Developing & Supporting Non-Traditional Assignment Design in General Education Courses

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What we hope to achieve this morning . . .

- Develop assignments/assessments that measure what we truly care about

- Explore productive ways to support student learning

One important note:

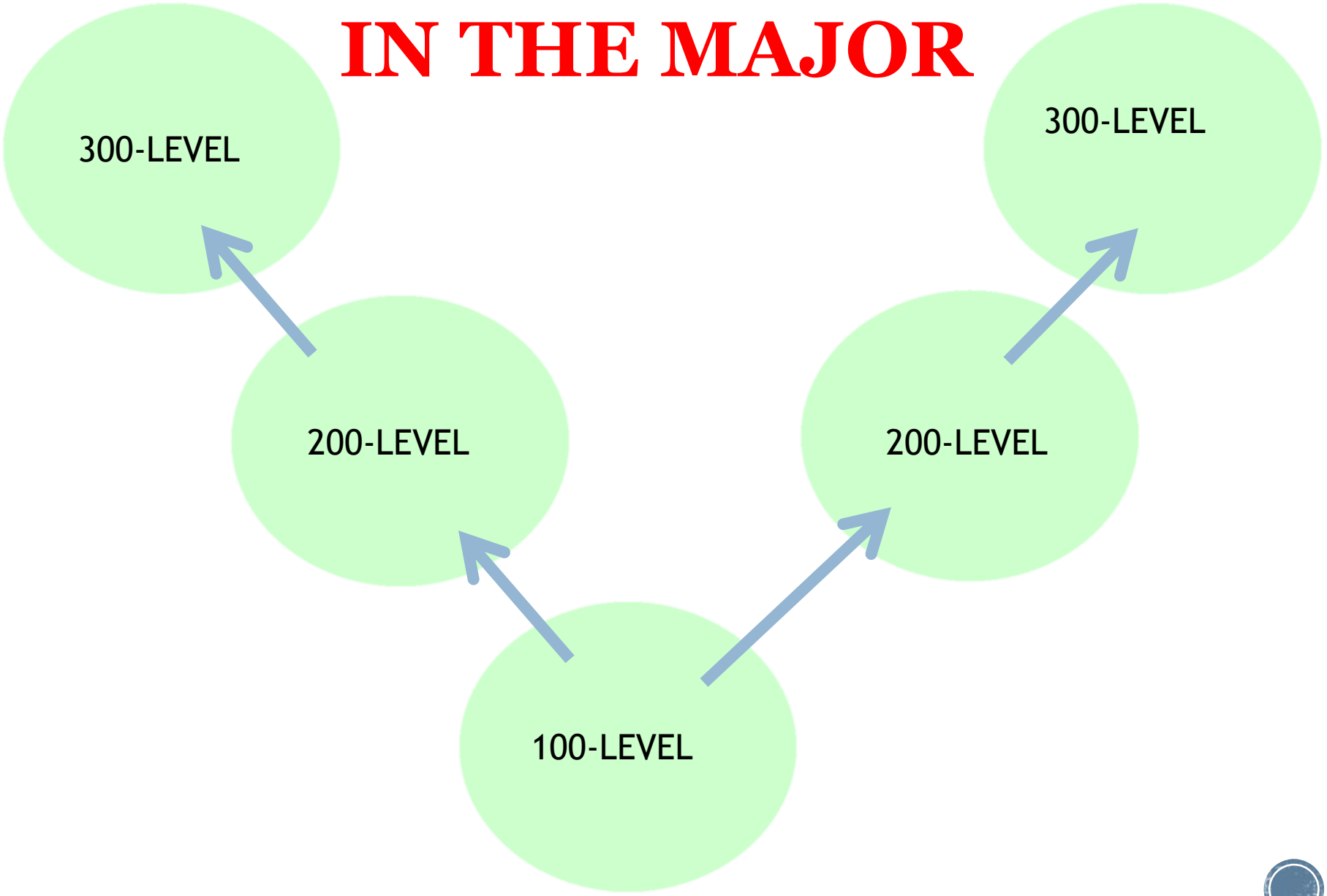
I will need your guidance in determining what situations/ideas translate from the context of United States learners to Hong Kong Learners.

Please feel free to speak up if you have an idea or question.

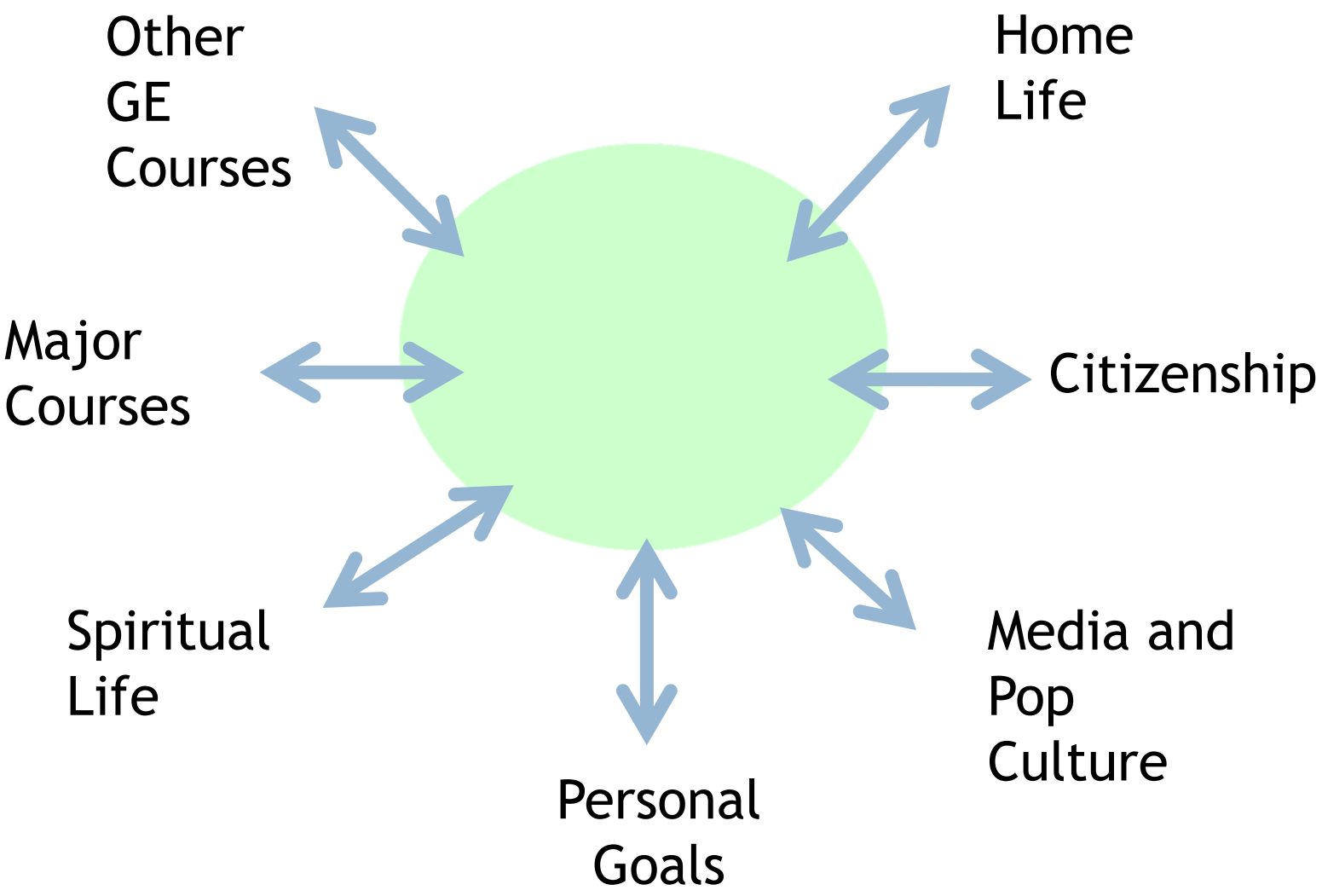
Beyond that . . .

- Engage
- Experiment
- And remember: no contract

IN THE MAJOR



In General Education



This distinction between GE and non-GE courses is important to remember, because it opens up a lot of different approaches relative to *audience* and *purpose*.

Exploring Gen Ed-Appropriate Assignments

Part I

Before we begin . . .

- Please choose a course (GE, LSFY, etc) that you've taught or would like to teach that involves at least one major assignment/assessment

- Write down the title/topic of the course

Defining "Traditional" University Assignments

- Implicit audience is the professor
- Written in formal academic language
- Generally intended to communicate/assess content knowledge
- Often "generic"—that is, not course/curriculum/institution specific

While there's nothing intrinsically wrong with these approaches, they don't necessarily guarantee that we get the best work from our students—or indeed, their best thinking . . .

Case Study:
The "Traditional" Research Paper

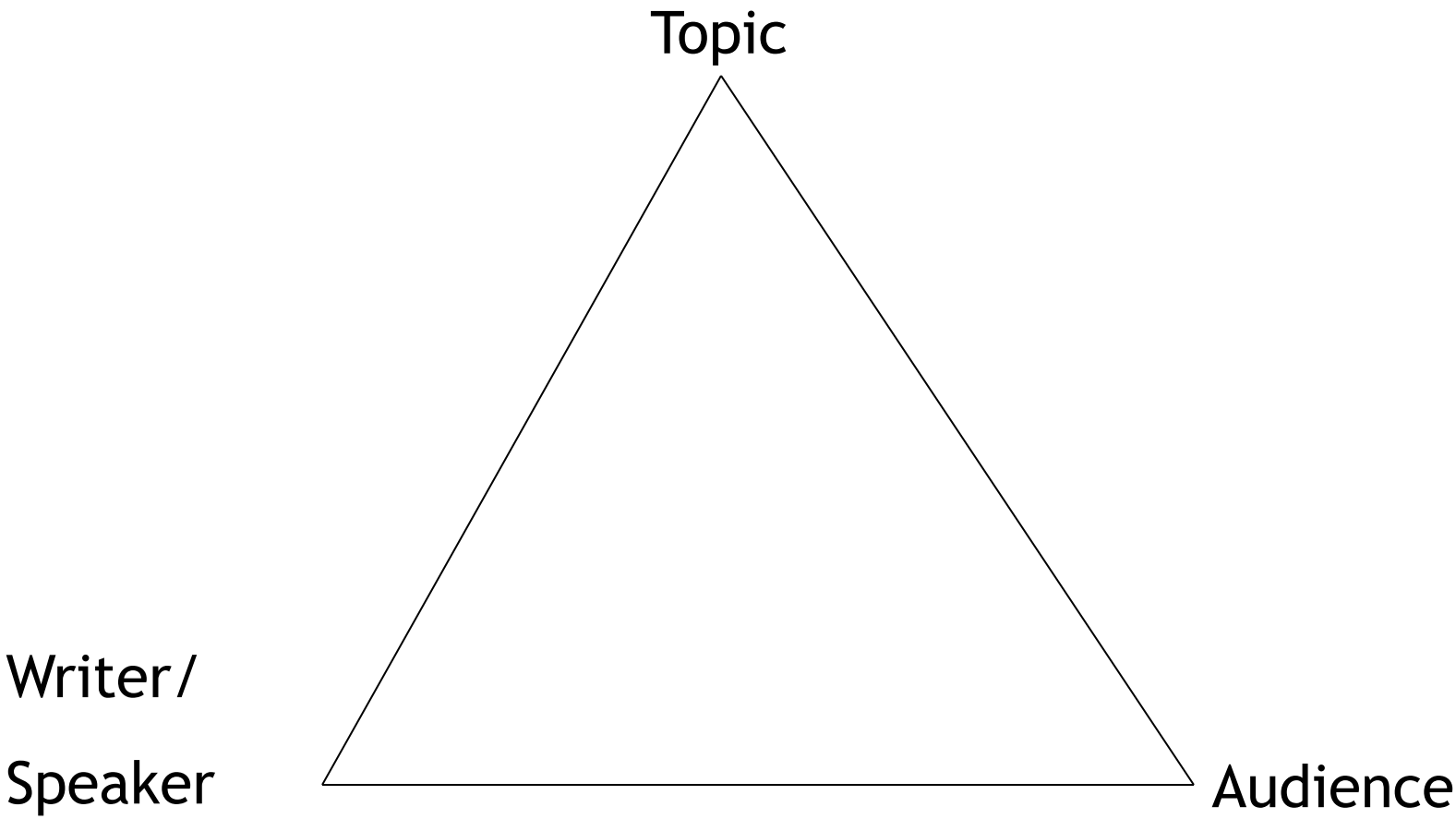
- Choose a topic in the course that interests you
- Research at least 3, 5,10 scholarly sources
- Add your ideas to the conversation

Such an approach has some value, particularly for advanced students. But what might some issues be?

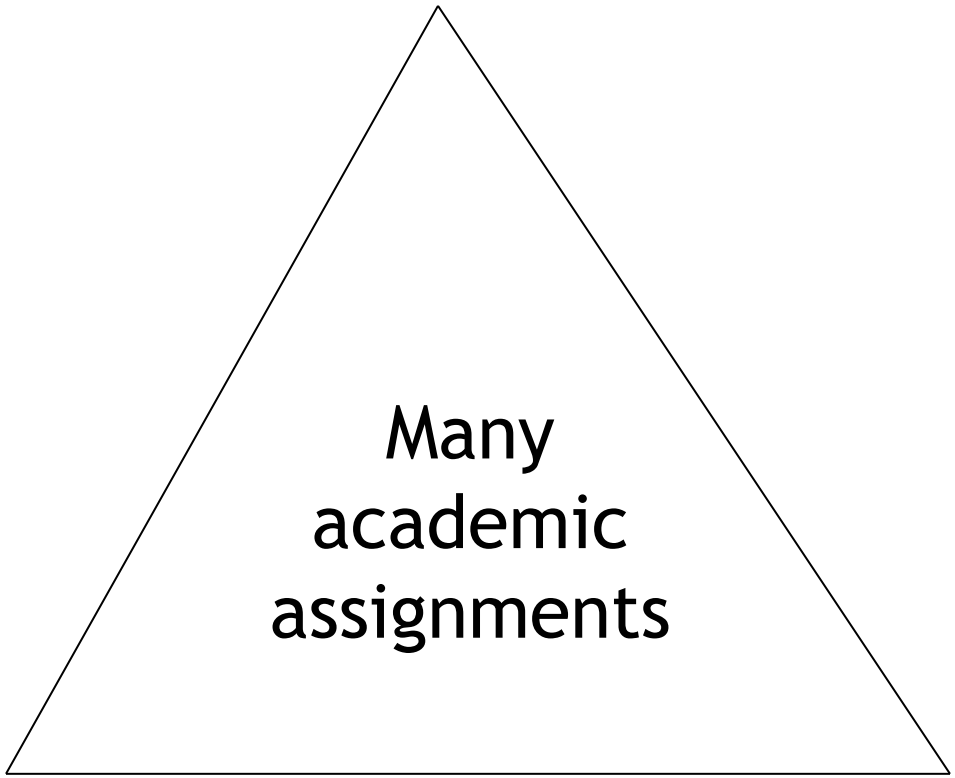
- Might not fit goals of the GE programme—does it teach beyond the major?
- Unless research methods are a component of the course, takes time away from other goals. (So, good for LSFY 103, but . . .)
- Easy to plagiarize
- Might lead to a “data dump”
- Does not necessarily require higher order skills
- Might not prepare students for “real world” forms of writing.

Further, this traditional approach can place students at a rhetorical disadvantage that makes it difficult for us to accurately gauge their learning and skills . . .

Consider . . .

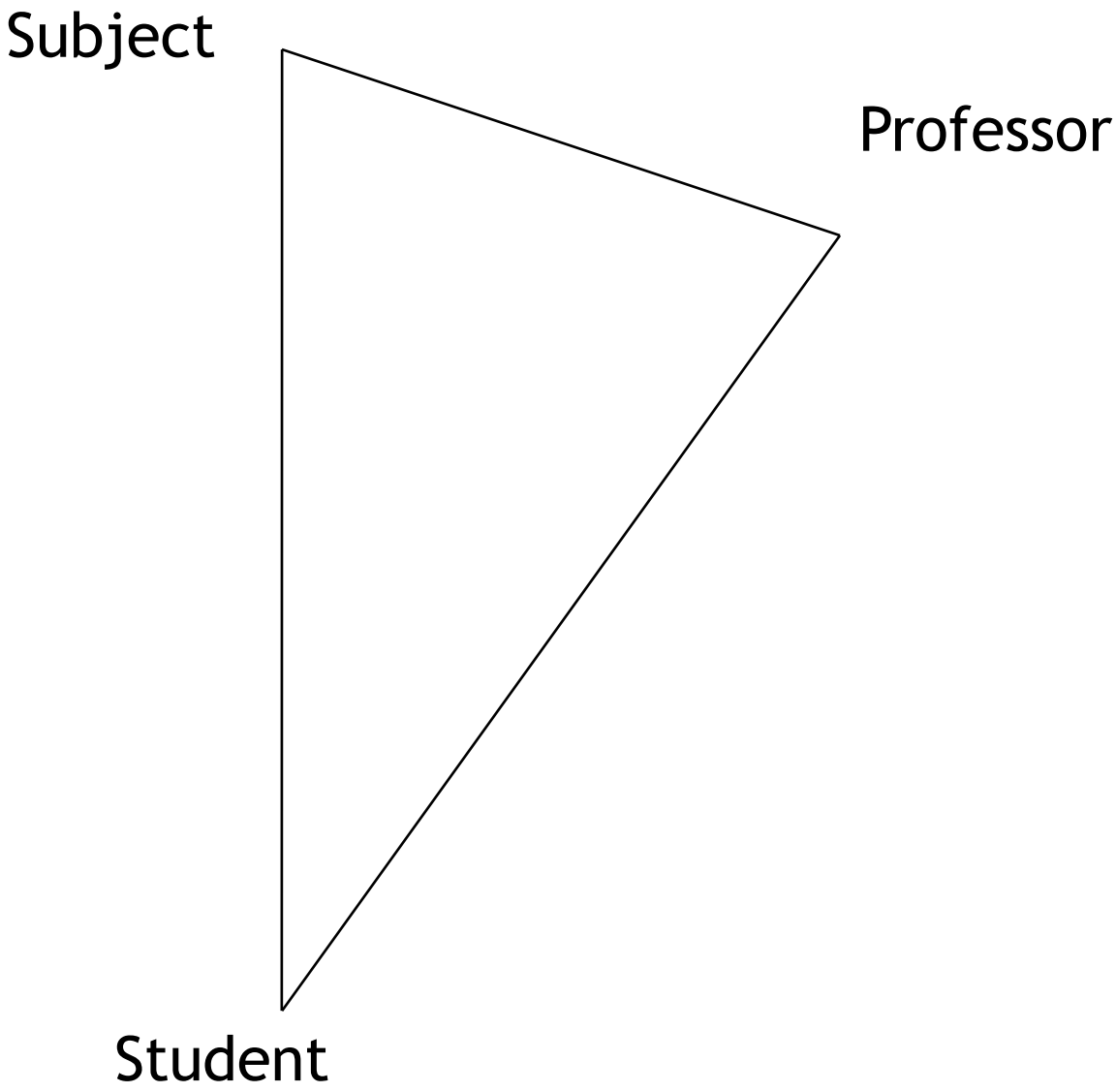

Topic
Writer/
Speaker
Audience

A topic discussed by experts in the field



A student with limited expertise

A professor with unlimited expertise (and a grade book)


Subject
Professor
Student

Danielewicz and Jack (UNC-Chapel Hill)

- Insider to Insider—written to someone inside the field
- Insider to Non-Specialist—written to a highly educated professional, but not within the field
- Insider to Public—written to a more general audience with varying levels of knowledge and education

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Insider to Non-Specialist

A General-Ed course in Marine Biology:

You are on an environmental policy board looking at the issue of land reclamation in Victoria Harbor. Your job is to make a recommendation with regard to the impact on marine life. What potential hazards do you see? How might you explain those hazards in a carefully researched way?

Insider to Non-Specialist

A General-Ed Course in Literature:

The business department is revising its major. Provide a rationale for the inclusion of a literature course in this curriculum, citing and carefully analyzing three works we've discussed in this class.

Insider to Non-Specialist

A Gen-Ed Course in Nutrition:

The government of Hong Kong is developing a list of recommendations regarding the lifestyles of primary-school age children. Develop an appropriate menu for breakfast, providing a carefully researched rationale that takes into consideration . . .

Please note:

- In each of these cases, the content you are asking students to work with does not change. What changes is *what you ask students to* do *with that content, for whom, and to what end.*

- That said, regardless of the roles you assign, students should be expected to discuss the course content at an appropriately high level. **And they must be alerted to this fact.**

Exploring Alternatives:

1. Consider the course topic you wrote down earlier
2. Brainstorm a list of non-specialist audiences appropriate for/interested in this topic
3. Discuss

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Insider to General Public

A General-Ed Course in Psychology:

Your roommate is dating someone who was emotionally abused as a child. Based on our reading from Chapters 10 and 11, give your roommate advice: should he/she simply quit the relationship immediately? If so, why? If not, what might he/she do to make this relationship work?

Insider to General Public

A Gen-Ed course in Biology:

Create an informational pamphlet on an emerging infectious disease, written for local parents. Include causative agent and vector, threat to local population, and possible measures to reduce risk.

Insider to General Public

A Gen-Ed course in Geology:

Data sets from a small town in western China seem to indicate the presence of several valuable mineral deposits. As the regional representative for your company, your job is to explain this data set to town residents, discussing the possible financial benefits to them, as well as the environmental consequences, if any, should these resources be mined.

Exploring Alternatives:

1. Go back to your topic

2. Brainstorm a list of *general* audiences appropriate for/interested in this topic.

And what about. . . ?

- Oral Presentations
  - Possible audiences?
  - Possible purposes?
- Posters
  - Possible audiences?
  - Possible purposes?
- Quantitative Projects
  - Possible audiences?
  - Possible purposes?
- Exam Questions
  - Possible audiences?
  - Possible purposes?

Oral Presentation

A General-Ed course in Sociology and Gender:

You are giving a talk to a room full of twelve-year-old boys about male gender roles. Explain a variety of roles, being sure to discuss the personal, relationship, and societal implications of each. Then give an explanation for why they might want to choose a model that goes beyond traditional assumptions about masculinity.

Quantitative Reasoning

A Gen-Ed course in Mathematics:

You are writing a book for secondary students who struggle with mathematics. Choose a particular type of mathematical problem: provide a careful explanation of how to do the problem, giving several examples. Then provide several increasingly-challenging practice problems. Provide a rationale for choosing these problems and placing them in the order you did.

Or even:

- Blogs?
- Dramas?
- Graphic novels?
- Web-sites
- Short films?

Video or Radio

A Service-Learning Course:

Create a public service video, radio commentary or podcast based on your social action plan. Gear it toward your chosen audience: other students, the local community, public officials, administrators, etc.

Combination

First Year Seminar on Travel Literature:

- In groups, develop a 3-7 minute YouTube video for students about to study abroad, providing tips for a successful year.
  - The film must demonstrate complexity of thought about international and intercultural experiences and their relation to learning and personal development
  - Must include list of sources

Combination

- Individually, write a carefully researched rationale. This should include:
  - A clear thesis that unifies all of the tips you include in your film
  - An argument for EACH of the tips you included. What research and/or class reading caused you to design this tip?
  - A close and careful analysis of both your in-class and your researched sources
  - A bibliography

Please remember:

- We're NOT doing this to be "creative" or to make the classroom more "fun."
- Rather, we're trying to create assignments that:
  - Force students to engage in authentic thinking
  - Create assignments where the rhetorical challenges don't get in the way of learning and communication
- That in mind, these assignments *should be academically rigorous*.

Now . . .

1. Develop an assignment or two that's appropriate for your course.
2. Clarify the genre, the audience, and the purpose.
3. Share the assignment with a neighbor, offering and receiving feedback and advice.
4. Revise

Supporting Student Learning

Part II

Consider:

- The kinds of complex thinking/tasks we're asking students to do are challenging and counter to many of their educational experiences thus far . . .

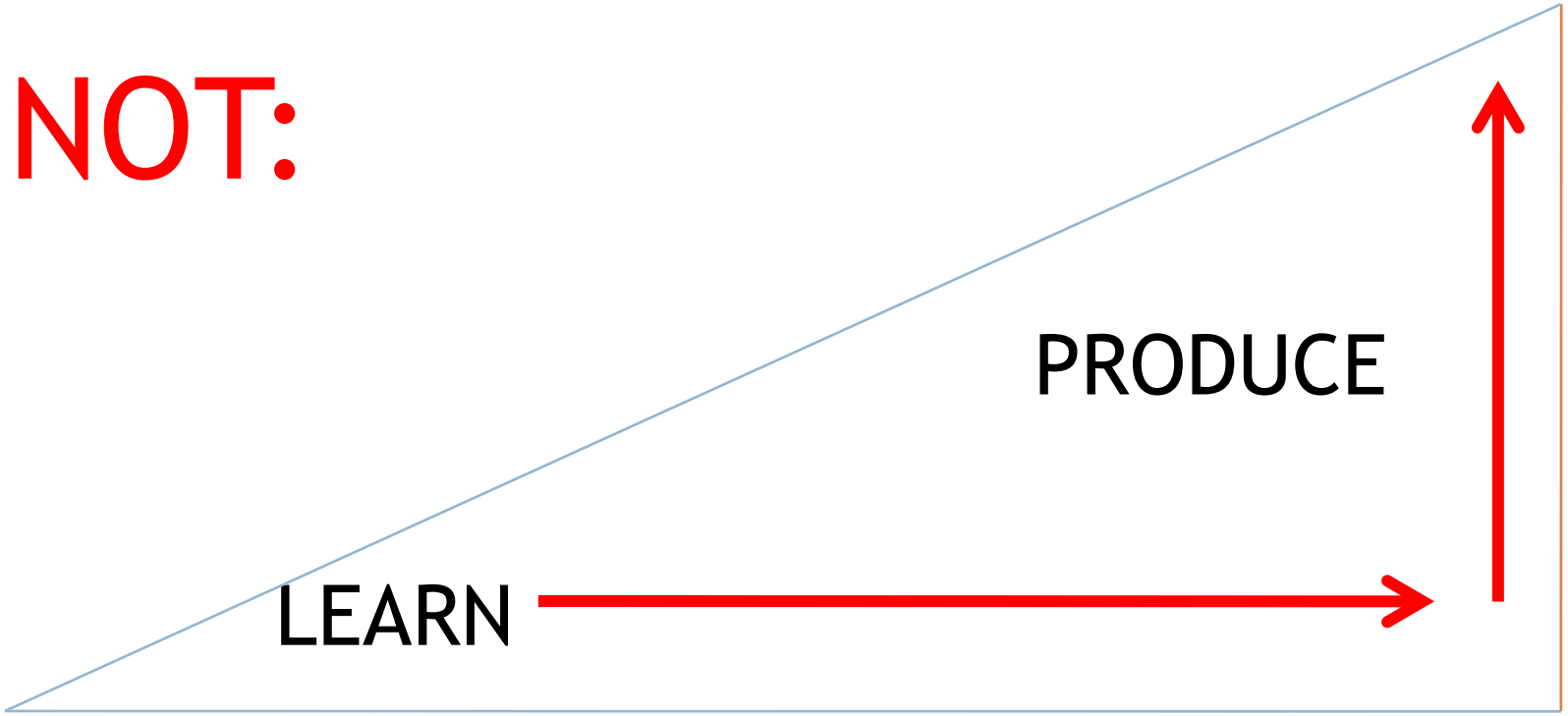
- Further, it's problematic to engage high-stakes grading without first allowing students to practice the kinds of skills and ways of thinking we value.

That in mind, students need to practice complex tasks *throughout* a course . . .

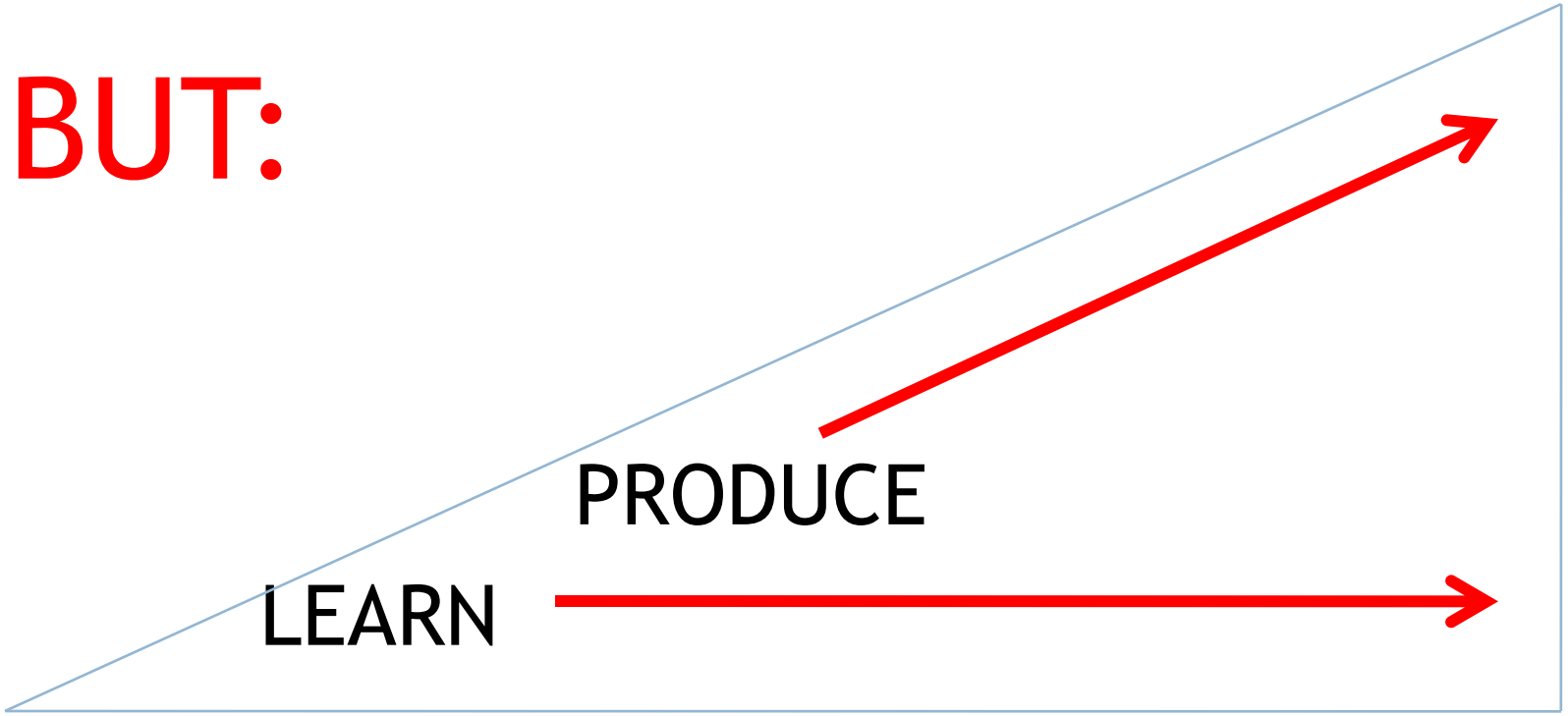
- In increasingly complicated ways
- In ungraded, minimally graded, or proportionally graded contexts

Therefore . . .

NOT:



BUT:



Semester-Long Pedagogies

(Same skill, done repeatedly over the course of the term)

- In-class: Instructor demonstrates a particular application or approach to programming
- Students practice several sample problems
- Students then work collaboratively to solve similar but more complicated problems
- Ungraded

Example: Computer Science

- Early data sets: minimal “noise,” one (or two) clear conclusions
- Middle data sets: moderate “noise,” two or three possible conclusions
- Final data sets: heavy “noise,” multiple possible conclusions that must be constructed by students
- Proportionally Graded

Example: Geo-Science

- Early in the semester, professor leads students in creating “Cliffnotes” or “Sparknotes” versions of texts for secondary students
- As semester progresses, students work in groups to create these analyses
- End of semester assignment: each student creates one individually
- Proportionally Graded

Example: Literature

- 10 lab reports throughout the semester
- The science is graded; the writing is responded to, but ungraded
- At midterm and end of semester, students revise and turn in two lab reports, along with a rationale
- "Ungraded"

Example: Physics

If you please . . .

1. Choose ONE of the assignments you've drafted
2. Consider for a moment: how might students practice the *essential* skill in this assignment in a manner that allows:
   - Repetition?
   - Increasing levels of difficulty?
3. Consider: should this be minimally graded, proportionally graded, or ungraded?
4. Jot some notes.
5. Discuss

Day-to-Day Pedagogies

(Key skill, practiced just once in a particular way)

Day to Day Pedagogies:

- Generating Questions: First individually and then in groups, students develop questions for class discussion Ungraded
- Reading Responses: Students come to class with written responses to a quotation of their choice from the day's reading Minimally graded
- Variations: Students come to class with three typewritten questions regarding the reading; students come to class with three typewritten theses regarding the reading . . . Minimally graded

Day to Day Pedagogies:

Two-sided debates:

Students are broken into two teams, asked to develop arguments—based on the reading, based on the discussion, based on their research—for BOTH sides of a question.

- Sides are then appointed.
- A debate occurs
- There's a post-debate discussion: what would they have said had they been on the other side?

Ungraded

Day to Day Pedagogies:

Monday-Morning Riddles

- A short problem that gets students thinking and engaged—and prepares them for exams and projects and life.
  - Physics: Develop a method for calculating the number of bricks in the buildings on campus
  - Literature: Present two conflicting readings of this poem
  - Statistics: Present two conflicting analyses of this data set

Ungraded

Day to Day Pedagogies:

- Student-generated Study/Exam Questions
- Student-generated Rubrics
- Generating Images*

Ungraded or minimally graded

*This last one particularly works for abstract or complex subjects: Transcription of DNA into RNA, ad the translation of RNA into protein.

- Can lead to mastery
- Will aid recall

Day-to-Day Pedagogies:

Gallery Walk

1. Students are asked to perform a task related to the course material for that day and present it in poster form.
2. Students then browse each other's posters, asking questions, making comments, offering advice
3. The class as a whole then discusses the "findings," clarifying concepts and making revisions

If you please . . .

1. Choose one of the assessments you've drafted
2. Consider for a moment: what day-to-day activities in the classroom might you employ to allow students to practice the *essential* skill required in this assignment?
3. Should this be minimally graded, proportionally graded, or ungraded?
4. Jot some notes.
5. Discuss

A few cautions:

When adding new assignments or pedagogies, remember to:

- Not overwhelm yourself
- Adapt pedagogies to your own style
- Take a few risks
- Revise/adapt after early failures

Thank you for your patience and hard work!

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