



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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INTEGRATIVE LEARNING FOR UNDER-PREPARED STUDENTS

As a basic-level writing teacher, I work primarily with students who are not pleased to be in my class. Most have received low scores on their Accuplacer tests and come to the first day of class angry at the system that failed them and resentful toward the college that requires a course which, in some cases, will not even reward them with credits. Many of these students have already labeled themselves as “underachievers” and are resigned to being in low-level courses that teach by rote and never require active engagement. Some have been diagnosed with learning challenges; others simply learned that the bare minimum was the academic path of least resistance. Many of these students were taught English skills using a “segregated-skill” approach, in which mastering language skills is separate from that of content learning. This is especially true of ESL students, who may have learned many rules but are unable to understand and express more complex thoughts in a cohesive manner when reading and writing.

It is for these reasons that I have begun using a more integrative approach in my classroom. In its simplest form, a course bearing a single-skill title, such as “Basic Writing,” actually would involve multiple, integrated skills. For example, I might give oral instruction on a writing assignment, requiring students to use their listening abilities to understand the lesson. Then we might discuss ways the assignment could be developed, thus employing speaking and listening skills, as well as group interaction and peer review skills. Finally, I might require students to continue the lesson at home, not only by creating a map, outline, and/or first draft of their writing assignment, but by generating a list of questions the initial assignment has conjured up for them. Now the students need to use organizational, analytical, and creative skills to complete the assignment, while the list of questions encourages them to think outside the box, applying *metacognition* (the act of thinking about thinking) to their writing process.

Some say that all learning is integrative because each new idea must be connected to prior ideas. But when integrative learning becomes the focus of one’s teaching style, it requires larger leaps of imagination. Integrative learning is about linking ideas and concepts that are not connected easily or typically.

In content-based instruction, students practice writing skills using a theme-based model that integrates learning into the study of a theme, such as violence in video games, social justice, recycling, the current political climate, or any topic students find interesting and engaging. The topic must allow a wide variety of skills to be practiced and clearly stick to the idea of communicating about the theme. One simple successful example of theme-based learning is an introduction to the school’s library, online research, and citation formats. In an all-female basic composition class, I gave the students a topic: “Women in the 21st Century: Still Paid Less Than Men.” Students were to find one legitimate source to support the topic, quote or paraphrase from the source, and correctly cite their work. The task generated enthusiasm, encouraged communication and peer interactions, and taught essential research and writing skills.

The other method of skills integration—task-based learning—only now is beginning to influence the measurement of learning strategies in higher education. One of the fundamentals of task-based instruction is group or pair work, which is utilized to increase student interaction and collaboration. At the beginning level, students might introduce and share a particular item of interest learned about each other, or write and edit a class newsletter. More advanced students might bring another element of integrative learning to their task—civic engagement—by taking a public opinion poll at school or creating a digital film to promote a service, idea, or political stance. During the 2008 presidential election, as part of their lesson on the rhetorical mode of persuasion, my students worked in groups of four to create multimedia presentations to encourage voter registration. Not only did we achieve near-perfect attendance and participation during those weeks, but registration of first-time voters among my students climbed from a paltry one-third to 100 percent.



In addition to civic engagement, service-learning is another task-based integrative learning technique that is capable of creating enthusiasm in students and instructors alike. Service-learning links meaningful community service to academic course content, enriching the learning experience while teaching civic responsibility and strengthening community.

In a foundational writing course, students learn how language gets things done in the world by undertaking a community-based writing project. A class might decide to adopt a non-profit such as a local homeless shelter, and write or edit flyers or brochures. Alternately, students could write a series of articles promoting public land use for a community garden space to support the local food bank. Reserving class time for reflection, however, is critical to the success of service-learning. If students are unable to differentiate between service-learning and volunteerism, they may not understand how they will benefit from the exchange. I have had students initially balk at the idea that they would be “doing something for free.” Reminding them that service-learning combines “service” and “learning” in intentional ways—i.e., by integrating community service with classroom learning—helps them appreciate this approach to academic enrichment.

Integrative learning is not just for the best-prepared or most-accelerated students. Indeed, it is important for those who are under-prepared for college-level learning because it links basic skills with meaningful experiences, both within the course and across disciplines. In a world that is at once interconnected and yet fragmented, integrative learning serves to heal this dichotomy by making real-life connections and creating authentic experiences. Even in remedial classes, students will be able to link their coursework to the rest of their lives.

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