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ENGL 206: Creative Writing

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IGS Small Grant Proposal

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I am applying for an IGS small grant to develop a new assignment (with accompanying activities) for ENGL 206: Creative Nonfiction. In this course, students learn and practice the fundamentals of writing creative nonfiction, a genre that uses the tools of literary craft and dramatization to tell stories about real people and events. My approach to this course has been evolving, incorporating activities that increasingly prompt students to fold into their work experiences outside of their own. This IGS small grant, should it be granted, would allow my students an opportunity to connect in meaningful ways with global populations.

Brief Description of Assignment

Students work on four major projects in this class. This new assignment would be one major project, and would account for 30% of their grade. For this assignment, the class will pair with a partner group outside of the U.S. I intend this assignment to become a staple of ENGL 206 going forward, with the partner group varying from year to year. For Spring '22, I am currently in discussion with a group of Irish Travellers regarding this project. Irish Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority in Ireland, with their own culture, shared history, language, and traditions. Their history is long, but they have only been officially recognized by Ireland's government since March 2017. A nomadic and often misunderstood community, they experience widespread discrimination, including at school, in employment, medical care, and more.¹

Students will read about and interact virtually with the partner group, learning about their culture, history, and traditions, and getting to know individuals within that group to inform the creation of their digital essay. Specifically, in the first virtual session, students and partner group members will engage in discussion and a shared experience to build community. In the second meeting, they will engage in a Story Exchange using the Narrative 4 model, where individuals are paired up to share stories from their lives. Each participant tells their partner's story to the whole group as if it were their own. Research supports that this model increases empathy.² Additionally, the experience will offer important material for the students' digital essays. Students will then be guided through the process of creating a digital essay, including the engagement in workshop for peer and instructor feedback and the creation of multiple drafts. Students will meet with the class partner a third time upon completion of the project for a shared viewing of the digital essays. With permission from all involved, these essays may be use on the partner group's website or in other ways to increase awareness about their lived experience.

Learning Objectives

The goals and objectives of this assignment include:

- discovering sources outside of personal experience for creative nonfiction essays
- developing the skills necessary to identify a compelling focus for a shaped essay
- reflecting on the larger human experience thorough the development and practice of empathetic imagination

¹ University College Dublin, School of Public Health, Psysiotherapy and Population Science. "Our Geels: All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Summary of Findings." September 2010.

² University of Chicago. *Measuring Impact: The Science of the Story Exchange*. 2018.

- practicing the art and craft of revealing larger truths about the human experience through the individual, particular experience
- thinking critically about the ways image and narrative work together to create meaning
- handling insight with nuance and complexity

Supporting the Learning Objectives of the IGS Program

This proposal supports all three of the learning objectives for the IGS Program. However, it speaks perhaps most dynamically to the second and third. Students will gain and understanding of the broader strokes of the culture of the partner group. However, it is the carefully curated shared experiences with individuals within the partner group that will most effectively “enlighten students about the lived experiences of people who occupy different parts of the globe.” These experiences, and the processing of them through discussion, reflection, and the creation of the digital essay will enlarge students’ perspective-taking ability and develop their empathetic imagination. They will also allow students more intimate access to the lived experience and opportunity to understand the compelling connections that exist between themselves and the individuals in the partner group.

The reflective components of this assignment will prompt students to “think about the interconnectedness of our fates across the globe, and about their own place in a globalized world through a variety of analytical lenses.” Through reflection, students will confront and articulate issues of interconnectedness as they observe them between individuals within the same community, and between the partner group community and their own communities. We will explore this in discussions. Additionally, the digital essay assignment will require a reflective component that prompts students to consider these issues. Students’ ability to observe, without a rigid preconceived notion of what they will write, is an important component of coming to understand—and then committing to the essay—some genuine and important aspect of the individual person. At the same time, the reflective component will allow them to make connections and associations. Through the examination of models, they will see how creative nonfiction need not settle with definitive conclusions, but rather can untangle complexities by posing questions, dwelling in uncertainty, and creating invitations to further thought.

This plan represents the bringing together of many components, and I want to briefly note the ways in which I am well equipped to carry this out successfully. I have incorporated civic engagement into prior classes, including multiple semesters working with veteran pilots at the Prairie Aviation Museum. I’m experienced with the complexities of navigating these kinds of exchanges—from building community to the logistics of scheduling. Additionally, my professional network includes several potential partner groups. I have also taught the creation of digital essays several times, and have a solid infrastructure on which to rest that aspect of the class.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with the committee my proposal. This grant opportunity is an important one, and being awarded a grant will make the logistics of this kind of complex and multi-layered undertaking possible. Thank you for your consideration.