

City as Text

When my colleagues in the National Collegiate Honors Council and I began to work on a very new venture, something we called “Honors Semesters”, we initiated a search for mechanisms to take students out into the streets to expand their sense of resources for research, and to help them familiarize themselves with the radically unfamiliar of a place new to almost all of them enrolled in the Semester. Our work began in 1973; we launched our project in 1976, and called it The Washington Bicentennial Semester. Our efforts to invent an integrative seminar for that specific event was fairly traditional: a term-long discussion featuring material from all courses offered in the Semester, and at times featuring invited specialists from the Washington area.

Though we were pleased with the results of WBS, we sought refinement of that particular segment of the whole. What we now call City as Text™ refers to structured explorations that serve as field laboratories for the integrative seminar. I designed them for use in NCHC Honors Semesters to incorporate key aspects of Semesters: these are site specific, thematic course clusters that engage students in primary research and field inquiry for all disciplines represented by the courses themselves. Since the pilot use of the concept in New York City (1978), and full implementation in New York City (1981), City as Text™ has been a feature of NCHC programming in multiple venues, and NCHC now holds the Trademark for the term.

A short version of these explorations has been a formal session in NCHC’s annual conference since 1984, and often appears on programs of regional honors conferences as well. Adaptations for use in courses and programs on campus, and in international study projects, are increasingly reported at honors meetings. CAT methodology has been featured in professional development Faculty Institutes since 1978. These Institutes amount to a “short course” on the objectives, architecture and ramifications of the uses of field experience for analysis and self-reflection. Adaptations of CAT to orientation, to high school bridge programs, to composition courses, to faculty development workshops, have proliferated.

The discipline of careful observation and detailed recording of direct, unmediated experience is one essential element of this approach. Another is the recursive nature of the exercise, which illuminates the role that viewpoint plays in determining the nature of experience itself, and shapes one’s sense of meaning. Students learn to see themselves as observers, to question not only what they see but how they see it, and come to appreciate their own ways of understanding, in an enterprise that resonates with discovery.

As a tool to broaden perspective and deepen engagement, CAT has proven to be a powerful instrument. For more information, check articles in JNCHC and elsewhere, and see the monographs PLACE AS TEXT (2000) and SHATTER THE GLASSY STARE (2008), both published by NCHC.

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