Implementing a First-Year Experience Curriculum in a Large Lecture Course: Opportunities, Challenges, and Myths

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Abstract

This article documents the design, delivery, and evaluation of a first-year experience (FYE) course in media and communication studies. It was decided that CMNS 110: Introduction to Communication Studies would start to include elements to address a perceived and documented sense of disconnectedness among first-year students in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. These elements included coping, learning, and writing workshops facilitated by various services units across campus. We present results from surveys and focus groups conducted with students at the end of the course and discuss the predicaments that the new realities of an accreditation and audit paradigm—under the cloak of the neoliberal university—produce. On one hand the FYE course may help students transition into a post-secondary institution; on the other hand, too much emphasis on the FYE can result in an instrumental approach to education, jeopardizing the integrity of the course. We offer some insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing FYE curricula within a large classroom setting.

Résumé

Cet article documente la conception, la prestation et l'évaluation d'un cours d'« expérience de première année » (ou FYE [First Year Experience]) dans un programme de baccalauréat en médias et communication. Le cours CMNS 110 : Introduction aux études de communication, à l'université Simon Fraser, a été modifié pour répondre à un sentiment de déconnexion exprimé par les étudiants de première année. Ainsi, une série d'ateliers animés par divers services de l'université a été élaborée pour le cours autour de thématiques telles que l'adaptation, l'apprentissage et l'écriture. Dans le texte qui suit, nous présentons les résultats d'un sondage et d'une série de groupes de discussion menés à la fin du cours avec ses étudiants. Ensuite, nous discutons des difficultés qui résultent de cette approche en fonction des pratiques d'agrément et de vérification qui s'imposent dans le paradigme de l'université néolibérale. D'une part, le cours FYE peut aider les étudiants à faire la transition vers les études postsecondaires. D'autre part, trop d'insistance sur le cours de FYE risque de mener à une approche éducative trop instrumentale qui met en péril l'intégrité du cours. Finalement, nous présentons les défis et les occasions à saisir en lien avec la mise en œuvre de programmes de FYE dans une salle de classe avec plusieurs étudiants.

Introduction: Paradigm Shifts in Canadian Post-secondary Education

Cultural and economic shifts in Canadian higher education have resulted in changes in teaching and learning practices. More than ever, research-intensive post-secondary institutions, especially in the arts and social sciences, are under pressure to demonstrate relevance and worth through periodic audits and accreditation mechanisms. Under the purview of these mechanisms, universities are increasingly perceived as "service providers" meant to dispense marketable skills to student "consumers" who will translate their education into lucrative jobs (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015, p. 160). And while the path from graduation to a career has never been a linear one, students are increasingly concerned with uncertain economic outlooks and seeking educational paths that have higher likelihoods of leading to employment (Cairns, 2015). In this climate, undergraduate programs in the arts and social sciences have particularly suffered, and many programs have been dismantled due to fiscal restraints and poor enrollment. In an effort to circumvent this fate, undergraduate programs across North America are devoting more resources to enhancing student experience in the classroom, particularly in the student's first year when problems with retention are said to be most likely (Tinto, 2006). Referred to as the first-year experience (FYE), programs at post-secondary institutions in Canada and elsewhere are tailoring their courses to include foundational skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking in order to provide students with the foundations for academic success.

FYE design and implementation differ from one program to another, but they share the belief that many students are unprepared for their first year of studies (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015). In Canada for example, to help students entering into first year,

Brock University has offered mentors to first-year students, MacEwan University has established a first-year Facebook page, and the University of Prince Edward Island requires students to enroll in one of three FYE courses.[1] As FYE initiatives continue to gain popularity at Canadian universities, a number of questions about how best to design and implement FYE curricula remain in need of discussion, especially because evidence of their success is somewhat divided when it comes to student retention (Connolly et al., 2017; DeMarinis et al., 2017; Jamelske, 2009) and obviating academic probation (Connolly et al., 2017). For example, given the diverse population of students enrolling at Canadian universities, whose experience are we referring to when we talk about the first-year experience? Who is to bear the responsibility of implementing FYE initiatives? And who do FYE initiatives really serve? These are only some of the questions we struggled with as we designed and implemented an FYE course in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University (SFU), a research-intensive Canadian university with an undergraduate student population of nearly 35,000.

In our case, the School of Communication determined that our 100-level curriculum needed a general review and update. In response to an administratively-driven, university-wide push to focus on student experience, and specifically the first-year experience (FYE), it was decided that our introductory course, CMNS 110: Introduction to Communication Studies, would start to include elements to address a perceived and documented sense of disconnectedness among SFU students (SFU Undergraduate Student Survey, 2016). The CMNS 110 project grew out of both ad hoc and formal conversations in the School on the nature of our introductory courses, their "place" in the curriculum as a whole, their long legacy, and their capacity to adapt to new challenges, such as labour market demands and technological advancements in the field. To address some of these concerns, we partnered with a number of service (i.e., non-academic) units across campus to offer a series of coping, learning, and writing workshops for first-year communication students during the Fall 2016 offering of the course. These workshops were facilitated by the Library, the Student Learning Commons, Healthy Campus, Student Services, Advisors, and University Co-Op. In addition, the teaching team also offered a series of sessions on drafting paper proposals and exam prep. These are some initiatives that educational literature and practical guidelines on FYE courses point to (Upcraft, Barefoot, & Gardner, 2005), although there are certainly other strategies used at SFU and elsewhere.

In addition to designing and implementing our own FYE curriculum, we sought to determine the usefulness of the modified content of the course for student learning in order to make informed decisions about our first-year curriculum in the coming years. Our research sought to answer the following questions:

1. Who are the partners and stakeholders across the institution, and how can they contribute to the design and implementation of an FYE curriculum?
2. Has the course had an impact on student learning, and if so, what do students feel they have learned?
3. Which elements of the course pertaining to the FYE curriculum should be kept and which of them should be revised or eliminated?

To address these questions, we begin with an overview of some common themes in the literature on FYE curriculum implementations. Following a brief account of methods used

for this case study, we present a summary of our research findings and a discussion of some of the predicaments that the new realities of an accreditation and audit paradigm—under the cloak of the neoliberal university—produce. On one hand, FYE curricula promise to alleviate some of the student anxieties of entering into a post-secondary institution; but on the other hand, if left to the devices of the administrative machinery of the university, FYE curricula implementation could take a rather instrumental approach to education. We conclude with providing some recommendations for future implementations of FYE curricula within the context of a large classroom setting at a research-intensive university.

The First-Year Experience

The first-year experience has been a sustained area of interest in higher education for the last 50 years. In a comprehensive review of the field, for instance, Harvey, Drew, and Smith (2006) collected approximately 750 English language peer-reviewed publications ranging from 1960-2000 on the topic of the first-year experience. Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns (2015) write that the "contemporary [First-Year Seminar] movement" began in 1972 with a conformist course offered at the University of South Carolina (p. 156). The ambit of this "University 101" class was not only student retention and better teaching practices, but also the engendering of "positive attitudes and behaviours towards the institution" (p. 156) in the wake of protest against the Vietnam War. In 1986, the university founded the National Research Center for the Freshman Year Experience, which has since produced a scholarly journal on the subject, along with books, monographs, and "endorsements for numerous commercially available assessments" (p. 157).

Attention to the first-year experience has also become an international concern. Australian schools, for instance, have hoped to retain students through "widespread scholarly investigation and interventions" over the last 20 years (Brooker, Brooker, & Lawrence, 2017, p. 2). Myriad universities make attempts similar to those in Australia, such as schools in Canada, Denmark (Ulriksen, Madsen, & Holmegaard, 2017), New Zealand (Elnagar, Perry, & O'Steen, 2011), and the United Kingdom (Brooker et al., 2017). What connects the above studies is the attention to student success and retention at university, as well as the methods of surveying or interviewing students on their experiences. We will explore some of their suggestions for improvement, along with other studies, below.

The broad interest in the first-year subject is owing in part to the observation that the transition to university can be a demanding or difficult one for new students (Krause & Coates, 2008). According to FYE literature, difficulties can stem from finances, mental health, coursework, "family care," and "emotional distress"—the last of which is named the most common determinant for first-year students weighing whether to leave school (Brooker et al., 2017, p. 50). Other research has found that poor academic performance and lack of engagement are often the causes of early withdrawal (Tinto, 2006).[2] Still another disadvantage involves students whose parents and families lack experience in higher education, making the student the first in that circle to obtain a university degree (Naylor, Baik, & Arkoudis, 2018).

High rates of withdrawal during the first year have made this period a pivotal one for institutional intervention (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Fittingly, student retention has become one of the most researched topics in higher education (Jamelske, 2009). In addition to concerns about the future of enrollment in the arts and humanities, the demands for

accreditation and for meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student populations are among the many challenges that FYE initiatives are thought to address (Keup & Kilgo, 2014). Current FYE curricula continue to be prescribed for a broad range of issues relevant to first-year student experience—and in a broad range of disciplines (Jamelske, 2009). These issues include fostering positive attitudes toward the university, improving student academic performance in foundational areas such as reading and writing, and encouraging faculty to reflect on their own teaching practices (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015).

Throughout an array of international and disciplinary contexts, studies recommend a number of strategies for various stakeholders to adopt. Citing "the student experience literature," Krause and Coates note the significance of "students connecting with each other and the university community in activities beyond the classroom, both social and academic" (2008, p. 502). Elganar, Perry, & O'Steen write that a "leadership program" can serve as a beneficial transition experience for new university students (2011, p. 58). Brooker, Brooker, and Lawrence (2017) advocate asking students about their own situations and challenges; in their Australian context, they call attention to "students' difficulties managing time, workload and others' expectations" as factors universities should address (p. 58). Connolly et al. (2017) report that identifying at-risk students early and having them participate "fully" in an FYE course can lead to positive results (p. 1). DeMarinis et al. (2017) state that university investment in "enhanc[ing] a sense of belonging" can improve retention (p. 94), further reporting that students' interactions with a peer mentor can boost their GPA.

It remains unclear whether or not FYE efforts are having a positive impact on retention (Connolly et al., 2017; DeMarinis et al., 2017; Jamelske, 2009). As prefaced above, however, many scholars have reported positive effects on student engagement and performance (Cook & Price, 1996; Fiddler & Moore, 1996; Grayson, 2003; Huff, 1996; Hyers & Joslin, 1998; Levitz & Noel, 1989). At the same time, some also note a sense of disengagement and poor academic performance among students as a result of FYE elements in a course (Bovill, Bulley, & Morss, 2011). The discrepancy in research findings is partly explained by the fact that retention is a much more complex issue than is often realized (Tinto, 2006).[3] Whether or not a student completes a degree may depend on more than simply adjusting to university life. In the Canadian context, for example, mobility, career opportunities, family, and social life are reported as other reasons for withdrawal (Blais & Pulido, 1992; Wintre et al., 2006). The factors impacting the first year are complex and diverse, revealing that that there is no such thing as the first-year experience, but rather a diverse range of first-year *experiences.*

When designing our own FYE curriculum for CMNS 110, we also took into serious consideration what the needs of an introductory Communication course are. In 2016, *Review of Communication* published an issue on the state of Communication and the importance of the discipline's first year for students, where Gehrke (2016) refers to early Communication courses as "the single most important aspect" of Communication (p. 109). The special issue makes clear that the first-year course needs a hard look and some theoretical retooling. Conversations about the state of our own introductory Communication courses at SFU often echoed several of the concerns raised by authors throughout the issue; for example, what a major in Communication should mean for graduating students. From an administrative perspective, should CMNS 110, and by extension the major, prioritize

job training? Are students themselves perceiving the major as preparation for a career? Or, by contrast, does Communication represent the study of a "time-honored tradition," a "civic responsibility," or none of the above, as Fassett (2016) recommends (p. 132)? These are the types of broad, disciplinary questions that needed to be addressed whilst thinking about the needs of our first-year students.

Methods

In light of the experiences and challenges presented by the literature, we sought to assess the outcomes of our own FYE initiative in CMNS 110. At the end of the Fall 2016 semester, the instructor and teaching assistants of CMNS 110 administered a cumulative and reflective survey to students. The exercise resulted in a considerably large turnout of 196 responses—an 80% response rate. The survey asked students to rank and evaluate several nuances of the course, such as 12 co-curricular activities incorporated under the mandate of our FYE program. These activities included an in-class "Alumni Panel" (in which four alumni explained their career trajectories), as well as extraneous events such as lunches organized around developing thesis statements and finding academic sources. The survey also asked students to assess their own learning over the course of the semester in relation to course themes.

With research funding from Simon Fraser University's Institute for the Study of Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines (ISTLD), one research assistant then organized the survey data with the computer software program, IBM SPSS Statistics. The main objective involved running cross-tabulations, discovering, for example, which of the FYE-related components yielded the most educational value—or which of the assignments should be junked in future iterations of the course. In addition to the quantitative data entry, the researcher also recorded the qualitative, written responses students were encouraged to add about the online component of the course and what impacted their learning overall.

To add depth to the quantitative results of our survey, we further investigated the impact of our FYE curriculum on student experience and learning in CMNS 110 by conducting focus groups in February and March 2017, shortly after the end of the course, with students and teaching assistants (TAs) from the course respectively. Focus groups result in a rich body of data that can offer valuable insight into the perspectives and experiences of individuals expressed in their own words (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2009). Student participants were selected on the basis of their performance in the course and segmented accordingly into three groups: groups one and two were comprised of students in the "C-B" grade range and group three was comprised of students in the "A" grade range. Morgan (1997) argues that homogeneity of segments "allows for more free-flowing conversation among participants within groups and facilitates analyses that examine differences in perspective between groups" (pp. 35-36). Students were segmented into focus groups by grade range to help foster open dialogue among students and to determine whether there were differences in the challenges students faced based on their academic performance. A fourth focus group was conducted with the TAs from the course to gain insight into their experience aiding in the implementation of the FYE elements of the course. The focus group discussions were moderated by a second research assistant who facilitated open conversation between small groups of three to six participants with a series of open-ended questions designed to complement the data gathered by our survey.

The transcripts were then coded and thematized by the researchers, the results of which are presented and interpreted in our findings following the results of our survey.

Findings

Designing an FYE Course

First, we found that it takes a village to design an FYE course; partnering with units across campus is key to success. One of the pitfalls with designing courses, especially foundational courses, is that it can easily become an instructor-centered project. In other words, the instructor, according to their own knowledge about what the disciplinary traditions are, goes on to design a course often in isolation from the rest of the curriculum and the broader university community. One of the major learning experiences from this project is that designing a course with FYE in mind is a major undertaking that should involve multiple partners across the university and beyond. For the purpose of re-designing CMNS 110 at least a dozen partners were identified and contributed to the course. Some were directly involved in the course (such as the Student Learning Commons and the Library). Other partners played an informative role and helped the design team to conceptually reimagine a different course (such as data on enrollment, retention, etc. from Institutional Research and Planning, and the Teaching and Learning Centre). Figure 1 provides an overview of the various stakeholders that were involved, directly and indirectly, in the curricular redesign for our first-year course.
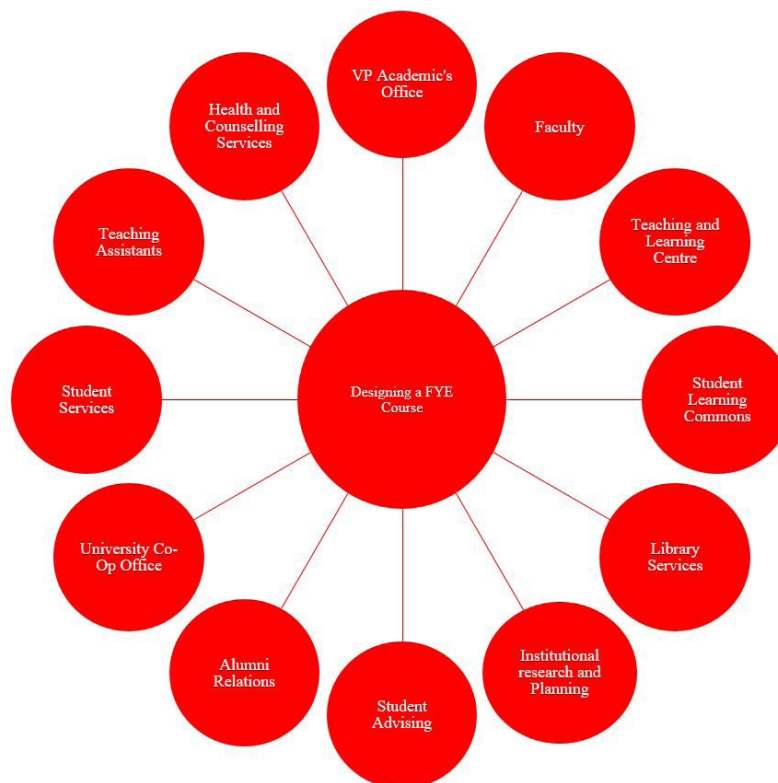

Figure 1

Involving other actors in the process of curriculum renewal has its affordances and drawbacks. It can provide an opportunity to holistically consider the curriculum renewal project and take advantage of the various services each actor brings to the table. At the same time, involving other actors could potentially impact the autonomy of individual instructors and academic units in renewing their curriculum. In our experience, it becomes the task of the individual instructor to shield the academic integrity of the course and curriculum by delineating the degree of involvement of each contributing actor. Nonetheless, in our experience with this case study, the actors involved in large part enriched the outcome of curriculum renewal and student experience rather than serving as a threat to the process.

Impact on Student Learning: Survey Results

Part of the challenge of teaching a first-year course is to suspend presuppositions about student competencies. Educational literature has pointed to an ongoing gap between K-12 curriculum and first-year university teaching (Ellerton, 2015). Often, first-year teaching involves conversations with students who are shocked at how "poorly" they are doing in their first writing assignments. Subsequently, the task of the teaching team in an introductory course, in any subject, goes far beyond covering discipline-specific content to include mechanical aspects of being a student. To this aim, we introduced a number of workshops to assist students in their studying and writing techniques. While it is difficult to measure the impact of these workshops on the actual learning of students (as is often the case, "impact" is measured longitudinally and may not manifest itself until years after), we relied on student self-reported sense of improvement based on a post-pre survey instrument. We differentiated between two independent variables: Students directly admitted from high school and college transfer students (labeled as D100 and D200, respectively, in Table 1). The numerical scores reported here scale to 5.

Table 1. *Mean measurements of D100 and D200 students' self-reported learning experiences in CMNS 110 (1 − 5 range)*

Student self-reports	Before the course (D100)	After the course (D100)	Before the course (D200)	After the course (D200)
I can question apparently common sense ideas using critical thinking.	3.2	4.2	3.7	4.3
I can develop an outline for a term paper.	3.0	4.2	3.7	4.4
I can develop a thesis statement for a term paper.	3.2	4.1	3.8	4.3
I can find academic sources for a term paper.	2.8	4.4	3.9	4.6
I can critically assess the influence media has on our thoughts about issues.	2.9	4.2	3.3	4.5
I have a solid understanding of the phrase, "we shape our tools, and then our tools shape us."	2.4	4.4	2.6	4.4
I have a solid understanding of the concept of "the danger with a single story."	2.5	4.1	3.2	4.3
I can critically assess media's representation of gender, race, sexuality and/or ethnicity.	3.2	4.5	3.5	4.5

Students admitted directly from high school (D100) experienced the most sense of growth in terms of their understanding of course content and material. On average, there was a 1-point increase in how students perceived their own improvement on tasks such as developing a term paper outline, writing a thesis statement, and critical thinking, while students in the D200 group experienced (not surprisingly) an average of 0.5 increase in their sense of improvement in the course (See Table 1).

Similarly, the co-curricular activities benefited the high-school intakes (D100) more than the other category of students (D200). This is evident across the board in Table 2, which gives an overview of how the students felt about each of the activities (only the top seven are presented here for the sake of brevity). As you can see, the survey asked students to rate their level of learning for each of the activities and then to report which activity in question should be kept for future offerings.

Table 2. *D100 and D200 students' assessments of CMNS 110's FYE co-curricular activities (%)*

Co-curricular activity	Student category	Learned a lot	Learned some	Learned little/none	Didn't attend	Keep
Alumni Panel	D100	30.6	13.3	3.6	3.6	41.8
	D200	14.8	11.2	3.6	9.7	25.5
Librarian Lecture	D100	21.4	19.4	5.1	6.6	33.7
	D200	4.5	17.9	12.8	4.5	21.4
Student Learning Commons (Formatting essay)	D100	18.4	19.4	6.6	8.2	29.6
	D200	7.14	10.7	12.8	8.2	18.9
Student Learning Commons (Writing essay)	D100	17.3	25	4.1	5.6	29.6
	D200	6.1	16.8	11.2	5.1	18.4
Enrollment planning	D100	10.2	8.2	6.1	26.5	20.4
	D200	.51	4.5	5.1	28.1	9.2
Healthy Campus	D100	7.7	20.4	15.8	7.7	17.3
	D200	3.6	13.3	15.3	7.7	12.8
Success at University	D100	7.7	30.1	12.8	3.1	15.3
	D200	2.6	13.3	18.9	5.1	12.2

One significant finding from this summary table is the degree to which students favoured activities that were directly linked to their course requirements. Aside from the Alumni Panel, which was hugely popular, the most favoured activities were the Library workshop and the two Student Learning Commons workshops on essay writing and formatting, all three of which were tailored to the students' term paper. Sessions on enrollment planning, healthy campus, and success at university all received unfavourable reviews in the survey. Similarly, the majority of our students felt that the top four activities in this table should be kept in future offerings of the course, while workshops related to the overall well-being of students (represented by the bottom three co-curricular items of this

table) were deemed less important. On average only one-third of students felt that they should be kept. This also confirms our hypothesis that students, for better or worse, tend to favour and pay more attention to materials and contents that are directly contributing to their performance in the course. These findings can perhaps assist other instructors and stakeholders looking to implement some form of FYE initiative into their own course.

Impact on Student Learning: Focus Groups

In addition to the surveys, we conducted three focus groups with students and one focus group with the teaching assistants from CMNS 110, each with three to five participants. We drew five major findings from this exercise: 1) that the co-curricular activities were at times intrusive 2) that the FYE course was a "one off" in that the support disappeared after the course ended 3) that students self-reported boosts in learning and writing ability 4) that the instructor plays a significant part in the efficacy of an FYE course 5) and that the Alumni Panel was the most popular co-curricular activity in the course. We will provide detailed reflections on each. Note that the names of participants are pseudonyms and that all transcripts are verbatim.

Students in general agreed that there were too many co-curricular activities, although they were sensitive to the fact that perhaps they were useful for others. The biggest complaint was that they took away from lecture time, and that they were more interested in the lecture than the co-curricular activities themselves. Jamie, for instance, said: "I feel like [the instructor] could have put them on Canvas for some of them, cuz a lot of the times we didn't go over everything in the lecture slides, which was kind of annoying." Janelle concurred, saying that "I felt it was too much," and that "[the instructor] frequently was behind on lectures, and he was struggling to keep up because he had so many guests." Another student, Sam, stated "I understand why he had all of them in, cuz we were first-years and wanting as much help as we could, but they were a bit repetitive. But I understand why we had them." These comments accord with the instructor's concern over the extra time that FYE content demands, which in turn corroborates Jamelske's (2009) findings that 49% of faculty members consulted agreed that "it is difficult both to teach my course effectively and to have it meet all the goals of the FYE program" (p. 381) .

Another significant finding from the focus group discussions was the students' concerns regarding their academic life after an FYE course. This concern underscores Nelson's (2014) claim about the need for ongoing attention in order to ensure student success. The transition out of FYE was a noticeable one for CMNS 110 students, and they seemed to think of the class as a "one-off" in terms of support and experience. For example, Tanya felt that

> In a way this course is great because it's helpful for first year students. Like, I imagine if you were coming right from high school that something like this is really helpful to have, you know, where your teacher gives you a study sheet and takes the time to have a study session or a review session where he answers questions before exams. But in a way it's also like, maybe misleading because as first-years you get this impression that that's what's normal.

Another student, Gabrielle, said that "We were really spoiled with this class," to which

Sara replied, "Yeah, but you can't expect that. Cuz now it's second semester and I'm like, [*in a joking tone*] I'm sorry, where's our study sheet? Where's [the instructor]? I want [the CMNS 110 instructor]." The question then is how can we carry this momentum forward beyond the first year to continue to offer students the support that they might need in their writing, research, and other forms of academic work. This is an ongoing curricular conversation that needs to take place at the department level.

Regarding students' own sense of improvement, the focus group moderator asked, "Have students developed/improved their knowledge in areas such as critical thinking, writing, and media analysis?" Students used the term "critical thinking" frequently throughout the focus group discussions. They tended to use it loosely to describe the ability to look beyond the appearance or surface level of things. Students also referred to their ability to analyze media as a kind of critical thinking, and when it came to this type of analysis, students valued the fact that examples and course readings were contemporary or relevant to their lives. In terms of writing improvement, the responses were varied. Probably the most surprising thing to arise out of the discussion about writing improvement was that students didn't tend to think of their weekly writing assignments as opportunities to "write." They perceived the weekly assignments to be about critical thinking and not about writing because they lacked the formality of a research paper.

In terms of overall self-reported learning, it was difficult to get a clear sense from the focus groups what students gained from the course. We did not ask students to identify specific things they learned. However, students were able to refer to some topics in the course that they found memorable. For example, semiotics, encoding/decoding, gender studies, fat studies, citations, how to write a research paper, critical thinking, and two course themes ("the danger of a single story" and "we shape our tools and our tools shape us") were topics that came up. However, it would be reasonable to conclude that the learning of focus group participants across all three sessions was impacted by the course. The focus group participants clearly felt that CMNS 110 was an exceptional experience. The students also stressed the impact that the course instructor and TAs had on their learning. They explained that it was not necessarily the course content, but the way in which it was administered and feeling like they mattered to their instructor and TAs that made the course exceptional and impacted their learning in a positive way. Our finding here reflects what is now an accepted reality that the success of any institutional effort to enhance retention through student experience is dependent on the involvement of faculty in carrying out those efforts (Tinto, 2006).

Lastly, the focus group participants echoed the results of the survey in that the Alumni Panel was popular. They were interested in seeing what jobs people can do with their degrees and were comforted to hear that the degree can lead to different types of career opportunities. Jamie commented,

> I liked the Alumni Panel a lot. It was like I had no clue what you can do, like, not just Communication but, like, an arts degree in general, cuz I'm doing psychology, so then, like, the same faculty and I'm like, "Hmm, what do I do," and then seeing how diverse you can be with a Communications degree, I dunno, it's just cool to see what they can do.

Tanya expressed her agreement:

> I think that the alumni, too, they didn't sugar coat it, cuz like, yeah it's reassuring to know that you can get a job, but really, let's be realistic. A CMNS degree, similar to a liberal arts degree or an English degree is, like, as useful or as useless as you make it; like, it depends on the person. So for some people, yes, they will get a CMNS degree and end up in, like, retail for the rest of their lives and that's just that. It was useless for them. Um. So it was reassuring to see instances where it was useful.

The extent to which students emphasized the significance of career pathways as a criterion for their degree choice is perhaps not surprising. The focus group responses to the Alumni Panel reveal a deeper tension between the FYE, the Communication discipline, and the market that we take up in our discussion below.

Discussion

The design, implementation, and assessment of the CMNS 110 FYE course raises two sets of broader issues in working with FYE curricula in post-secondary institutions. The first set of issues involves the institutional challenges of implementing such curricula, in the context of SFU but also beyond, and the second set of issues has to do with the wider economic and cultural paradigm of neoliberalism, or what has been referred to in educational literature as the neo-liberalization of post-secondary education (Readings, 1996) and the rise of the managerial university (Anderson, 2008).

Part of the challenge with designing an FYE curriculum lies in not quite knowing why redesign tasks are undertaken, and how and by whom the parameters are set. Is this a university-wide initiative, or faculty-focused, or departmental? Is it driven by internally set parameters or influenced by external forces, such as accreditation? Are the strings pulled by the administrative side of academia or the academic side? Perhaps in our case it is a combination of all of the above. As pointed out by the academic literature reviewed in this article and reinforced by our case study, there is a strong case to be made for the usefulness of FYE curricula and courses to help students with their transition into a post-secondary environment. However, as pointed out by our focus group participants, and highlighted in our survey results, the model can be implemented in a rather prescriptive way that only helps to reinforce the market-driven tendencies in Canadian higher education, for example viewing education as primarily a means to employment.

In our experience there are three distinct stakeholders that are involved in the implementation and support of FYE curricula: the academic, the service, and the administrative wings of universities. Our research shows that higher administration often sets the framework for the implementation of FYE curricula, while the academic wing executes and implements the policies at the course and program levels, and service units (such as Student Services) provide the "on the ground" support for implementation. With CMNS 110 there seems to exist an inherent tension between the academic side of the equation and the administrative side. The course, being a theoretically-inspired course with a theoretically focused curriculum, was being challenged to "open up" to elements that at times were incongruous with the existing structure of the course and program as a whole. This

is not to say that FYE is an entirely administratively-driven project. We believe that the academic side of universities also has a vested interest in rethinking some of the courses that have had a long tradition and legacy. The implicit push for us has been then to run an FYE curriculum that is "light" on theory and instead focuses on two things: 1) skills related to succeeding as students (reading, writing, studying, and research skills; coping skills; guidance in choosing a career through co-op education and advising), and 2) applied content that prepares students for "the real world" in areas such as digital literacy and production, numeracy, data literacy, and presentation skills. Our concern is not at all with the merits of incorporating these elements into our courses and programs. Instead, our concern, as it has been expressed by other scholars (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015; Kift, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2016) is with the rather sudden and rapid growth of FYE initiatives in the Canadian post-secondary system where the focus has shifted from "educating citizens to preparing workers" (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015, p. 155). The tensions here are perhaps unsurprising; nevertheless, they must be continually addressed.

One of the major problems lies in the ethos of FYE implementation: it assumes students are ill equipped to navigate academia and therefore provides a series of scripted programs to assist them in their journey. Furthermore, it assumes that students are (or should be) well prepared after their first semester or year with FYE-specific programs. As expressed by the students, these initiatives cannot be one-off initiatives that leave students stranded in their second year of studies. This is the inherent tension, in our view, between a course-driven change initiative versus one that is driven with the curriculum in mind. In our experience with redesigning CMNS 110, when operating at the micro level (course design) one runs the risk of losing sight of the big picture: the curriculum. Often, as the people tasked with re-imagining CMNS 110, we felt that we were designing a course without taking into account our existing curriculum. In other words, we were changing one or two courses without looking at how these changes might impact the curriculum as a whole. For example, if we were to "skip" academic content in order to accommodate FYE co-curricular elements in lectures, how would that affect the students' level of preparedness for our second-year courses, especially considering our theoretically-oriented curriculum?

Secondly, in designing and implementing our FYE course, we were reminded that these initiatives are subject to the tensions produced by the broader economic and cultural paradigm referred to pejoratively as neoliberalism. By now, neoliberalism's trajectory is a familiar story in fields such as critical communication studies (Fuchs, 2014), sociology (Davis, 2006), and geography (Harvey, 2005; Mann, 2013). The establishment of neoliberal logics, along with an escalating financialized and globalized economy, have resulted in far-reaching consequences from schools to work environments to media to the city. In terms of university life, evidence shows that students have internalized some of the logic of personal responsibility; such logic is a neoliberal hallmark, as these policies are meant to "transfer all responsibility for well-being back to the individual" (Harvey, 2005, p. 76). In one Canadian study, for instance, university students reported that "responsibility for improving living conditions rests largely on the shoulders of individuals, and the best that can be hoped for is individual success in an unfair world" (Cairns, 2015, p. 127). Summarizing his interview data, Cairns (2015) writes that "in the context of an increasingly competitive job market and growing number of BA holders, a better future depends upon one's ability

to stand out from the pack" (p. 131). Says one interviewee: "Volunteer as much as possible, get references and connections" (p. 131). We see this type of sentiment reflected in our own survey data and focus group data— for example Tanya, whose take-away from the Alumni Panel noted earlier was that the degree is only as useful as you make it.

While we do find some evidence of neoliberalism affecting students' perceptions, we also see neoliberalism visit university administration. The latter can result in: education treated as a commodity; government dictates on university spending; a shift from the taxation of corporations for secondary education to direct corporate donations; decreased or rerouted funding; and higher tuition (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012). What is most germane to our study, however, is the neoliberal university's inclination based on corporate efficiency to "justify itself through a variety of 'performance measures'", of which enrollment numbers are a metric (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012, p. 25). While well-intentioned, the FYE implementation could be read as an alignment with efforts by the school to appear more marketable to prospective clients due to the higher retention rates it can publicize.

But this is a curious development, as it shows that neoliberalism is contradictory and not "all bad." Indeed, Canadian universities from Brock to MacEwan to SFU hoping that first-year students socialize and thus improve university life can certainly have positive educational consequences. Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns (2015) recognize this when they say, "At first blush, the goals of FYS seem worthwhile and appropriate," and that "Students want their degrees to be useful, as opposed to useless, and so they should" (p. 159). When the motive is to appear as a more marketable institution, however, the FYE project can look questionable, such as when university marketers proclaim "Our students get jobs" (p. 160). Likewise, while the market-modeled university attempts to improve student satisfaction and "ameliorate struggle" (p. 164), this again puts students in the role of consumers filling out surveys (Readings, 1997). The problem here is that "learning may be a painful experience," and that this journey should not be artificially rigged and streamlined (p. 131). The FYE implementation we outlined in this article drops right in the middle of this contradictory stage of higher education, bringing with it objectively good ideas, yes, but also realities in need of critical evaluation.

Further research in this field would require several elements, including a longitudinal approach to data gathering (both qualitative and quantitative) to assess and measure changes in student experience, satisfaction, and learning as FYE curricula are implemented and revised over the years. Attention also needs to be paid to studying student experience beyond the first term or year, to see how FYE curricula prepares students for academic life and what impact they have on student retention and learning. Finally, if feasible, a quasi-experimental approach would allow for comparison of student groups who experience an FYE curriculum with those who do not.

Conclusion

The FYE curriculum is an initiative introduced by post-secondary institutions to assist students to transition into an academic life. This move (or push!) is especially paramount for larger, research-intensive universities with curricular legacies that stem from practices and traditions that predate some of the contemporary moves towards experiential, student-centred, and flexible learning. Our case study demonstrates that to implement

such initiatives, one must first take into account the enormous infrastructure that is required to ensure a reasonable measure of success. Secondly, while measuring success is a difficult task, courses and programs that implement FYE curricula should regularly engage with course and curriculum assessment in order to at least periodically gauge student experience with such curricula. In our study, which stemmed from a desire to know more about our students' needs as freshmen, we faced a series of challenges with adding FYE content to our introductory course in communication studies. As it was reported by our students, some measures such as the academic skill development workshops were successful, while others, such as the quantity of co-curricular activities overall, were considered unnecessary or overkill. What is evident from the findings is that students in general, perhaps driven by a market logic that education is primarily a means to employment, are more inclined to engage with content that directly impacts their grades, and stay away from content that is supposed to teach them various coping mechanisms for a university setting. At the same time, as we have discussed above, the move to implement FYE measures is not divorced from the broader cultural and economic conversations about the worth of a post-secondary education in a neoliberal age. We therefore caution against any implementation strategies that are primarily driven by administration and the managerial university. ❧

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Notes

1. Information on these programs is available at, respectively: https://brocku.ca/about/first-year-experience/; https://www.macewan.ca/wcm/StudentAffairs/New-StudentOrientation/First-YearExperience/index.htm; and http://www.upei.ca/pro-gramsandcourses/first-year-experience
2. Writing in the context of Australian FYE scholarship, Nelson also writes that "Poverty

is still one of the major reasons that students leave [higher education]" (2014, p. 6).
3. DeMarinis et al. write, for instance, that "[m]ore research, over a longer time frame, is needed to understand the factors that affect retention" (2017, p. 93).

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