcoming community?

E

In approaching the ASEM my goal was not so much to “teach” writing as to “enable” it. We didn’t spend much time on formal writing skills and techniques but across ten weeks my students wrote seven long-form assignments and uncountable short-form in-class pieces that were explicitly about concretizing and synthesizing their experiences with our materials as readers, as class participants, and as thinkers more broadly. In large courses, survey or otherwise, I’m forced, for both my sake and my students’ sake, to limit how much writing occurs around the readings and classes. This limits their ability to synthesize, to integrate, and to spend their *time* with the material in a meaningful way. The goal and act of explicitly and compellingly yoking the practice of writing to the act of reading, discussing, and thinking about a broad variety of topics is what makes the ASEM so compelling to me as a teaching model.

F

I imagine ASEM as a forum for exploring ideas outside of one’s major, with a diverse collection of peers and perspectives. It is intentionally multi-disciplinary, encouraging students to step back from their everyday ways of doing as prescribed by their major, and embody the heart of a liberal arts education—to learn *how* to learn about and engage with a variety of topics, sources, “texts”/data. Ideally from this they learn how to effectively listen to, learn from, and respond to ideas that are not their own, and may be antithetical to their own opinions.

ASEM is an opportunity to explore compelling ideas within the framework of a class designed around a professor’s areas of expertise. Within that framework, I strongly believe student projects should be designed in ways that connect to, but not necessarily focus on, their interests and ways of thinking, thus making connections across their years of study. I’ve found it’s often effective to have explicit conversations about this in the classroom, as well as explaining, as an instructor, how the class/assignment was designed to do so. Explicitly addressing how to synthesize diverse perspectives and ideas, students should be encouraged to bring in resources, perspectives, ideas from outside the class.

Often, teaching ASEM feels more like *facilitating* a discussion in which students explore their own and others’ perspectives and knowledge. True, I offer concepts, vocabulary, new or

improved skills, and examples to demonstrate them, but it's the students who drive the class discussion content. I further encourage this through assigning students to lead class for a session, in which they select a one of several course topics and present examples to the class, giving it the focus driven by their own interests and experiences. From this, classes have taken directions I never would have guided it towards, but was very pleased it did because of the way I was able to learn along with students, and how it led students to explicitly draw on how ideas from across their learning tied together with real-world examples. Through this, ASEM becomes a place to for students investigate why their discipline follows particular practices, through seeing other ways of being and doing. As with explicitly discussing the idea of seeing the world in different ways, I think a crucial task of the instructor is to develop students' skills to convey those ideas through different forms of writing and text creation, learning how to effectively express ideas to a variety of audiences. And hopefully not to use as many run-on sentences as I have.

G

In my experience, one thing that ASEM does particularly well is provide a forum for advanced-level students from a variety of academic backgrounds to get together and read, talk, think, and write about a topic that is outside of their major yet of interest to them and, with any luck, of wider academic, social, and political importance. I tend to think of it as a capstone class that lives outside of any particular major.

ASEM also plays a key role serving the goals of our undergraduate curriculum. After their first year of study, i.e., the FSEM and the Writing sequence, which also bring together students from a variety of academic backgrounds, students spend the next 2 or 3 years ensconced within their majors, more narrowly focused on specific topics and ways of reading, talking, thinking, and writing that are discipline-specific. ASEM tilts their gaze upward, allowing them to see beyond the limitations inherent within their academic home, and to apply their critical reasoning skills with the aim of integrating divergent perspectives and synthesizing ideas.

H

What do you think about the ASEM goals and outcomes, about the nature of ASEM?

- Students demonstrate their ability to *integrate different perspectives*
- Synthesize diverse ideas through *intensive writing* on a topic

The way I read the above is that we are checking in to see if students have developed or refined their abilities to think and communicate. This is fine, but overly narrow in terms of what I think the value added of ASEM is. That is, the construction above seems like testing (again, that's fine), and I want to make a pitch for there is still (and should be) an ability to add something to students.

In terms of adding something, three things come to mind. The first derives from the course content. They will, or should, be taking something new and thus they will learn about something new. The latter two are more abstract/lofty/idealistic/etc. Briefly, I see ASEM as helping students realize

that no matter their major(s) and what they think their professions/occupations will be, as (near) college graduates they:

(a) should be able to (as well as “should” in a normative/duty sense) think rigorously about new topics that they have not thus far considered in such a manner,

&

(b) the world is a diverse and interesting place, and that they should continue seeking out things that may be outside of their areas of expertise or familiarity.

Yes, these latter points are lofty, easily mocked, hard to train and test for, but really, the above three, for me, are what is attractive about ASEM. How do you get there? Prompt professors to stretch, pursue things that interest them *but are in some way new to them*, and invite the students to come along. Make them into collaborators or contributors *as everyone in the room explores something that is new in some capacity*. Will it work for everyone – faculty & students alike? No. Will it work for some? Yes. I have more to say about the “hows” and “whys,” but I’m out of time.

I

During the workshop, another faculty member described the response of her students who lauded her for getting out of the way of their conversation. (She claims to have done no such thing, by the way.) Many of my students responded very similarly to their ASEM experience with me. They felt that they were allowed to have real, in-depth conversations with each other in which I only played a facilitating role, and they were grateful to that. They also indicated to me that the topics felt “real” and relevant to them going forward.

I will speculate that what underpinned these reactions were a few key elements that relate back to what an ASEM is (or should be, anyway). First, it brings together students from across the university with most of their college experience behind them. As juniors and seniors, the students know things! On the topic income inequality, they all had informed opinions that they owned, and there was something amazing about the process of them getting to know each other and recognize each other as peers. The content of the ASEM provided a common focus, but I purposefully left room for students to engage with that content in their own way as long as they also engaged with each other about it. Inevitably, this meant both refining their opinions and synthesizing new idea that they encountered during the quarter – perhaps most importantly those of their peers.

A key to how the ASEM worked out was that I really focused on the idea of it being a *seminar*. Once a week, a group of two students gave a synopsis of the assigned readings, raised questions about it, and facilitated the ensuing discussion. I acted only as a “facilitator of last resort” as necessary. I was also very clear at the beginning that within the broad scope of the class, I had no particular agenda and that the class as a whole would determine the direction and specific topics to explore. The combination of student-led discussions and an open course narrative are probably most directly responsible for the students’ feeling that I successfully got out of their way.

The fortuitous consequence of this was that the students were incredibly engaged. They participated, they did their readings, they engaged with each other – it was all I could hope for!

Because the students were prepared, the discussions were rigorous and I used them for inspiration for follow-up lectures that helped maintain the academic level of the class. It also meant that they engaged in the writing assignments in a way that surprised me and really impressed me. Students who were used to just sending in their essays and getting good grades took the revision process seriously; students who had always been lauded for their writing in their home disciplines had to contend with different audience's stylistic preferences.

It is, therefore, without exaggeration that my first ASEM experience proved very successful *by the goals set for ASEM*.

I

Goals, outcomes, nature of ASEM

The ASEM offers an opportunity for students to engage with diverse ideas, topics, and cultures. I see the ASEM as a way to provide students a chance to discuss something they would never have studied or learned in another class. I think the writing aspect of ASEM has been really interesting for me as a scholar. I see the ASEM as a place where I can not only teach better writing but also, better critical thinking. This quarter, I introduced a research presentation replacing the annotated bibliography. I really wanted to end the class with something that compelled the students to "learn something" that interested them and share it with the class. While I understand the ASEM is billed as an intensive writing course, I believe good writing dovetails with well-honed critical thinking skills and the ability to vet and synthesize information into a clear, cogent presentation. These presentations offer students a chance to explore what they find interesting in the class. In a sense, they expand what I'm able to teach in the classroom and the force students to take responsibility for their learning. This assignment was successful for the most part in getting students to use the class material and readings as a departure point. I've noticed that the research presentation made for better writing on the final exam.

In terms of outcomes, I've realized that I view the ASEM goals and outcomes very locally and focus on what I see as achievable in 10 weeks. I like to teach students usable skills such as learning to present, learning to research, critical reading/thinking, formal writing, synthesizing information into concise, relatable chunks without compromising style or form, etc. Rather than worrying about how much formal writing they do, I focus on getting them to write each week and do different types of writing assignments that focus on developing each of the skills I listed above. For example, weekly responses which are used to respond to a prompt based on the readings are designed to ensure comprehension of the material but also prepare students for the take home final exam as well as provide ideas for their annotated bibliography, short essay, and research presentation.

It has been an interesting experience teaching multiple ASEMS, one I designed from scratch and one I adapted. Ironically, I found the one I didn't design easier to teach and seemingly more interesting to the students. I think there are multiple reasons for this: 1) it takes more than my own enthusiasm and interest to make the class interesting for the students. 2) ASEM topics need to be both broad and specific at the same time. 3) How to make things that are "fun" to me, "fun" for

them. In my course focused on a topic rather than critical organizing concept, the diversity of perspectives I think is easier to foster.

K

Based on my experience, the strongest aspect of ASEM courses is that, while the goals and outcomes describe ASEM as “designed for nonmajors,” these courses help students embrace “different perspectives” that they eventually overlap with their main fields of specialization.

When I first taught my class, I assumed that the simultaneous presence of different backgrounds would be the most difficult challenge, but the ability to make meaningful connections between the ASEM and one’s major has now begun one of the main things I look for. For this reason, I believe one of the more important aspects of administering an ASEM is the choice of materials that are introduced to students, and to keep in mind that a Business major will be sitting next to an English major, or a foreign student. The structure of the course allows for the discussion of, for example, organized crime from the perspective of environmental studies and the effect that toxic waste has on the environment and on public health, while incorporating an analysis of its effect on the economy.

Another aspect of our goals and outcomes that I find pivotal (and that we have briefly discussed during our workshop) is the connection with the reality outside of the classroom and “the demands of contemporary life.” The design of ASEM allows the instructor to consistently propose connections (or, at least, parallels) with today’s social, artistic, or political situation in students’ daily experience in their own culture (which is not necessarily the U.S.). Combined with the “multiple perspectives” we encourage to propose and embrace, I believe we are doing a terrific job introducing students to different points of view that they originally had. One topic or problem can be observed from several perspectives. For example, a fictional story can be studied in its aesthetic, historical, societal implications, and the current structure of ASEM allows us to incorporate all of the above.

L

For me, the “goals and outcomes” of ASEM fall under the main idea in the first paragraph: “Successful people navigate complex political, social, cultural and economic environments...” Perhaps in pedagogical technospeak, this is the “goal,” specified further as “to help students better understand the demands of contemporary life...” Following the technological pedagogy language one step further, the outcomes would be demonstrating (1) “ability to integrate different perspectives” and (2) “synthesize different ideas.” The method is intensive writing. I think all of these are important. The liberal arts education that the ASEM crowns (more glorious, less ambiguous than “finishes off”) is intended to train the mind so that the alum is able to handle many challenges of life in society. Nowadays we especially see those challenges including the capacity to continue learning, even about complex issues.

The “goals” are what interest me most—helping students navigate complex environments in order to better understand the life they are going to encounter. In order to do this, I focus more on the integrating of different perspectives than on synthesis. I do this because, “synthesizing” seems

to me to indicate that we come out with a single answer to a complex issue. The answer may involve different sources and perspectives but they blend together and would be hard to trace back to their origins. Integration, as I think of it, allows the articulation of various perspectives to remain visible. What intersects with what? How? Why do we think letting these things intersect in these ways makes sense?

For instance, I use Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in my ASEM. Then we apply it to instances of economic behavior in the early 21st century. We ask, what Aristotle offers us that we may not be able to reflect on carefully without his ideas. So we get to consider his view that excess ruins things and juxtapose it with cultural approbation today of "extreme ____" (skiing, racing, etc.). Is "extreme" more likely to produce pleasure? In what time frame? (Not just flying down the mountain, but in consideration of other things one has to do in order to get to the mountain, pay for the equipment, etc.) Other topics, like the nature of courage, seem to us more limited to Aristotle's time and place. For instance, the paradigmatic instance of courage seems for him to be the battlefield. In the complex corporate structures in which people work today, how shall we think about courage? Can we find an equivalent to not throwing down one's weapons and running away? If Aristotle thinks that people fight for the good of their city, what possible equivalents for the "city" do we have in corporations? The corporation itself? A local community? Society at large? The national economy? Or is Aristotle just not up to the task of describing courage because he leaves out so many aspects in life where people have to take risks to their own well-being in order to pursue some other good? So to integrate these reflections we strive for clarity about each element and why we think they can speak to one another.

The result of the work, I hope, is to help students continue to analyze, as well as to bring viewpoints into dialogue, and to make an argument for the basis on which they can be said to inform each other. Subsidiary subjects are also accommodated—like developing close reading skills, thinking systematically about text, breaking out of the narrative to think what the narrative conveys, etc.

M

ASEM Reflection

The final assignment in my ASEM is a long paper requiring students to compare and contrast the seven distinctive traditions that we have studied in the course (the course is broken into seven distinct "units," each with a topical focus.

In the prompt for the paper, I give the students a list of "final words" I'd like them to think through and use in the paper.

Compare and contrast the various religions we have studied in this class. Are there more similarities among them or differences? Focus especially on: sacrifice, the body, healing, agency, disempowerment, gifting, and appropriation.

I was very impressed by their thoughtful responses. Students were able to take a concept—sacrifice, for example—and not only identify it in its original usage (human sacrifice), but also expand it more broadly to demonstrate that religions, generally, require some kind of sacrifice—be it commitment, time, and money. Students were also able to locate the body in these traditions, particularly its ritual construction and deconstruction.

N

An ASEM assignment that turned out really well, but required a lot of flexibility and willingness to provide more scaffolding along the way, was the final assignment for my course in which students had to analyze body shaming on social media through content analysis. Students were instructed to gather 50 pieces of data (tweets, comments, photos) that illustrated body shaming. They could use data that showed shaming of the body, or shaming of what people do with their bodies (slut shaming, bottom shaming of gay men who prefer to be on the bottom during sex). Then, they had to analyze themes they found to make an argument about the ways in which body shaming manifests in social media.

Initially, because we had done so much analyzing of body shaming, I did not realize that students could only explain what body shaming looked like, but not the “how” they knew it was actually body shaming. Student research questions began to ask “why does the x type of body shaming exist?” They were looking to their data to answer their question, and not using the literature we read and discussed to think more deeply on their own. I then took the class time and devoted it to content analysis, to better understand what types of research questions could be answered through this type of research. Students then learned to look at the “how” types of research questions. That afforded them opportunities to think more deeply about what the body shaming looked like. Then, they could take their analysis to the level of thinking about, “why might this be happening?” Their data couldn’t tell them that. Instead, they had to think about the work we’d done to write about why this was happening. Student work turned out better than I ever expected. They chose topics about which they were passionate, and constructed really complex themes through which to analyze body shaming. They began to look at the subtle ways bodies and those within the bodies are shamed—like looking at before and after pictures of women after weight loss, or pregnancy shaming when Hollywood stars are photographed weeks after giving birth and are back to their pre-baby weight.

O

Overall objectives and outcomes are worthwhile and valuable for students to experience at DU. Students need this added level in the development of their writing and critical thinking skills. I also think the challenge of leaving their majors and wear multiple disciplinary hats as they inch toward degree completion is important. Developing a course based in one’s expertise (which usually contains a bit of purity from one’s own discipline) for nonmajors and from multiple perspectives

(requiring instructors to divorce themselves from such purity for a while) can be tricky and is not always easy to achieve. In reality, I sense many instructors may still tip a heavy hand toward their own discipline. What has been helpful is to delineate better for myself, objectives, outcomes, and outputs. Overall, though, as an instructor of ASEM course for several years now, it is one of my favorite courses to teach.

2) This assignment has repeatedly been successful, although can be frustrating at times because it requires students to create an argument based in their education. The only time students have not performed well is when they simply survey and summarize the course information: Drawing on the course readings, your first paper assignment requires you to consider all the macro factors that can cause/predict lethal violence in America (incarceration rates, the economy, capital punishment, abortion legalization, social disorganization, guns, drugs, the cultural ideal of the “American Dream,” etc.). After reviewing the literature discussed in class and evidence of the impact of such factors, you will argue for three factors you feel are most important. In creating your argument, you can connect such factors as you explain why the homicide rate rose throughout the 1980s to early 90s and then dropped in the mid-1990s. Why has it remained relatively low (even through now)? As part of the evidence for your argument, utilize the case studies of New York City and Chicago case studies. This is not an essay that surveys all factors. You must make an argument. Likewise, do not feel that you must cover *every factor*. 3000 words minimum

As an illustration of an assignment that has proven frustrating:

Using what you have learned about school violence and mass shootings from *the case examples* and bringing in no fewer than four outside ACADEMIC sources (see me if you are uncertain what I mean by ACADEMIC), your final essay will detail a sociological profile on school shooters (community, family, psycho-social). You will end this essay with solutions toward reducing mass shootings. Students will be required to discuss their papers during the last week of class (and your presentation will be part of your final grade). 3000 words minimum

Students have shown difficulty in researching policy solutions and programming responses to school shootings. They cannot synthesize disparate sources of information and put together into a profile, even when given more specific instructions. In later renditions of this assignment, we have worked with our library liaison to bolster research skills and have worked on writing good literature reviews before moving toward the profile development.

P

The ASEM's goal of experiencing and integrating different perspectives as a way to launch into fully functioning educated adulthood is laudable. It is surprisingly difficult, though, especially at the end of a period when students have been working so hard to define themselves as specialized practitioners in a particular discipline. At the same time that they are putting the finishing touches on their theses they are asked to invest in other forms of expression that might feel no longer relevant. Similarly, they are ensconced in disciplinary research habits. I was surprised to find this especially in terms of how students put creative texts in dialogue with the particularities of social,

historical, political “reality.” Ultimately one of my assignments was “downgraded” to an exploration between the supposedly universal elements of a genre and the particular expressions that confronted or challenged those universals. The relation between creative texts and the real world gave everyone enough trouble.

Q

From my understanding, ASEMs are designed to allow students to engage with scholarship, concepts, and discussions that break with the “common curriculum” or courses that are mandated in order to receive an undergraduate degree. These courses, then, typically showcase topics that are often disruptive to the perceived notion of “seminal” theorists, theories, methods, etc. In my course, I am allowed to draw from multi-modal texts, discuss issues with my students that integrate personal experience, introduce controversial topics, etc. The importance of multiple perspectives cannot be stressed enough here; one of the major goals of my course(s) is to introduce ideas/knowledge that may be overlooked due to many factors, but are nonetheless an important part of the conversation around scholarship in the area of the course.

This all being said, I believe that the goals and outcomes of ASEMs work for some students, but not for others. Some students truly enjoy the fact that they are exposed to alternative modes of knowledge formation, while others are “just taking the course because I have to in order to graduate.” I find that the latter can be particularly disruptive. The goals of the ASEM program—integrating different perspectives and synthesizing diverse ideas through intensive writing on that topic—works if two main factors are in play: (1) they are in the class because they chose it; (2) they take it seriously. Now, I understand that it is up to the instructor to inspire their students whether or not they “wanted” to take the section they ended up in, but I typically notice a difference between students that *want* to be there and those that just want to graduate.

Sometimes I wonder if the program could be re-branded to focus more on the “seminar” aspect of the course rather than the writing. The notion that it is “required” and “writing intensive” seems to introduce a level of anxiety into the experience when it should, perhaps, be framed as an opportunity to dive into complex concepts with upper-level undergraduates from an instructor that has a high level of expertise in the subject area. In this way, it could be thought of as a mini-graduate level course or a “University Topics” course.

R

I love that these courses allow professors to teach their passions. One of the major takeaways from teaching an ASEM is that my students are inspired by my own passion and enthusiasm for these issues we discuss. I think that this is an important aspect of the course’s nature. I also think that the multiple perspectives of nonmajors is incredibly rewarding, but it puts a lot of pressure on the instructor and their conceptualization of the course topic to make sure all students have a common foundation and can operate with similar vocabulary as they move forward. While I believe in the

power of writing, I also think there are other ways students can demonstrate their abilities to synthesize diverse ideas and topics, particularly through other forms of creative work, activism, or research. The focus on traditional paper writing somewhat limits the exploratory potential of this course at times, particularly because my class examines media texts. I believe students could pitch or produce their own forms of media in order to get a better understanding of the challenges facing the producers they are critiquing or learning about.

S

I began teaching my ASEM course two years ago and have taught it for six quarters. What I found particularly attractive in the ASEM course description itself was the notion of choosing a subject in which I am knowledgeable and passionate. Not only would I be able to share my knowledge and passion with my students about a subject that likely few of them have explored, but also, that students would (presumably) choose my course based on their own passions and desire for a particular type of knowledge. While I have students who, admittedly, take my course based upon its time slot rather than my sparkling course description, I do believe that most of my students enroll in my class because they too are interested in the subject and want to learn, write, and talk about it. Additionally, what I very much enjoy about the ASEM I teach is that it asks students to take their interests and expertise (whether that be finance, biology, hospitality, theater, etc.) and apply it as a critical lens onto the texts we read. I find that this produces more invested writing (generally speaking) and makes the course more enjoyable for all as the exchange of ideas and information increases the depth of the texts and the course.

What I find challenging regarding the ASEM is that it takes place over one quarter. It is difficult to focus on a variety of advanced writing strategies/techniques as well as cover content in ten weeks. I realize this may be totally unreasonable, but an ASEM I and ASEM II over two quarters would allow me as an instructor to work with my students both individually and as a group. Particularly regarding research and the challenges and pitfalls (and importance) or secondary sources.

T

What is one of your ASEM writing assignments that went well/surprised/frustrated?

For their first major writing assignment of the quarter, students take on the role of music critic for the village voice. They write a review of an album of their choice – one that was released within the last 12 months. The album is one that they have never listened to before, but that is associated with a genre of music that they are deeply familiar with. I tell them that the review is an opinion piece that should help their readers decide whether the album is worth listening to. Students are to take their reader inside the album, giving them a feel for its sound (affect, instrumentation, quality of production/performance etc.), structure (flow of songs, narrative arcs etc.), and significance (socio-cultural value, artistic originality, connection to the genre). To better contextualize the significance of this album (socially, culturally, musically), they engage in some research that goes beyond the album's liner notes.

One of the main objectives of this writing assignment is to get students to use figurative language when writing about music/sound. Many students, especially non-majors, come into the course feeling that they do not know enough about music to write about it with authority. The purpose of this assignment is to convince them otherwise. Along with the prompt, students are given a detailed rubric in which I tell them that I will be assessing their work for its clarity, assertiveness, and persuasiveness, as well as a personal writing style that narrates their experience of the album through creative figurative language.

The first year I assigned this paper to students, I was shocked that most students seemed averse to using playful and descriptive figurative language. They tended to shy away from the creative, privileging the dry and descriptive. When commenting on their drafts I would tell students that they should feel free to exploit language's creative and poetic potential in describing their listening experience. In marginal comments on the papers I highlighted particular instances where I felt that they might have some more fun with language - create and develop analogies to explore the relationships and interactions between sounds, lyrics, and sentiment. For their final drafts students submitted papers that were rhetorically persuasive, in which their own voice as analyst and critic began to emerge.

U

What advice might you give a colleague preparing to teach ASEM for the first time?

I'm so glad you've chosen to teach an ASEM. In a liberal arts education, one of the main things we have to teach our students is the ability to engage effectively in the task of thinking critically and to translate their thinking into effective communication. We also aim to teach students how to integrate knowledge gained from multiple disciplines and perspectives as a foundational basis for both critical thinking and communication. The ASEM, in some respects, allows us assess how successful we are in both these realms.

Our undergraduate curriculum, as currently constructed, conflicts in certain ways with these two core goals of a liberal arts education. We pay lip service to the interdisciplinary knowledge domain by requiring students to complete courses in the "general education" sequence, that presumably cross different kinds of "inquiry." At the same time, we know that most students think of the general education sequence as something to "get out of the way" so that they can focus on their major. And we know that many of our students think of their majors as a way to earn a credential that will lead to gainful employment *or* entrance into advanced education in a specialized field. Many of those same students don't actually value the goals of liberal arts education. And ironically, for those *not* going on to advanced education in a specialized field, many don't realize that prospective employers are less interested in their specialized knowledge and more interested in their ability to think critically and to communicate effectively.

The ASEM is the one place in the curriculum where we can invite students to engage a *specific* topic in a *broadly interdisciplinary* way.

More time:

- We ask students to draw from multiple disciplines and perspectives
- We ask them to write about the topic to demonstrate their ability to think critically and communicate effectively *outside* of their disciplinary majors
- It would be good to have this happen beyond the ASEM, but that's what we have to work with right now. It's good to make best use of this!! So I'm glad you're joining in this preliminary effort.

V

ASEM assignment that went well

I assign weekly reading response essays of 400-500 words, in a question and answer format. Student propose a discussion question and answer it using assigned readings and/or films. I encourage them to analyze more than one source and to think about how the current day's readings relate to past assignments. I explain that grades are based on four criteria: argument, evidence, clarity and mechanics.

I found that ASEM students were able to figure out this task quite easily. I also posted on Canvas a sample Q and A that was done effectively (with the author's permission). Most students improved their essays over the course of the quarter.

I also use the Q and A's to prompt discussion. So I'll say, "Ashlyn, you made a really interesting point. Can you please explain...," always making the prompt positive.

Surprising/frustrating assignment

I also assign a research paper for the final project. I meet with students one-on-one mid-quarter to select a topic that interests them, and help get them started with suggested primary and secondary sources. They submit an outline around week 7, a rough draft in week 9 that is reviewed first by a peer, and I provide extensive comments on a revised rough draft. The final paper is due during the exam period.

I realized that I had not spent enough time explaining what these papers should look like. I had assumed students could take the basic task of the Q and A, and expand that level of analysis to the research paper—both assignments aiming to craft an argument and support it with evidence from a variety of sources. They actually had trouble making this leap. A couple students tried to make arguments without using evidence. (e.g., Robespierre failed because of logical dissonance with the French public). Several students didn't seem to know how to write an intro, main body and conclusion, with the argument clearly articulated.

Do they have less experience with this kind of writing than in the past? Was this particular group unique, or have high school curricula been changing? Or even DU courses before they get to the ASEM? Do WRIT courses teach this kind of analysis in more traditional research papers? I really don't know, and am now wondering if I even should be assigning this kind of paper in the ASEM.

I firmly believe in the value of teaching students to support assertions with evidence, a task that seemed to become urgently necessary in the past year, with public discourse on "alternative facts." But is the research paper the right way to accomplish this goal in an ASEM?

I'd really like to see what other instructors are doing, and think about how I can use class time differently. Perhaps we need to examine examples of effective writing vs. more polemical writing that isn't grounded in evidence.

W

One of the assignments that I have used that seems to go quite well are my final exams in both of my ASEM courses. Because I have a major paper due in the last week of class, the final exam is intended to be a lighter assignment, with a shorter number of pages. Yet I also want the students to use the skills, content knowledge and course materials to analyze a popular text, something that will be happening throughout their lives after university. In my **Sixties Britain: Swinging London?** course, I show the film *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* during the last day of class, with snacks, and an atmosphere rather like MSTK3000, where students are encouraged to react and comment throughout. This film, with which many of them are already familiar, depicts the decade under analysis in my course. Their assignment, usually a 4 page double spaced paper, is to analyze the film's representation of the period and its themes. Although I do not require them to cite course materials during this assignment, I do require them to use the ideas and discussions from the course in their writing. Overall, the results are usually pretty well articulated and fairly insightful. They make arguments about whether or not the movie should be shown in the course as the final assignment and back that up fairly well, beyond just opinion, but with examples from class.

I do a similar assignment in my **Celtic Identities and Nationalisms** course, but use a dance show by Michael Flatley, *The Celtic Tiger* for them to analyze. While *Austin Powers* is usually given the green light as a text representing the decade and its issues, *The Celtic Tiger* is usually universally disliked, although students often argue that it does represent all of the poor assumptions and constructions of "Celticness" that we spent the quarter debunking. I think this assignment works well because it demonstrates the continued lifetime use of academic thinking, analysis and writing outside of the university setting, something that they can and should use in a work or entertainment setting.

As for an assignment that has not worked well, I am often frustrated by student willingness to complete reading assignments which then impacts the papers they write. This is no surprise to most teachers. My largest writing assignment in my **Sixties Britain: Swinging London?** course is focused on the espionage genre of movies, television and literature. Students read a James Bond novel, *Casino Royale*, another novel with a woman hero, *Modesty Blaise*, along with the comic strips that spawned the books. We also in class watch the 1966 movie based on that novel, and outside of class they watch *The Spy who Came in From the Cold* (1966). After multiple discussions in class and readings. They analyze the

films, books, and readings in a paper about how the espionage genre reflects larger changes in British culture and its place in the world throughout the decade.

Student papers ignore parts of the assignment because they didn't read or don't discuss a text.

Students fail to use material from the course to analyze the films.