FWI Project Report

Name: Philippa Carter (teaching professor) & Robert Revington (undergraduate research assistant)
Faculty/Area: Social Sciences/Religious Studies
Project title: Explorations in Learning and Mentoring

Soc. Sci. 2LP3, “Explorations in Learning and Mentoring,” was a three-unit Level II course offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences in Fall 2013. The original proposal requested funds to offer a course in which the Avenue/Desire2Learn platform would be evaluated in terms of its suitability for McMaster’s Learning Portfolio and to cultivate peer mentors for students entering the Faculty of Social Sciences in AY 2014/15. Since the decision to use the Avenue platform had already been taken at the time the course was offered the focus shifted to using the Learning Portfolio on collaborative projects and on recruiting peer mentors.

Most students were recruited for the course by direct invitation from me. As fall approached the Faculty of Social Sciences advertised the course and 27 students enrolled. Our focus had been on recruiting students in Levels II and III in order that they are available to mentor in AY 2014/15. Twenty students were in Levels II and III and seven students were in Level IV although two of the latter planned to return in AY 2014/15. Twenty of the students were from Social Sciences and the remainder from Humanities (three), Science (three) and Health Sciences (one).

I framed the course as primarily student-driven with minimal facilitation. Students were tasked with introducing their peers to some aspect of the University or the community that they found especially note-worthy or valuable. They also participated in two workshops: one on the use of the LP platform and the other on developing learning goals. The course was scheduled on Tuesday afternoons and most weeks we went on “mini” field trips including tours of the McMaster nuclear research reactor, the Lyons New Media Centre, the William Ready archives, Ronald McDonald house, the McMaster Museum of Art, the Gould Trading Floor, the Centre for Simulation-Based Learning and the David Braley Athletic Centre. We also participated in a story-telling workshop in the School of the Arts and one group brought in Kevin Makins from Eucharist Church to talk to the class.

Students were asked to write brief reflections on at least five of these events organized by their peers and to put together a presentation using the LP presentation tool on the trip their group organized. These presentations were then peer-reviewed by others in the course. Students were graded on short reflections on five of the “field trips,” the group presentation and on their reviews of others’ work.

Overall, the class went well. Students seemed to enjoy exploring parts of the University they had never encountered before and this came through in the reflections and peer reviews. Students were less enthusiastic about Desire2Learn’s LP platform but at least ten of the students expressed interest as serving as peer mentors next year. To date one student has successfully applied for an
SSL position focusing on the LP in the Centre for Student Development and six more have agreed to serve as peer mentors for the LP in Relig. St. 1B06 in AY 2014/15.

When planning this course I was mindful of ensuring that the students who were invited to participate represented diverse academic backgrounds and talents. I believe that the LP can be of most value to students who are dedicated and committed to their studies but not necessarily academic “stars.” I also wanted to ensure that the reflections and projects were not burdensome. Some of the group presentations were especially engaging thereby demonstrating that we can and indeed should go beyond the traditional term paper when evaluating students in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

I enjoyed facilitating the course and we all learned a lot from the workshops and the visits. I think I might have focused a bit more on the actual “mechanics” of putting together a learning portfolio since a handful of students were still having trouble with the platform at the end of the term. I also think some challenges remain in terms of integrating the LP with students’ broader academic and learning goals. We did not address this during the course mainly because of time restraints and my own hesitation about imposing a specific approach to the LP.

Robert Revington, an undergraduate student and a co-applicant for project funds, served as an undergraduate research assistant for the course and his help was invaluable. We have submitted a proposal to the annual STLHE conference to be held at Queen’s University in June and hope to participate in a pedagogical “speed-dating” session based on our experience with Soc. Sci. 2LP3. I hope to cultivate new mentors from amongst the students enrolled in Relig. St. 1B06 next year for the students beginning in Social Sciences in AY 2015/16.