Calderwood Seminars in Public Writing

Some Questions and Answers

1. What are Calderwood Seminars in Public Writing?

The Calderwood Seminars in Public Writing, inaugurated in 2013-14 at Wellesley College, are senior level seminars taught within academic departments. They differ from most college courses in that they emphasize public writing—writing that appeals to a general readership rather than to an audience of specialists. As a result, they follow a pedagogical model different from that of most other courses. Each week students write short pieces, usually ranging from 500-1000 words in length that might appear in a newspaper, magazine or blog, and in which students revisit the specialized knowledge they have acquired in their majors and shape it for ordinary readers. Calderwood Seminars (“Calderwoods”) have been taught by faculty from across the curriculum with offerings in American studies and art, economics and environmental studies ,mathematics and music, etc. The program is named after Stanford Calderwood, a philanthropist and supporter of the arts who had an abiding interest in communication, and whose Calderwood Charitable Foundation provided the financial support that launched the initiative.

1. How are Calderwood Seminars different from other 300-level senior electives?

Most senior level electives adopt a narrow focus and concentrate on a subfield within a discipline, e.g., courses on Jane Austen, the Civil War or Labor Economics. Calderwood Seminars tend to adopt a broad perspective permitting students “to take one more lap” around their discipline, applying skills learned in their major to a broad array of topics in their chosen field.

1. What assignments are used in Calderwood Seminars?

Unlike most courses, Calderwoods are not organized around reading lists, chapters in a textbook or sequential topics. Instead, they are organized around discrete assignments. In a typical 13-week semester, each student completes 5 or 6 such assignments. These may include blog posts or short essays on articles found in professional journals or in public reports; coverage of public lectures; book, film or theatre reviews; Op-eds; letters to the Editor; interviews and profiles of professionals; text boxes that might appear in an undergraduate textbook; and mock proposals for grants. Students complete each assignment once as a writer and once as an editor. Each writer’s 1st draft is workshopped in class; the final draft, reflecting the comments of the entire seminar, is generally due one week after class discussion.

1. Do students write on the same or different topics?

Calderwoods employ two basic strategies: common genres and common texts. In a given week, students whose turn it is to write will all work within the same narrative form—a blog post, a film review, an Op-ed, etc. On some assignments, faculty will assign a common text so that the week’s writers each produce a book review of the same book. This leads to “Rashomon” moments where everyone has viewed the same text but comes to different conclusions about what it says, how it makes its point and why it matters. In other weeks there may not be a common text, with students, for example, writing Op-eds on topics of their own choosing. The mix of common genre versus common text assignments varies across Calderwoods.

1. What are students responsible for?

Each week half of the class writes and the other half edits. These roles rotate each week. Whether as writer or editor, all students must complete the assigned genre or common text each week. Writers must complete a “0” draft and get it to their editors who provide both line edits and an overall evaluation of the piece. The writer then revises and produces a 1st draft and posts it electronically the day before class meets. All students must read all the posted pieces prior to class time and must be prepared to discuss each piece in class. After class, the writer typically has one week to produce a final draft based on in-class workshopping and the professor’s feedback (usually provided after the class has met). (Since the inception of the program there has been some innovation with editors assigned to work with the writer on the final draft either instead of or in addition to working on the 1st draft.)

1. “I have never taught writing.”

Many faculty have never taught a “writing course” and may be wary of teaching writing. Such a response is unjustified. Calderwoods are courses in a faculty member’s discipline. In a typical week, the faculty member will read the assigned text (if there is one) and the papers students produce that week. The faculty member comments on those assignments just as s/he might in any other course, offering a critique of both substance and exposition. Based on what the students have written, the faculty member decides what to present and review during the first half of class – this might be core issues in the assigned text or analytical techniques used in the text that students may have forgotten. The second half of class ordinarily is devoted to workshopping each piece produced that week, with the faculty member contributing to the conversation but encouraging students to drive the process themselves. Faculty do not need to be trained writing teachers in order to offer a Calderwood successfully.

1. What are the advantages of a Calderwood Seminar?

Different from the standard “talk and chalk” of most college courses, Calderwoods are one variant of “the flipped classroom.” There is no discussion of material before students submit their writing, or if there is, it is minimal. Upper level students are ready to tackle the material on their own and come to class having thought and written about it. This provides a great opportunity to explore the material in depth because these students are not blank slates but are prepared, indeed eager, to discuss the assigned material, independently from the course mechanics of Calderwoods requiring it. Being asked to translate complex professional work for a general audience requires a deep understanding of the material, one not unlike the understanding required to teach it. Public writing hones the skill of critical thinking.

1. What do students gain from taking a Calderwood Seminar?

We have conducted extensive evaluations of the Calderwood Seminars in Public Writing program, gaining insights from the students who take these courses and the faculty who teach them, as well as from independent evaluations commissioned for this purpose. We find that students’ writing improves, as does their command of their discipline. Students tell us that they learn the value of concision in their writing, the art of getting to the point, and the importance of writing multiple drafts. They also tell us they become better thinkers – as biologists, economists, sociologists, etc. – in ways that are different from their experiences in other electives. We find that these seminars help students find their “voice” and recognize that they have opinions they need to defend. Some “fall in love” with their majors again. Students learn to give and receive criticism, and become more skeptical readers and more independent seekers of information. Course alumnae find these skills valuable in the workplace and in graduate and professional school programs.