



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Interdisciplinary Studies Then and Now: Expanding Concepts of Integrative Teaching and Learning

Interdisciplinary studies and integrative thinking have long been a topic of conversation in academia; many researchers have pointed to the advantages of engaging students in interdisciplinary studies and various forms of integrative thinking. In 1994, I wrote the *Innovation Abstracts* titled, "Promoting Interdisciplinary Studies," that described my colleagues' and my efforts to implement integrative learning communities on several campuses at what was then called DeKalb College. What I have learned since authoring my previous *Innovation Abstracts* is that institutions need to support a variety of integrative approaches. Colleges often develop a preferred integrative approach that fits best with their level of resources and overall goals. However, based on my experience and observations, students need to be exposed to multiple forms of integrative thinking to obtain the greatest benefits.

Learning Communities

When I wrote my previous *Innovation Abstracts*, my colleagues and I promoted interdisciplinary studies by using learning communities at DeKalb College. Learning communities are intentionally structured to help students make two connections: Encouraging students to connect ideas from a variety of disciplines, aided by the structure of the courses in which the students are enrolled, and connecting students to their peers through ongoing social interactions made possible by being with the same students for an extended period of time.

There are two commonly used learning community approaches: Linked courses and coordinated studies. The linked course approach involves cohorts of students taking multiple courses during the same semester. Syllabi for the courses may be fully integrated or separate, but linked courses tend to incorporate at least one major integrative assignment among the courses. Learning communities in a coordinated studies model are often designed around a central theme. Instructors from varying disciplines co-teach a course about a specific theme. Students in a coordinated studies learning community explore how diverse disciplines impact the course's theme.

Interdisciplinary Approach

Learning communities, however they are structured, are not the only way to engage students in integrative

thinking. Some institutions have designed stand-alone interdisciplinary courses that fulfill core curriculum requirements. An interdisciplinary course incorporates topics from multiple disciplines into a cohesive narration. The goal of an interdisciplinary course is to help students make connections among ideas and concepts across a variety of disciplines.

Which Integrative Approach?

In the late 1990s, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Higher Education embarked on a project to foster the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through the Pew National Fellowship for Carnegie Scholars. Carnegie Scholars were selected to focus on projects that enrich the conversation about teaching and learning. I was privileged to be among the second group of Carnegie Scholars and, along with two other interdisciplinarians, attempted to explore and generate new data about interdisciplinary learning. At that time, I was intrigued by the extensive claims in academic literature about the positive impact of interdisciplinary work on retention and engagement, and the lack of data about the impact of interdisciplinary teaching on learning.

To complete the research, I used a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods. My research project involved analyzing the performance of hundreds of students over several semesters who were exposed to a variety of integrative approaches. I found improved performance by students who participated in several different integrative approaches. In other words, it was not one particular integrative approach or course structure that generated the results I obtained, but rather it was the overall combination of a variety of integrative approaches, including hands-on, collaborative activities.

Integrative Teaching and Learning

My research has convinced me that educators should move beyond perfecting one integrative approach to incorporating multiple integrative strategies into a course's curriculum, through the integrative teaching and learning approach.

Integrative teaching and learning is when instructors incorporate lessons into their courses that help students make connections between the course discipline and other academic disciplines. Instructors can create these opportunities in a variety of ways in their traditional disciplinary courses that are not designated as interdisciplinary. Instructors can incorporate global perspectives, undergraduate research projects, writing intensive projects, service learning, and other strategies

that promote, by their nature, integrative thinking.

Questions to Consider

When institutions and faculty members are considering integrative approaches, they should review the following questions:

- What populations of students will be recruited for learning communities?
- Are interdisciplinary courses required?
- Is there a particular integrative approach model that is more closely aligned to institutional learning outcomes and strategic goals?
- How can traditional disciplinary courses involve integrative thinking?
- What institutional systems need to be in place to support learning communities, interdisciplinary studies, and other integrative approaches?

To grow learning communities, interdisciplinary studies, and other integrative approaches, institutions need to create support structures for faculty members to design effective learning environments. Faculty members who have exclusively taught one discipline for many years may face challenges when integrating coordinated studies or other approaches into their courses. Learning communities often demand that faculty integrate new material they may have not previously encountered or taught. Institutions must plan to provide robust professional development programs to support faculty members who are a part of developing learning communities, interdisciplinary studies, and the integrative teaching and learning approach in their courses.

Conclusion

While there is academic literature that documents the impact of interdisciplinary work and various other forms of integrative work on retention and learning, there is still no compelling research that suggests that there is one “best approach” to integrative learning. The most impactful approach is to expose students to a variety of integrative models. Therefore, faculty should design their course curriculums to incorporate integrative learning whenever possible.

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