

Where Content is King

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Teaching Freshman Composition in a Digital Age



JACKMAN DRAWS ON HER YEARS OF TEACHING TO MAKE FRESHMAN COMPOSITION ENGAGING FOR STUDENTS IN A BREADTH OF DISCIPLINES. “FOR ENGINEERS, FOR EXAMPLE, I MIGHT CREATE FORMULAS, LIKE ‘THIS PLUS THIS EQUALS A THESIS STATEMENT,’” SHE EXPLAINS. THEIR RESPONSE? “OH, GOOD— I THOUGHT I HAD TO BE CREATIVE!”

Krista Jackman didn’t set out to be a pivotal influence on UNH students’ first year college experience. But for many fledgling Wildcats making the transition from high school to college —undeclared liberal arts enrollees and business students, future engineers and nursing majors—she has been exactly that, giving them a critical tool kit to chart a course for academic success at UNH. And they don’t even have to leave their dormitory to get it.

For the past six years, Jackman has been a lecturer in the English department teaching English 401, freshman composition. Required of virtually all of the 3,500 freshmen who matriculate each year, English 401 is the University's most widely taken class. It is also perhaps the most underappreciated.

"A lot of students, especially those who aren't in the liberal arts, think 'oh, ugh, freshman composition. What's the use of that?'" Jackman says. "Well, the fact is strong communication skills are essential in every discipline. If I've done my job right, they leave my class with a skill set that allows them to focus on content for the rest of their college careers, whether they're writing lab reports or business proposals or analytical essays."

By all accounts Jackman does do her job right. Students rave about her—she's been referred to as "the greatest," and "a superhero with English papers"—and this spring, she was recognized with a College of Liberal Arts teaching excellence award.

"I love teaching English 401," Jackman says. "College freshmen are at such a great age. They're so enthusiastic, just figuring everything out, and it's all going wonderfully and poorly at the same time. You spend the day with 72 18-year-olds and tell me that something funny, engaging, tragic, or terrific isn't going to happen."

Like every other professor who teaches 401, Jackman is tasked with delivering three assignments over the course of a 16-week semester: a persuasive essay, an analytical paper, and a personal essay. Unlike many of her colleagues, however, her classes take place in either Christiansen or Williamson Hall as part of the University's so-called "residential learning community." Instead of meeting at one of the academic buildings on campus, students take Jackman's class in a dormitory "learning area" with their dormitory peers, often literally rolling out of bed and down the hall to their classroom in their sweats or pajamas.

"My only requirement is that they brush their teeth first," she laughs.

While the opportunity to learn where they live is certainly one of the main appeals of Jackman's class, another is the enthusiasm and ingenuity she brings to the material. For the past five years, she has tied the three major assignments into the annual University Dialogue, helping her students create connections not only with one another, but also with the greater UNH community. Over the past four years, she has upped the ante even further by introducing a rich media element to the final assignment, the personal essay.

Over a five-week period, students not only write and refine a paper, they also develop a complementary presentation that builds on the paper's "dominant impression" or key themes. It's all about preparing new college students for academic success in any venue.



AMONG THE MANY THINGS JACKMAN LOVES ABOUT TEACHING ENGLISH 401 IS THAT EVERY DAY IS DIFFERENT. “I DON’T THINK I COULD DO A JOB WHERE I KNEW IT WAS GOING TO BE THE SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY.”

“A lot of students come in thinking there aren’t rules about how they use social media—like maybe it’s fine to put your personal photos up on YouTube with a popular song playing in the background, for example,” Jackman says. “As students are asked to use rich media like video and music and photos in more and more of their classes, someone needs to be offering them guidance on everything from the most effective ways to use those media to more nuts and bolts issues like copyright and proper citation. That’s where I come in.”

As the rich media portion of her class has developed, Jackman and her students have navigated the different options and approaches together. Every semester ends with Jackman’s students sharing their presentations. She’s been amazed by the diversity of approaches and by the power different media have added to her students’ work.

A UNH alumna herself, Jackman notes that her 401 class looks a little different from the English courses she took in Hamilton Smith Hall 25 years ago. After graduating in 1991, she earned an MA.T. from Rivier College and cut her teeth teaching high school English in Somersworth. Twenty-two at the time (“a very young 22,” she says), teaching 17 and 18-year-olds, Jackman learned a great deal her very first day on the job. While still at Somersworth, she began teaching individual sections of English 401 as an adjunct, and ultimately accepted a full-time position after the birth of her first child.

Jackman says one constant about English 401 is the role the class plays in helping first year students get their arms around the difference between college expectations and high school. “At first, students are shocked to learn they don’t get to do a paper over if they don’t like their grade,” she says. “I tell them that’s real life—you don’t get a lot of do overs.” Jackman’s students may argue that she doesn’t get what it’s like to be a college

student, facing the challenges they're facing, but, more than many professors, the fact is that she does.

“As someone who went here, who taught high school seniors, and who came to college with maybe a little repair work to do on her GPA, I tell them I really do know, and I've been in their position. That honesty, being able to relate to me, really matters to them,” Jackman says. She draws the line at wearing her pajamas to class, however.

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