Virginie Greene, Professor of Romance Languages and Literature, transfers the theme of her Freshman Seminar course, The Grail Quest of Marcel Proust, to the classroom by holding every class session in a different location around the Harvard campus or in the Boston area. “Teaching a freshman seminar allows you to do something a little rash and provoke students. A knight going on a quest never stays in the same spot twice.” Whether they are exploring Sanders Hall, the Harvard Art Museum, or the Boston Public Library, class time is split between exploring the space and discussing the week’s reading.

**The benefits:** By physically inhabiting new and different spaces, students better understand the nature and contours of quest and search. “They experience moving about in space and time more concretely.” Often, Greene finds that visiting these spaces evokes key memories for students and because the two main texts (Chrétien de Troyes' The Tale of the Grail and excerpts of Proust's In Search of Lost Time) are about coming of age, these adventures also help them to reflect on and navigate their first year at Harvard. Additionally, this unique learning opportunity gives students the chance to bond and form community.

**The challenges:** With no assigned room location for this course, an abundance of
planning and logistical support is needed to ensure a place for each session. Greene hires a teaching assistant to find, reserve, and communicate about each of the locations to the class. The fluidity of locations requires a small class, so this approach works well for freshman seminars, which are limited to 12 students. A final challenge is making enough room for in-depth close readings, given the split uses of class time.

Takeaways and best practices:

- **Start local, then go further.** Greene begins the quest on the Harvard campus to give the incoming students an opportunity to explore their new home. “There are a lot of interesting places at Harvard to bring students. Some they might not venture to on their own as a freshman.” Later on, students are better equipped to explore off-campus places in Boston, like the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

- **Let the space and students shape what you do in class.** To explore how different places reveal varied dimensions of quest and adventure, Greene shapes the session’s focus and discussion in response to what the space presents. Additionally, students play a major role in deciding what they want to discuss in class. “I was surprised when the students connected readings in new ways, highlighting socioeconomic themes, just from their experience riding the subway downtown.”

- **Keep the dialogue going.** At the end of each new adventure, students are required to reflect on their experiences in a physical scrapbook that Greene provides at the start of the semester. Then they scan the pages and share them on the course Canvas page, followed by commenting on each other’s reflections. This practice allows students to continue the conversation about the week’s learnings even after they leave the space.

**Bottom line:** Perpetual shifts in location create a strong classroom community where students learn to engage and connect with their new campus home, with one another, and with dense and provocative texts.

**More featured faculty**

**What the research shows**

This thesis reviews the research pool of Critical Pedagogy and Place-based
Education and demonstrates why it is important to bridge the two methods together to take the fullest offering of a place, its environmental, social, political, and economic components.

Related resources and opportunities

ABLConnet offers how-to-guides and assignments for faculty based on activity types, including field trips.

Instructors can create discussions in their Canvas course to provide a forum for students to reflect on topics raised in class. Discussions allow students to link other materials like images to their discussion submissions.

The Academic Technology Group at FAS is currently piloting an authoring tool called Scalar which enables users to assemble media from multiple sources and juxtapose them with their own writing in a variety of ways, with minimal technical expertise required.

Virtual Reality Pedagogical Initiatives across Harvard (supported by a HILT Spark Grant) is hosting a series of discussions about VR in pedagogy.

Edublogs offers additional readings and resources about place-based education.

More university-wide resources

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How do you engage students in content and community?

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