

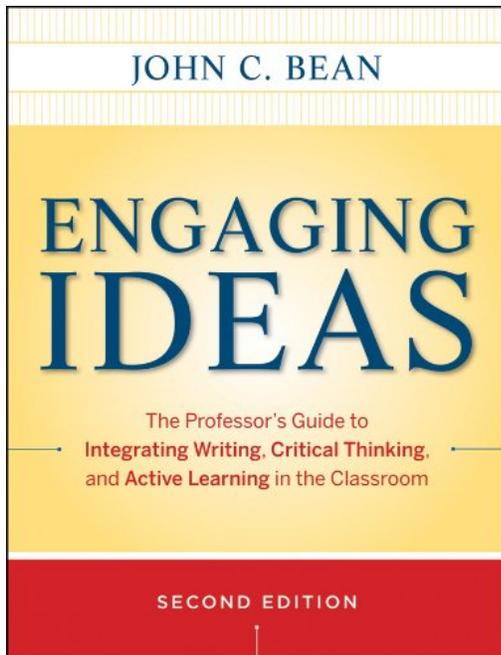
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## A Conversation with John Bean

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In February, courtesy of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Program (SOTL), IU Bloomington was fortunate to host John Bean, an English professor from Seattle University, and author of *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. In addition to the talk he gave for interested faculty, Professor Bean engaged in a conversation with several of the library faculty to further explore the topics of his research. The following are highlights from this conversation.



**“You hear about writing across the curriculum, but you don’t hear much about reading across the curriculum.”**

The conversation began by addressing the lack of attention paid to rhetorical reading skills in education today. Writing across the curriculum has become a hot movement across the country, with greater attention being paid in a variety of academic departments to the cultivation of writing skills and the acknowledgement that different skills are needed for writing in different areas. Professor Bean noted that not as much attention is paid to reading across the curriculum, addressing the different skills that are needed to parse texts in different disciplines. Certainly faculty in these departments think rhetorically when they read, but they take for granted that this is a skill developed as their own studies progressed; students do not inherently possess the same skills. This skill could be taught by the faculty, but Professor Bean suggests it could also be a pathway for

librarians to embed themselves in the curricula.

**“I wish librarians could be more like writing consultants.”**

Much of the conversation centered on the relationship between libraries and writing centers. Rather than being an affront to the work of reference librarians, this comment from Professor Bean was in conjunction with a discussion of how the relationship that writing centers have with students differs from that of the reference desk. Typically at writing centers, students bring their assignments, in varying stages of the writing process, and engage in an interactive consultation with the writing center staff. Contrast this with reference desk interactions, where often the student is at the beginning of the assignment, fails to bring the assignment with him or her, and expects the librarian to give the answers, rather than engage in an interactive research consultation. A librarian in attendance at this conversation agreed, suggesting that we present ourselves differently than do writing center staff, so students have different expectations when they

come to us. Professor Bean suggests that we see how writing center staff are trained and apply that to our own reference rituals.

**“Bad library practice stems from a bad assignment.”**

At this point the conversation began to shift to the construction of assignments in the first place, a focus of Professor Bean’s work. Often research assignments will state something like this: the student must include three peer-reviewed journal articles, two articles from trade publications, and four monographs. Thus the student comes to the reference desk saying, “I need three peer-reviewed journal articles,” and expects the librarian to help him or her retrieve them. Professor Bean suggests the assignment would be better crafted if the student was made to understand why you might want to use peer-reviewed journal articles over non-peer-reviewed, for example. This sparked a lot of conversation, with one attendee proposing that we rethink how we as librarians instruct students on the research process, focusing less on tools and how to use them and more on the ideas that these tools contain – what makes an article in a peer-reviewed journal different from that of a trade publication? Another participant suggested that we emphasize that using information from a resource is not just about gathering facts, but about students entering the professional conversation.

The question then became: how do librarians engage with faculty to improve upon poorly constructed assignments? Professors might take offense to being told how to improve their assignments, after all, so it is a fine line that we walk. In the end we determined that it comes down to your approach: Don’t tell the professor how to completely overhaul his or her class, but instead suggest to the professor services you can provide that would help him or her return better assignments from the students.

**“It’s getting faculty to see a backward design for curricula.”**

We next discussed approaches for reforming assignments. One attendee suggested having the professor “decode” the assignment, essentially turning the assignment around to the professor to see if he or she would know how to approach it. Brian Winterman from SOTL noted a similar approach that he takes, asking professors to be the model by showing students what to do with information in a research project, thereby demonstrating for students how the research process should be tackled in that course. Professor Bean further described the process used at Seattle University; he recommends that departments there arrange their assignments like scaffolding, starting with basic, introductory assignments that then build toward more sophisticated assignments as students’ research and writing skills grow. This can be done both within a course and within a department, with more basic assignments and expectations in beginner courses and more sophisticated expectations by the student’s senior year. Professor Bean suggests reverse engineering the course, having the professor lay out the final, major project first and then work backwards to construct the other assignments so that they build to the point that the students will have acquired the skills necessary to tackle the final assignment.

The conversation shifted to a discussion of accreditation agencies and the newer focus on measured learning outcomes in higher education. Professor Bean suggested that this falls squarely into the reverse-engineered, scaffolding focus for course and curricula design. If each department or school has to come up with a set of measurable learning outcomes for its majors, this naturally becomes a conversation about scaffolding, designing courses in a major that will track the development of students’ knowledge and skills in a discipline. How do librarians fit into this planning? By adding to this conversation suggestions of how information literacy requirements fit into this model of curriculum construction. There has been much push-back against the

requirement of measurable learning outcomes, with the concern that it just fuels busy work for students and faculty. Attendees at this event from SOTL and CITL (the Center for Innovative Teaching and Development) emphasized that we need to steer this curriculum reformation away from busy work and toward meaningful learning experiences. Professor Bean suggested that at IUB, we already have several entities in place to help fuel this conversation and curricular transformation, speaking specifically of SOTL and CITL.

**“Students are meant to be meaning makers.”** (not just conveyors of facts)

Time and time again, the conversation of curricular reform comes back to the issue that students do not understand the research process. The discussion with Professor Bean ended with everyone agreeing that something must be done – some steps taken – to address this issue. Is it assisted assignment reform? Is it a partnership between libraries and writing centers? Is it an increase in librarian-led research instruction? Is it a reformation of reference desk duties? In all honesty, it’s probably a combination of these, built incrementally into the changing face of higher education. If nothing else, it is a conversation that must continue, with a realization of the interconnectedness of all departments of the modern university. Certainly the conversation Professor Bean began with IUB librarians and faculty will continue, hopefully fueling new partnerships to improve student research skills.

Interested in reading Professor Bean’s book? The latest edition is available in hard copy at [IUPUC and IUPUI](#), and as an e-book at [IUB](#).