Syllabus Design for Place-Based Gen-Ed Courses

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Inhabiting the Midwest

Writing Rural Spaces & Communities

Tourism Guides “Greetings from Florida”

“Greetings from Florida” studies Florida’s Beri Beri and culture from the perspective that the state’s syllabi at environments has an out of influence on life in the Sunshine State and the narratives we tell about it. In Land of Sunshine, Sarah Newbold’s Grim Morrow argues that because it is “absurdly endowed with equatorial beaches, emerald water, and eternal sunshine, Florida converted nature into stream vacations. As fuming and underutilized as it was at first, beach and untamed, tourist-accursed fun and profit in the era when consumption was replacing production as a national template” (18). I see Morrow’s cultural history in supplement course readings, which include several personal essays by Florida written as well as two novels, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’s The Yearling (1938), a tale of boyhood in the Florida Scrub, and Karen Russell’s Swamplandia (2011), about a family who runs a tourist trap gator farm in the Everglades.

The front page of the syllabus reflects course themes in three ways. First, the layout and bright colors mimic the the brochure that might find on a display board next to a motel check-in desk. The second, the vintage postcard in the header refers to the history of tourism in Florida and at the same time the layout has used its image as a tropical paradise.

The first quotation by John Muir underscores the state’s reputation as a dreamland, through the later dreams referenced by Carl Hiaasen seem to have become nightmares. The ways Muir and Hiaasen describe the image of Florida points to the third way this first page of the syllabus communicates the central work of the course: the header “What People Say About Florida” and the question “What Will You Say?” turns from course readings to the student’s own experience, who has been the type of traveling and personalized reflection that students will complete for this course.

Regionalism in Syllabus Design

Infrastructure Undergirds “Inhabiting the Midwest”

The first page of “Inhabiting the Midwest” has too much content than “Greetings from Florida,” as I hope to communicate more fully through the main image, a 1938 John Vachon photograph of grain elevators along the railroad tracks in Sisseton, South Dakota. As it shows a postcard that the students might find on a display stand next to the motel check-in desk the vintage postcard is a bridge to the tourist experience that plays a role in the visual space of the Midwest and (2) the course content that places an emphasis on the interconnected systems and the others linked into the infrastructural systems represented in this photo by the railroad and grain elevators. Another key difference between these syllabi is that this particular image of the Midwest is under every part of the page—a design decision that I would repeat throughout the document as much is possible. Furthermore, to accentuate how the photo served as a visual lead-in, I drew it from Wright Morris’s iconic photograph that the inhabitants (1940), which also ends one of the key challenges of representing rural Midwestern life. “Everywhere you look, there is man leaving something –or something that man left.” Everywhere you look, you can see that nobody is leaving anything. Houses adhere to the spaces and structures of rural life, as well as to the human-made built and landforms. This text is a combination of story, poetry, diaries, photographs, and documents that encourage students to answer the course’s central questions, which emerge from the darker portions of the cover image. These questions mirror student work in the course. How do they look at the ways of the Midwest within all represent place, particularly looking at local design’s ties to rural Midwestern writers as well as the environmental and social-cultural narratives. The cover image features the landscape, the infrastructure, and the human-made Midwestern space.

Student-Centered Design

Design-oriented revisions cannot solve all accessibility issues in a course, but through them I hope to achieve an accessible document. Along these lines, Thomas Titon and Kristen Bluhm educate us in their “Collaborative Universal Design for Learning” that “is the process of designing a course to meet the needs of all students, including those who have learning disabilities, those with visual, hearing, and motor impairments, and those who have attention issues. It involves designing a course that provides accommodations to all students, so that no one is left behind. It is important to design courses that are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. In the future, design courses that are accessible to all students.”