VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 19

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Team-Teaching in an Interdisciplinary Environment

The modern classroom infrequently capitalizes on the inherent connections between disciplines. Faculty meet infrequently and share ideas even less frequently with one another on content or methodology. Yet linking disciplines is relatively easy, as demonstrated by our experiment.

In an effort to provide students with a more integrated view of the human past, we fused World Civilization to 1300 (history) with Western Humanities to 1550 (composition and humanities), team-teaching each component course and offering them in tandem. The combined course met two days a week on the quarter system, for four and one-half hours each day, for a total of 10 credits. An explanatory note was included in the class schedule requiring students who registered for one course to register for the other, with class size limited to 20.

Fusing the curricula of both classes presented several problems. First, we wanted to integrate each course without sacrificing any of the material. Second, we wanted ample time to emphasize the interrelationships between the courses, which was, in essence, a new subject. On the surface, these wishes appeared difficult to realize. We found, however, that the overlapping areas were numerous. Moreover, we found that the expanded time format of the team-taught class would provide ample time to cover the material of both courses, as well as to expand the humanities component to include the literature, art, philosophy, and culture of the Far and Mid-East, and Africa.

A quick look at our texts validated this approach. The humanities text began each chapter with a historical overview; the history text ended each chapter with an overview of culture. The interdisciplinary approach expanded on elements already present in the curriculum, but made the connections more clear. We created one syllabus for the ten-credit block. Selections from the texts of both courses, both primary and secondary, were combined to form one set of assignments for each topic. Students received one grade for the block, which was recorded for both the history and humanities courses.

The length of the class meeting posed a problem. Although students frequently register for back-to-back courses, the block course was taught as a single unit, often taxing attention spans. We varied our activities, using film, slides, discussion, oral presentations, lectures, collaborative learning, and frequent guest lectures to enhance the presentations. The meeting time was divided into one-hour segments, each of which ideally required active participation from students: small group analyses of texts, problem-solving activities, group assignments, or oral presentations. To stimulate interest and provide a change of pace, the class sampled food from many cultures midway through the class period. Students were refreshed, and their appreciation of the particular culture under discussion was greatly enhanced.

Once this problem was addressed, we found that the interdisciplinary approach had several advantages for students. Both instructors were present for the full session, and both were involved in the presentation of material. This sparked critical thought in the students, for the instructors freely disagreed with one another on matters of interpretation. Students benefited from the diverse instructional styles; they received comments from both instructors, and although a single grade was assigned, different perspectives were presented in the instructors' written comments.

The integrated environment of the course allowed the instructors to promote writing across the curriculum. No in-class examinations were administered; rather, several different types of writing assignments were required. These assignments required students to synthesize material from the different disciplines. Students were asked to write formal analytical papers, creative pieces, film and book reviews, and museum explorations. The written assignments often were discussed in class, stimulating critical ability and providing further opportunities for linkages between the disciplines. For example, students were given the option of writing a dialogue between Medea, the heroine of Euripides's play, and Pericles, whose "funeral oration" appears in Thucydides's history of the Peloponnessian wars. Students then shared their creations with the class, and the instructors and other students commented on their particular viewpoints. Presentations stimulated a critical appraisal of Athenian democracy and tied together a literary, historical, social, and political approach to Greek civilization.

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The integrated approach provided an increased opportunity for multicultural investigations. For example, students studied ancient creation mythologies in small groups. Samples from Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Japanese, and Native American mythology were used. This activity clarified the similarities and differences between various cultures and allowed the instructors to expand further on material that typically cannot be covered in normal time frames and with more traditional approaches. The role of women and other social groups can be studied in this way also.

Oral presentations were equally effective. When studying Rome, students were given a variety of topics from which to choose, including art, architecture, daily life, cuisine, military life and warfare, politics, slavery, and Roman emperors. The material was discussed after presentations, which was an effective alternative to the lecture format.

The complete integration of the courses created several exciting possibilities. The class was able to focus on the literature, philosophy, art, music, and history of a single culture in each session, presenting students with an holistic view of a particular era and civilization. Field trips and other experiential activities were possible. For example, during a session on Africa, a group of African drummers performed for the students and explained the role of music in Africa. Following this event, the class visited a local museum and explored the riches of African art. The remainder of the session was spent discussing African geography, language and ethnic groups, and major civilizations of antiquity. Finally, a guest lecturer discussed African folktales. Written assignments required students to read an African novel or folktale, and to analyze the cultural traits and historical realities mirrored in the fictional portrayal.

The study of the Far East was similarly integrated. Students studied Zen Buddhism from many perspectives, including a reenactment of a Japanese Tea Ceremony, an experience of a Zen meditation, the creation of a Japanese landscape, and an examination of the rise of samurai. The class also explored origami and made some of the most popular figures. Japanese dress, language, history, and the origins of the samurai were explored, creating a unified picture.

Written assignments required students to read excerpts from the Lady Murasaki's *Tale of the Genji* and to write a creative fictional autobiography of the author in the context of her times, drawing from historical and literary sources. Alternatively, students were asked to view a film related to Japan, such as *Heaven and Earth* (not the Oliver Stone version) or *Shogun*, and to write a critical review of the work, discussing its historical accuracy and comparing it to other works they had read.

In general, our experiment was a striking success. Students remarked that they had never before had as much interest in attending class and were surprised to find that their attention was held for the entire afternoon. A real bond developed between them, and a real understanding of other cultures was fostered. Many students expressed a desire to visit more museums to learn about regions of the world they had not previously explored.

This ten-credit course provided a means, at least for one ten-week period, by which students could see the integration of the human past and perhaps proceed towards a more effective integration of their futures. They learned that great literature cannot be understood without a knowledge of the era in which it was written, that great art reflects the philosophical and political events of its day, and that political events do not occur in isolation, but rather grow out of deeply held philosophical and ethical beliefs.

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September 20, 1996, Vol. XVIII, No. 19

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals postage paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to INNOVATION ABSTRACTS, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712-1293.
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