In every field, faculty members discover difficulties in teaching undergraduates to write papers that reveal the thinking processes of disciplinary experts. Recognizing that learning to write a traditional “research paper” in a first year composition course does not transfer readily across academic fields, scholars at Seattle University agreed that the responsibility for teaching disciplinary writing and research rests with faculty. John Bean, alongside a group of faculty drawn from throughout the curriculum, identified and investigated the kinds of writing and research projects that would demonstrate seniors’ ability to do the intellectual work of the discipline (what they call “expert insider prose”). In each case, these projects involved coalitions of disciplinary faculty, librarians, and writing specialists.

In this presentation John Bean will showcase work from economics, chemistry, psychology, and English to discuss the Writing in the Majors project, funded by the Teagle Foundation. Working collaboratively, faculty used Decoding the Disciplines strategies to identify the bottlenecks that prevent students from thinking like disciplinary insiders: misconceptions or novice ways of seeing or thinking that obstructed students from understanding disciplinary genres, posing insightful problems, conducting meaning-making research, writing literature reviews, and using evidence effectively to make arguments.

Disciplinary faculty members then used the backward design method to rethink the curriculum, focusing on the vertical sequencing of scaffolding assignments that would teach the skills needed for undergraduate research. In every discipline the researchers discovered varied and complex problems in teaching information fluency, particularly difficulty in teaching students to find sources effectively, to read them rhetorically, and to use them purposefully within a disciplinary argument. Bean will show how the pedagogical practices inspired by the Teagle project are now being sustained by departmental assessment projects and are leading to documentable improvements in students’ ability to write expert insider prose.

John C. Bean is a professor of English at Seattle University, where he is Consulting Professor of Writing and Assessment. He received an undergraduate degree from Stanford (1965) and a Ph.D. from the University of Washington (1972). He is the author of Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom, (Jossey-Bass, 1996; 2nd ed. 2011), which has been translated into both Dutch and Chinese. He is also the co-author of three widely-used composition textbooks—The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, Reading Rhetorically, and Writing Arguments. His current research and writing have focused on the development of institutional assessment strategies that promote productive faculty conversations about teaching and learning. He is particularly interested in pedagogical strategies for promoting transfer of learning and for accelerating students’ growth in critical inquiry and argument. In 2010 his article Messy Problems and Lay Audiences: Teaching Critical Thinking within the Finance Curriculum (co-authored with colleagues from finance and economics) won the 2009 McGraw-Hill – Magna Publications Award for the year’s best “scholarly work on teaching and learning.”

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