**Spiderman Debate**  
by Craig Fischer, English

In September 2009, Christopher Bartel of Philosophy and Religion and I collaborated on an enjoyable and enlightening General Education event. Both Chris and I teach classes in the “How We Tell Stories” theme in the Aesthetic Perspective. I teach some of the English 2170: Introduction to Film sections, and Chris helms Philosophy 1502: Philosophy, Literature, Film and Comics. One of the integration strategies for “How We Tell Stories” is that our Gen Ed students are required to attend two campus interdisciplinary events in addition to their regular course requirements, and Chris and I decided to organize one such event ourselves.

The centerpiece of our “How We Tell Stories” event was the screening of an hour-long 2007 BBC documentary *In Search of Steve Ditko* (Peter Boyd MacLean, 2007). Ditko, a little known but influential pop culture personality, began his career as a comic book artist in the 1950s and worked with Stan Lee on the earliest adventures of such Marvel Comics superheroes as Spider-Man and Dr. Strange. The documentary also chronicles Ditko’s fascinating later career, particularly his quixotic attempts to write, draw and distribute independent comic books based on the Objectivist philosophies of Ayn Rand.

*In Search of Steve Ditko* posits a couple of controversial questions: Is Ditko the co-creator of Spider-Man? And if so, is he morally and legally entitled to any of the money this character has earned for Marvel Comics? Chris and I debated these questions for about an hour after the movie. Chris argued that scripter Stan Lee was the sole creator, and drew a comparison between Lee and a musical composer to prove his point; even though many hands perform the music, we still rightly credit the composer (and, by analogy, the comic book writer) with coming up with the initial ideas. I disagreed, arguing that business practices at Marvel during the 1960s compelled Ditko to make more of a contribution to the origin of Spider-Man than that of a hired hand.

Our *In Search of Steve Ditko* screening and discussion was held in I.G. Greer Auditorium, and about 80 students were present. Many asked questions and joined in the debate. My students learned to think much more deeply about the concept of authorship (especially in collaborative media like comics and film) and about the roots of today’s superhero blockbuster movies. I really enjoyed the debate with Chris, and I hope other faculty in other themes seize the opportunity for collaborations like this.

**Discussing Traditions and Innovations**  
by Tom Mc Laughlin, English

I am currently teaching two sections of English 2050, Studies in British Literature, which is part of the "Traditions and Innovations" theme in General Education. I recently had very successful discussions in these classes about the words "tradition" and "innovation." I did not want to assume that we all meant the same things by these terms, so I thought it would be useful to discuss them directly. I use a lot of in-class writing in my classes, so I first asked the students to write a brief definition of the word "tradition," which seemed to me to be the more problematic term. In the discussion after this writing, the class collectively produced a very rich definition of the term.

Next I asked them to declare which of the terms they had a more positive emotional response to, and to explain why. The results were about 50/50, and their reactions were interesting to hear. I was surprised how many of them had a positive emotional reaction to "tradition," which they associated with comfort, certainty, and group coherence. The next step was to get the class to list what they saw as the advantages and disadvantages of traditions and the advantages and disadvantages of innovation. We ended up with a blackboard full of provocative responses -- they saw traditions as confining boxes as well as comforting beliefs, and they saw innovation as disconcerting as well as exciting.

The theme of my particular sections of this course focuses on ideas of "creativity" in 19th and 20th century British literature, and this conversation has enriched our discussion of the theme. I think it would be interesting to stage this discussion in other courses in the "Tradition and Innovation" theme, to see how students react to the terms in other disciplinary contexts.
Influences on Wellness
by Marianne Adams, Theatre & Dance

About one month into a Wellness dance course, I have assigned a journal prompt that I found to be fruitful. Students start the semester by completing a family tree that often denotes relatives simply by age, health, death and/or disease. A few weeks later, through class discussions, students begin to examine lifestyle choices as they relate to peer influences. They then complete a Genetics, Lifestyle and Peer Influences on Wellness assignment, which requires discussion outside of class with their peers. Their awareness of wellness factors enlarges as they begin to sift through a few of the layers of wellness components (e.g., genetic factors, lifestyle habits, and peer influences).

Most students really begin their personalized, individual wellness plan at this point, as they compare contradictory nutrition methods, genetic proclivities, perceptions of peer influences, and their own current decision-making habits. This helps them develop greater sophistication in understanding the complexity of wellness factors, such as the need to balance lifestyle choices, the realism needed to make mostly good choices, issues of self acceptance (and empowerment) as related to genetic factors, increased attention to daily dietary choices and an increased awareness of the need for regular stress-relieving exercise.

Research and Documentary Films
by Joe Gonzalez, Interdisciplinary Studies

For years I struggled with an unpleasant truth: My freshmen did not like research. In fact, many hated it. As a result, they wrote their papers grudgingly, each misplaced comma, each uncited source testifying to their lack of enthusiasm. It was as if I had forced eighteen year olds to eat their vegetables, and they, like most children, had repaid my demands with sullen compliance.

Then I discovered documentaries. Thanks to some enterprising, tech-savvy freshmen, and the good people at University Documentary Services, I learned how to teach my students to make arguments in film, having already done the kind of interdisciplinary research I wanted them to do. The result? Students, though still prone to grumbling about libraries and sources, nevertheless worked harder because they got the chance to do something cool -- namely make a film they could show to their classmates, friends, and relatives.

Now my students do research and make films. Their written work is better, and I have found that they learn more by creating arguments in more than one medium. In short, I found a way to get my freshmen to eat their vegetables; I just had to find a way to put dessert on the menu.

Sustainability Coffee House
by Courtney Baines, Sustainable Development

Students taking courses within the General Education “Sustainability and Global Change” theme gathered together in the Whitewater Lounge for a discussion after Vandana Shiva’s lecture “Sustainability and the Global Food Crisis.” In this informal "coffee shop," students engaged in an open discussion about the lecture while munching on local goat cheese from Ripshin Dairy and Heritage Homestead, a variety of North Carolina apples, a coffee cake from Stick Boy Bakery, and Organic Fair Trade coffee from Crossroads. Students were given a note card upon entering the Lounge in which they wrote their name, class, and either a question, comment, like, or dislike. These cards served as a catalyst for discussion and were collected at the end for attendance/participation purposes.

As a co-facilitator of this event, I believe it was beneficial that students from five (or more) different courses were able to mingle and discuss the lecture outside of their normal classroom environment. I enjoyed working with Dr. James Houser who spearheaded this event, provided the food, and provided an alternative perspective to the questions raised. We were both pleased with the turn-out as nearly 40 students attended this post-lecture coffee shop. There were also two more Sustainability and Global Change coffee shops later in the semester, facilitated by Jeff Biggers and Gary Machlis.

Want to share a story about your teaching?
To contribute an article to the General Education News, please contact Paulette Marty, Faculty Coordinator of General Education at martypjw@appstate.edu.