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WCSU Honors Program

What a Wonderful Class

by Amanda Bloom

“The Wunderkammer of Knowledge” (WoK) is an honors course that was offered for the first time this past semester at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury. The course was built around the idea of Wunderkammern, cabinets that housed curious collection in 16th century Europe, as metaphors for learning.

WoK was comprised of 16 students and seven teachers, all from various academic backgrounds. Each professor presented his or her own Wunderkammer in the first several weeks of the class and assigned reading in support of their presentations.

The presentations of both students and faculty were a clear four-century departure from the first Wunderkammern – most of the presentations were conveyed with PowerPoints and stocked with concepts and intangibles that could never be placed in a cabinet or even a room. Yet once each Wunderkammer item was introduced to the class, the idea would resurface to be toyed with again and again as though it had its own place of honor on a shelf somewhere.

Once the professors’ presentations were cycled through, the class visited the Truman Warner collection of various objects, documents and news clippings in Western’s Haas library to “produce knowledge”, according to the WoK syllabus. In November, the class took a trip to New York City to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and to see a performance of the French opera, Carmen.

The students were instructed to find the works of art that filled them with the most wonder and then to take a photograph of the piece. The photographs were displayed and discussed the following week, and together the class examined elements of emotion, opposition and creative tension within the works.

Then came time for the students to present their own Wunderkammern. Music, language, the ocean, pets, sex, religion and the stars could be found in the students’ various cabinets. Some presentations solely implemented the PowerPoint; others included recorded or live music, posters or items from the students’ own personal collections.

WoK was a course that attempted to dismiss all the traditional frameworks of the modern-day classroom, which is not necessarily easy for students or teachers after decades of systematic education. There seemed to be a bit of tension among the faculty about leaving all structure behind, and they were still unsure how to go about giving final grades after the last class. But As, Bs and Cs aside, its safe to say the class was a success.

“The whole purpose was to get you to think on your toes and formulate your own thoughts based entirely on your own experiences and your own ideas rather than regurgitating facts that you might have learned,” said senior WoK student Olivia Schulze. “Because you couldn’t always plan for one of our classes, you never knew where a discussion was going to go, you really had to be confident and be ready to express your thoughts – and it was okay if it wasn’t well-rounded or completely comprehensive[...] it was really experimental. I think that has a tremendous amount of value. I think you learn a lot more that way.”

The WoK students probably can’t tell you the rote facts of the Wunderkammer within European history, but they are equipped with the mental, emotional and perhaps spiritual tools that will help them in creating passion and wonder within their academic and professional lives.



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