

Comprehensive Project

Letters to Students

Vol No. 1-4 - Nov. 1996 - Nov.1999

from Jerry

Introduction:

The Comprehensive Project Letters

Volumes 1-5 - 1996 - 2000

The following sets of letters were written to fifth year Comprehensive Project students at midterm of the Comp Project Prep Class ("Comp Prep") during the years 1996-00. They are being made more widely available, with names removed of course to protect the innocent, so that they can serve as an ongoing source of general advice about project development for today's students. They are also intended as shared teacher's reference, a window into the kind of instructor advice given to students at the University of Oregon, for those with similar classes everywhere.

The Class Bargain

The class bargain went as follows: **You turn in your midterm project development notebook (on time) complete with title, cognitive maps and diagrams, a project abstract and a ten page narrative about the projects key issues and concerns, along with some speculation about what needs doing, and the products of your work, and I'll write you a serious letter of evaluation. You work hard at it and I'll try to do the same.** If you send in the slims, so to speak, it's hard for me to be of much help.

The letters in Volumes 1-5 were usually written quickly over a five day period in November, so that each student would have a quick response and some direct guidance for their last four weeks of working on their project. Digesting some 25-30 of these self-selected and ambitious final projects and writing a useful and personalized page about each in an otherwise busy week continues to be quite a challenge. But I've kept it up now for over ten years because it has proven the most effective way to build richer preparations (programs, briefs, well-developed proposals) for the student's capstone studio experience.

Note to This Year's Students

It is probably better to read the collection backward, starting with Volume No. 5. If you attended last year's presentations, you will recognize at least some of the projects and remember their author/composers. Choose Show Bookmarks from the Windows menu and you will see all the titles of the projects and you can jump directly to the letter on the topic of your interest.

Please keep in mind that these letters reflect on comprehensive projects at the midpoint of their prep term and that you saw them presented after another full term of studio work. Comparing their early with the later should give you a tangible example of how things begin and what project development means. I want to especially underscore the necessity of an early, fast fall start in order to cover the distance to a satisfying and successful project experience later in the winter and spring quarters of the year.

The General Model of the Letters

In general, the letters have the following underlying form which show itself after you have read a few. First there is an acknowledgment of the project and it's potential as I see it. Often I'll try to restate what I've been told in my own words and quote back part of the student's description I found particularly apt. (As the term progresses, I'll challenge the student to be able to say this better than I can. After all it is their project!) Then I'll give the student credit for all the things they've done well in their project narrative to date, knowing that

a lot of effort goes into these projects and that criticism means appreciation as well as constructive feedback. (If they haven't written, mapped or diagramed much, this is hard to do). Then I'll discuss the issues they raise and usually try to raise a few more that seem important and/or missing for a richer "aboutness." I see my task as building an environment for improvement and continued growth through these remarks and want to create the expectation that our conversation has only just begun.

Then if, for example, their project abstract isn't complete or altogether missing, I'll sometimes make one up for them so that they can have a tangible example of what I'd like them to be able to do. There are a number of these "5¢ project descriptions" (which make good project proposal outlines) in Volume 4 and other kinds of examples scattered throughout the letters.

If I know of some useful resources or references, I'll recommend them, and will send them to find more precedent studies and/or knowledgeable people to learn from. I know the tendency is to try to put off necessary research and analysis at this point. It's tempting to just collect a stack of materials and put them in a box for later. Probing and processing only partially conceived projects is very difficult, so it's easy to put off. But designer's grow their understanding through active engagement and can't get very far very fast if they have too shallow an understanding of critical components they will be working with.

That's This Term's Work, I'll Write

After a few obvious successes, which show up vividly in the class' shared sessions, the conviction builds that probing and processing from different points of view and modes of thinking really pays off with real growth. I'll remind them that staying too abstract and not getting down to the how much and the how many and how they intend to demonstrate their interests are hurdles that have to be overcome. "That's this term's work," I'll write. And I'll warn them that if they try to postpone developing a good preliminary working understanding of their project until comp project studio, it will steal desperately needed time from their later integrative and expressive work, usually resulting in very incomplete and shallow planning and design proposals, especially considering the limited time available in a ten week studio.

Then I'll help them worry over other things, such as scope, value and issue emphases, important contexts, design process, organization, project management, important strategies and products, and whatever else seems helpful. The different projects and people require responses tailored to their specific project and personal needs.

Speeding Them On Their Way to Studio Readiness

The idea is to send the projects speeding on their way toward a set of schematics and a well-developed and well-illustrated narrative by term's end. I don't think they're far enough along if they can't be conveyed in accurately scaled and placed schematic drawings. I also don't think they're far enough along if the written material hasn't richly portrayed what the projects are about and the students intentions and expectations.

If they have an actual "client" for their project, and many do, they are encouraged at the end of fall term to send their final project proposal to their "client" for an evaluation. Giving the project proposal a look and a polish one can be proud of is a class expectation. Call that being professional.

An important concept, however, is that the project proposals are expected to continue to develop through next term's integrative work, a contrast to the more usual static concept of a design program.

I hope these letters, taken as a whole, will serve as a useful supplement to the many other materials that attempt to teach this subject.

Jerry Diethelm Sept. 2001.