Grant Report

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EN 422-002
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Targeted outcome: A.3: Undergraduate English Major: Student Learning Outcome 3: students will demonstrate critical thinking skills and imaginative strategies in their written work and presentations.

The assignment: Students were broken into four groups tasked with devising a public event or class exercise that manifested (metaphorically) one of four principles of chaos theory: the fail safe device; the excluded middle; the butterfly effect; and entropy. Following completion of the assignment, students produced a 2-3 page reflection.

Assessment: For the project, students were assessed based on (1) creative use of scientific metaphor, (2) timely completion of tasks, (3) effectiveness of collaboration, and (4) engagement with public space. For the reflection, students were assessed based on (1) effectiveness of self-reflection and (2) strong writing skills.

Results: During the planning stages, all groups met 3-5 times, both in and out of class; they also produced an outline of their plan. Two of the groups provided a shopping list for necessary props. Three of the groups enlisted non-class-members to participate in the events. One group produced a sophisticated computer program designed to inject the effects of probability into their project. One group produced a mock-Crimson White to support their event.

The "fail-safe" group designed a test of the Crimson Ride's ability to respond to an unexpected influx of riders. The "excluded middle" group designed a game for the class that involved questions with randomly correct answers, probability-driven forward movement and/or ejection from the game, and an "excluded middle" area outside the classroom where good fortune in a game of roulette could return players to the main game. The "butterfly effect" group produced a mock crime scene in the quad, involving a bicycle accident, a Crimson White reporter, a police officer, and an Alabama Power representative seeking to understand a series of accidents caused by the gnawings of a stuffed (and ultimately mock-electrocuted) squirrel. And the "butterfly effect" group designed an event with three teams playing three very different games that all began in a "warm-up" session in front of the library and then dispersed (according to odd sets of rules) across the entire space of the quad.

Each of the groups managed to effectively demonstrate the scientific principle in question, to overcome obstacles in planning and execution (and in one case, weather), and to generate enthusiasm and interest among the class as a whole (as well as in bystanders). Three projects engaged with public space in very interesting ways, while the fourth expanded the boundaries of the classroom to include the hall and vending machine area. The projects were completely successful.
Summary of conclusions: The self-reflections demonstrated that the students had thought about the projects quite seriously, especially the ways in which the projects would take us back to previous discussions in class or the chaos literature we had read over the course of the semester. In order to complete this assignment, in order to collaborate in such an active way and to take so much responsibility for the success of this final portion of their senior seminar, students were required to manifest skills in communication and time-management, and to engage in a kind of sheer inventiveness, that other sorts of assignments simply do not demand. That they were then asked to write about it, to bring their already quite sophisticated writing skills to bear on the product of their joint efforts, simply reinforced the learning that had already taken place and allowed them to take ownership of that learning.