

## Food for thought on Canadian campuses

### In defence of the importance of first-year courses and the faculty who teach them by Bruce Ravelli <sup>1</sup>

Do you remember your first day as an undergrad? Did you get lost trying to find your first class? Do you remember feeling overwhelmed, homesick? Like you, many students remember that first day on campus long after they graduate. Some students also remember the class that changed their lives – their first-year Intro course.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers have found that students were significantly more likely to major in a field when their Intro course was taught by an inspiring and caring teacher. Further, undergraduate students were equally likely to write-off an entire discipline after a single negative experience with a professor.<sup>3</sup> This should not come as a surprise since introductory courses are often the first-time students experience the beauty of philosophy, grapple with historical injustice and colonialism or appreciate how mRNA vaccines changed the world. Intro courses are often where we pull students into our disciplines or where we push them away.

Many would agree that introductory courses are important for students transitioning to postsecondary education and yet, on campuses across Canada, they are often taught by contract or junior faculty. As someone who has spent much of their career (happily) teaching Introduction to Sociology courses, the assumption that “anyone can teach Intro” cannot be further from the truth. In my experience, teaching first-year students requires different skills than leading a fourth-year seminar, but I believe both courses are intricately tied to each other. I am convinced that the better the first-year course is today, the better the fourth-year seminar will be tomorrow.

Teaching first-year courses can include an element of performance, but it is so much more than that. A good lecturer can take deep theoretical and scientific insights and convey them in a way that

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<sup>2</sup> Hard, B. M., Lovett, J. M., & Brady, S. T. (2019). What do students remember about introductory psychology, years later? *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 5(1), 61–74.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000136>

<sup>3</sup> Chambliss, D. F., & Takacs, C. G. (2014). How college works. In *How College Works*. Harvard University Press.

connects to their students' lives. Teaching Intro is about surveying the entire spectrum of one's discipline and delivering it in a way that even a struggling student can understand. Beyond lecturing, answering student email and managing the learning management system (that has been changed, again!) is time-consuming and often frustrating. For those teaching large first-year classes with hundreds of students, there are the added responsibilities of supervising a team of Teaching Assistants (TAs). While TAs are hardworking and a pleasure to work with, they are also students and a few inevitably require extra time and support. Teaching fourth-year seminars is about drawing upon a deep connection with a particular area of study that may take years, or decades, to understand and present in a way that inspires and empowers students.

We must appreciate that without the first-year instructor drawing students into our disciplines, there would be no students in our fourth-year seminars.

Students deserve passionate and committed teachers from their first course to their last. From the start of a student's journey where some feel lost, to the end, where many can finally appreciate how far they have come, the breadth of our first-year courses complements the depth of our fourth-year seminars. In culinary terms, Intro courses are the *hors d'oeuvre* and the fourth-year seminars the *mignardise* – bite sized morsels intended to awaken the senses and show the promise of what is to come, and then later, to settle the palette and allow time to reflect upon the entire experience.

Surely it is time to give more than lip-service to our colleagues teaching first-year courses and commit ourselves to ensuring that they receive the appropriate recognition, job-security, and workloads they deserve. After all, as the research confirms, they play a key role in inspiring students to become our majors, our graduate students, and in time, our colleagues.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Do you remember your favourite first-year class? Your worst? If so, what made them so different?
2. On your campus, who tends to teach first-year courses (i.e., contract, junior, or senior colleagues)? What message does this send to students? To colleagues?
3. Does your institution recognize the increased workload associated with teaching large first-year courses?