

Calderwood Seminars in Public Writing:
"The most beneficial class I have taken at Wellesley"

SMITH COLLEGE; MARCH 2, 2018

Ten years ago, Julio and I were on a Mellon project together about Capstone experiences. He invited me to Smith to talk about a course I was teaching, Economic Journalism. Back then, I taught the course every other year to 12 students. Five years later, we began to build a program at Wellesley College that employs the basic pedagogy of Economic Journalism, applying it to other disciplines. Since then we have introduced 18 new courses to our curriculum, taken by an average of 90 students a year, about 15% of a graduating class. In fall, as we expand the program to other colleges and universities, we estimate there will be 30 Calderwood seminars on six different campuses reaching, we hope, close to 300 students.

To tell you more about what we are doing, let me start from the beginning. I first taught my Economic Journalism course in 1984. The primary motivation for the course was *not* to help students improve their writing. The primary motivation was to get senior majors to think like economists.

One way of doing that was to get them to write about economics rather than to complete one more P-set (not that I have anything against P-sets – I assign them all the time.) My primary goal was to use writing as a means for seniors to take stock of what they had learned as economics majors and for them to discover their voices as economists.

Today, I recognize the independent importance of public writing as a skill our students should have as they leave our campuses. In a world where we hear the expression “fake news” on a regular basis, we should be empowering our graduates to contribute to public discourse in a meaningful and responsible way.

Calderwood Seminars ask students to reflect on what they learn in their majors by having them translate work from their field into language a college friend from a different major or a parent might understand. This is something we do not often ask college students to do and probably should do more often. Explaining something in writing to a non-expert requires a deep understanding of one’s field; it embodies what a Liberal Arts education should provide.

A Wellesley student, who completed a Calderwood in biology this fall, put it this way, "This semester has made it clear that the true mark of understanding is to explain something so that it makes sense to others." <I could not say it any better.>

Calderwood Seminars have met with considerable enthusiasm from students and faculty alike. In a survey of recent Wellesley alumnae who completed a Calderwood Seminar

before graduating, 85% said their Calderwood Seminar was one of the best 3 courses they took in college. They praise these seminars for the intellectual engagement they offer and tell us how their command over their fields of study *and* their writing improved.

[SLIDE] I would like to say that the departments offering a Calderwood Seminar range from A to Z, but Wellesley does not have a Zoology Department, so I can only say they range from A to W, from American Studies to the Writing Program. There is a good mix of seminars across all the disciplines.

<Favorite title: Cappy Lynch. A Chaucer expert, will introduce, The Dead Poetry Society in fall.>

What this list conveys is that the common approach we employ in these seminars has proven *adaptable and portable* over a wide range of fields and faculty. We did not know this would be the case when we started but our success suggests that the approach of these courses might also be adaptable and portable across institutions.

[SLIDE] With support from our donor, we are introducing Calderwood Seminar programs at Amherst, Bard, Georgetown, Middlebury and Wesleyan. Perhaps some of you would like to join us.

As the name of the program implies, Calderwood seminars involve Public Writing as distinct from Academic Writing. Public writing—the ability to translate complex arguments and professional jargon to a broad audience—is different from the academic writing done in most courses and is central to success in life beyond college.

As one student said, “I feel like my First Year Writing course was ‘Writing for College,’ and this class was about ‘Writing for Life.’”

Most of the 20 faculty who have taught Calderwood Seminars at Wellesley, and most of the faculty at other colleges who have signed up to do so, have never taught a writing-intensive course before introducing their seminars, something we might want to talk more about later, since faculty often say, “I’m a chemist, I don’t know how to teach writing.”

But before getting to that, I would like to talk about the course design and course mechanics common to Calderwood Seminars.

[SLIDE] When I teach a course in economics, I usually start with an outline of course content: here are the topics in my Econ 101, Principle of Microeconomics.

[SLIDE] After that, I flesh out each topic with readings and then decide on the assignments that will be linked to each topic: P-sets, essays, and exams.

In Calderwood Seminars, we do the opposite. We start with assignments, the writing genres, first deciding what we want each student to produce. These are the six assignments in my Economic Journalism course.

[SLIDE] An economic journalist covering an economics beat might be asked to write a story of 800-1200 words on each. Heather Long, a 2004 Wellesley graduate and an alumna of Economic Journalism today is an economic correspondent for the Washington Post and actually does some of these assignments on a regular basis.

Faculty teaching Calderwoods in other disciplines often use different assignments. In CAMS, students write movie and TV reviews. In chemistry they write a grant proposal directed at an interdisciplinary faculty committee. But the spirit behind these assignments is the same, encouraging public writing.

[SLIDE] Next I identify specific texts, referred to as “common texts”. In selecting these texts, I cover the discipline – we discuss issues in macroeconomics and macroeconomics; in labor economics and health economics; on income inequality and economic development.

[SLIDE] In so-doing, Calderwood Seminars differ from other 300-level electives in a major. Instead of exploring one sub-field in depth, students are given a chance to appreciate the breadth of their majors, taking “one more lap” around their discipline.

Calderwood Seminars achieve their success in large part due to the way these seminars operate from one week to the next, what we call their “mechanics.” To explain this, I would like to give you a brief tour of a typical week in my Calderwood Seminar,

[SLIDE]

- 12 students – enrollment cap for all CSPW but some are smaller, especially in relatively small majors like Music and Religion
- Each week, writers and editors, with roles reversing the following week, with every student completing each assignment as either a writer or editor.

[SLIDE] I am going to focus on Week 5. Week 5 was devoted to a Presidential Address to the American Economic Association delivered by Claudia Goldin, a distinguished economic historian and labor economist. The title of Prof. Goldin’s address, “A Grand Gender Convergence”, examines the gender pay gap between men and women in professional occupations such as finance, IT, law and medicine. Prof. Goldin’s address was written for an audience of PhD economists not for undergraduate economics majors. It is a subtle analysis on a compelling social issue.

[SLIDE] It is a difficult paper – filled with the Greek letters, complicated graphs and lots of statistical results common to economic analysis. In assigning this paper we did not discuss it in class first. There was no preparation in previous weeks on the subject or methods used. All the students had to rely on was their prior course work, over the past 3.5 years, as economics majors. To appreciate the challenge they faced, let me introduce you to one of the seminar’s Writers in Week 5, Narayani Gupta ’15.

[SLIDE]

- During the week before our 5th meeting, Narayani and her 11 classmates all had to read Claudia Goldin’s address before class the following Thursday.
- Narayani had to draft an 800 word, jargon free, news story that might appear in the NYT. She had to figure out what the article said, how it made its case and to place the work in some context – why should any non-economist care about what Claudia Goldin had to say. Nothing focuses the mind like having to write only 800 words on a complex subject that your Mom and Dad can understand (and drafts often are sent to Mom and Dad.)

[CLICK]

- Narayani then had to get her story to Kathy, her editor, early in week 5 in time for Kathy to comment on both the substance of Narayani’s argument and to recommend ways to improve the writing.

[SLIDE]

Peer editing is something we do not ask college students to do very often. Some faculty are dead set against doing so – “Students give each other bad advice, why would I want to encourage that.” Seniors are not especially skilled at it ... at first. But why should they be. We seldom ask them to evaluate one another. But isn’t this a skill they should leave college having worked on? And they do get better at it with practice and, as in Kathy’s case by Week 5, wrote close to as many words – both line editing and summary thoughts – as Narayani did.

[SLIDE]

- Armed with these comments, Narayani revised her draft and posted her piece to the seminar’s Google Group by our press deadline – Wednesday mornings at 9 am, about 30 hours before class met on Thursday afternoon.
- By 9 am on Wednesday – and virtually no one ever missed a deadline because peer pressure is a more powerful force among seniors than is faculty pressure – every

student had either worked as a writer or as an editor on Claudia Goldin's address. We now had six 800 word essays posted to our Google Group.

- What we also had was Rashomon!

[SLIDE]

- In case this Japanese film is not familiar to you, it was directed by Akira Kurosawa and is based on a 12th century Japanese folk tale. A samurai, his wife and a bandit meet in the woods and have a violent encounter. Each of the three then recounts his or her version of what happened, as does a woodcutter who observed the event. All four have vastly different accounts.
- And without the violent encounter, this is what happens in my Calderwood Seminar on the majority of assignments. Twelve students read the same work and come to very different conclusions about what they read and why it matters.
- Back to my class. Before we met in week 5, every student had read Claudia Goldin's address as well as all six pieces written by her classmates – of which they were already familiar with one as either a writer or editor – and came to class prepared to discuss the work of that week's writers;
- From a faculty and a student's perspective, nothing is better than discussing material that students already have invested heavily in. They come to class not as blank slates but as well-informed participants fully engaged in the topic at hand.
- We spent the first half of class discussing Claudia Goldin's work, reviewing how economists analyze pay discrimination and going over the fine points of Goldin's empirical work – offering the class a review of econometric lessons learned in other courses;
- The second half of class was devoted to work-shopping the six essays produced that week. We spent about 10 minutes per piece, literally going around the room with each student pulling out her marked up copy of her classmates' essays, asking questions and offering suggestions. Throughout all the Calderwood Seminars, students repeatedly highlight peer-editing and in-class work-shopping. They really appreciate writing for an audience other than just the professor;
- It is hard at first for students to give and receive criticism from their classmates but they get better, and *much less* inhibited, at doing so as the semester progresses;

[SLIDE] By the end of our 2.5 hour seminar, Narayani again had a lot to think about.

[CLICK]

- She had read the work of her five other classmates who had responded to the same assignment she did; participated in our general discussion of Goldin's address; received the specific (and often pointed) reactions by her peers; and, after our class meeting, received electronically my written comments on her work. One week later, after taking stock of all this material, Narayani would submit a final draft of her news story, sometimes rewriting it from scratch;
- In this way every student was writing every week, working on either a first or a final draft ... and nothing improves a student's writing more than writing every week for 13 weeks;

[CLICK]

- In week 6, at the same time as Narayani was rewriting her story on the gender pay gap, she was also serving as Stella's editor when Group A students were writing 1200 word book reviews of Yale economist, William Nordhaus' book, *The Climate Casino*, on the economics of climate change;
- Every week in Economic Journalism was a new beginning; we started from scratch on new topics that spanned the discipline – from gender pay gaps to climate change; from the Federal Deficit to income inequality. Senior majors got to take “one more lap” around the discipline; reviewing material they learned in previous courses; empowering their knowledge in their major; helping them find their voices as economists.

I often think of my six assignments as what I would hope every economics major could do by the time she graduates. Wellesley has about 100 economics majors in a graduating class. Only a small handful 4-6 will go on to become economists. But I hope all will be better critical thinkers and more educated citizens because of their economics major. What better way to challenge that sort of thinking than to complete each of these assignments.

The course mechanics I just described, more or less, characterize the approach taken in most Calderwood Seminars, whether in American Studies or Environmental Studies, Sociology or Spanish. We all rely on pairings of writers and editors, in-class workshopping and rewriting with submission of 1st and final drafts.

I have conducted class visits of other Calderwood Seminars and got to experience what the late poet and musician, Leonard Cohen, must have felt when he heard other artists cover his song, *Hallelujah*. I got to watch my colleagues *cover* a public writing seminar. While there were important differences between them in terms of content, there was also a lot that felt familiar:

- The palpable Energy in the classroom;
- The Engagement of all students with no one left at the margins;
- The Enthusiasm from students and faculty alike
- The Ownership students had over class discussion.

This common experience now extends to other campuses. Svea Closer, who teaches anthropology at Middlebury, introduced a Calderwood in fall and two faculty members at Wesleyan are teaching their Calderwood for the first time this semester. All three have been enthusiastic about the experience. Like my Wellesley colleagues, they find this style of teaching a refreshing change from what we normally do.

One of the Wesleyan faculty, Andy Szegedy-Maszak, was quoted in a recent campus announcement about their Calderwood program. “We’re surrounded by classical influences and references, but if classical studies are to survive and thrive, they can’t be the possession of a small group of specialists. This course is meant to enable the students to talk about what they’ve studied with people like their families, their friends, prospective employers, etc. I see such communication as a crucial skill for anyone doing liberal arts.”

<In a recent phone conversation, Andy, who has been teaching at Wesleyan for 45 years and has won awards for teaching excellence, also told me that teaching his Calderwood has been the most satisfying experience he has had in the classroom in decades.>

Returning to our students, Wellesley’s have been overwhelmingly positive about their experience in Calderwood Seminars. They tell us how these seminars improve their command over their disciplines and how it improves their writing, improvements that spill-over to other courses and their work experience after graduating. They learn how to give and receive criticism; how never again to submit a first draft to anyone; and how to become more critical readers. They also tell us about the unique bond formed with other students in their seminars, often unlike any of their other courses. They are finding these courses as unique and meaningful opportunities that offer a bridge between their college years and what comes next.

Let me conclude by quoting from three student reflections about their Calderwood Seminar experiences.

From a student who took the Psych Calderwood:

I just ended my internship with the Office of Public Affairs at the Labor Department, and wanted to let you know how beneficial last semester's Calderwood was for my work. From drafting the ideal 75 character tweet, editing press releases, to writing blogs on behalf of the Department, the work-shopping skills from the class have proved extremely useful. My boss was often impressed by both my writing and editing skills and was always curious as to where I picked them up. This further proves that your seminar is still **the most beneficial class I have taken at Wellesley.**

From my Economic Journalism, a graduate from 2014 wrote:

The skills I learned in Econ Journalism are serving me very well at CEA. I write pages and pages every day, and most of my writing is aimed at a general audience. I often get calls asking me for writing help (this morning I was asked to translate "from econ robot to human"-- a skill I am now apparently known for).

From the Calderwood Seminar offered as an elective in Comparative Literature and French,

Looking back on my four years at Wellesley, I feel like a lot of what we do is preparing for the collegiate setting, but this Seminar felt like preparation for life in a way that reassured me that the skills I have worked so hard to improve are applicable and necessary.

What do Students Learn from their Calderwood Seminars? [SLIDE]

- MAJOR
 - Empowering students in the knowledge that gained in prior courses
 - Why CSPW are 300-level, not 200- or 100-level
 - Often taking one more “lap around the major”
 - Getting to think like an economist, psychologist, etc.
 - Finding one’s “voice”

- WRITING
 - Public Writing versus Academic Writing <from writing good cover letters to compelling memos, even well-composed Tweets>
 - Establishing a context and having an opinion
 - Improving writing mechanics
 - Getting to the point
 - Learning that a 1st draft is not a final draft
 - Evidence of improvements from study w/ Wini <because of the nature of the grant we received from the Calderwood Foundation, evaluation has been a big part of our program from the start. If you would like me to, I can tell you more about the evaluation of writing we undertook and the other evaluation components.>

- “SOFT SKILLS”
 - Seeing the work of one’s peers
 - “... education is a funny system; you spend 16 years in the classroom, but you hardly ever get to read the work of your classmates. Certainly, that sort of academic isolation allows you to develop your own voice, but it also deters collaborative learning.”
 - Writing for someone other than one’s professor
 - Learning to give and receive criticism
 - Becoming better and more skeptical readers