

Towards Integrated Learning: An Experiment with Linked Classes

Linda Anstendig, Gerard Vallone and Joseph Franco

As a result of a college sponsored National Endowment of the Humanities grant, we designed and taught in Spring 1998 a linked class curriculum for students in our English 102 (Introduction to Literature/ Freshman Composition), Philosophy 115 (Contemporary Moral Problems) and Sociology 102 (Introduction to Sociology) courses around the theme of Ethics. Although we did not share the same students, we approached this project as an interdisciplinary endeavor. We spent a great deal of time planning for three joint class sessions during the semester and identifying the linkages in our courses. We would like to describe our experience and explore its pedagogical implications. In spite of some logistical problems, we believe we succeeded in offering our students an enriched integrated learning environment.

BACKGROUND

After spending many informal lunches together discussing ways that students might become more advanced critical thinkers, grow more invested in their learning, and make more connections among the disciplines they are studying, we decided to experiment with the core curriculum courses we were currently teaching. Without actually designing a new course that would have to pass through various school curricular committees, we decided to informally collaborate, bringing our students and syllabi together. Many educational reformers have been writing about the benefits of learning communities, opportunities for students and teachers to come together in new ways. The theoretical underpinning for such innovations in higher education go back to philosophers such as John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas, and the psychologist Lev Vygotsky who argued that learning is an inherently active, social process, and in coming together through meaningful dialog, individuals may move towards deeper understanding, insight and sensitivity. The goal, according to Vygotsky, is to take people where they are, work within the zone of proximal development and move toward new potentials for learning. (Does theory, 1999)

Our idea was to feature units of our syllabi where our subject matter might dovetail and where students might be led to discover meaningful connections. For example, in English class students would be reading stories, poems and essays about «coming of age,» and «family,» while in Sociology students would be learning about theories of socialization and the family, and in Philosophy students would be learning about theories of moral justification and moral development. In bringing students together to discuss

these issues and in restructuring some of the curriculum to link our classes, we hoped, along with Grabelnick and others (1990) who have written about learning communities, that students would «find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students.» (p.5)

As we began to meet and share our syllabi, we identified common themes and saw some possibilities for applying central ethical issues across all three disciplines. To make the time spent out of our individual classrooms worthwhile rather than disruptive, we planned for three strategically spaced joint meetings during the semester. These meetings took place in a large lecture hall. Although we tried to book another meeting room that was not so austere, it was not available. At least we could provide some refreshments to establish an atmosphere of conviviality.

THE- LINKED CLASSES

The first joint class, consisting of 80 students, was scheduled for the fifth week, and introduced the concept of normative ethics - how to think about what is moral vs. unmoral behavior. The session combined direct lecture by the Philosophy professor, some class discussion using literary and sociological frameworks, and the showing of a film clip, «Mississippi Massala» to illustrate the concepts of egoism, utilitarianism, and Deontology. A framework for thinking about moral philosophy was introduced, and students learned new meanings for terms such as situation, agent, act, patient, judge, as well as values, principles, rules and facts. After watching a part of the movie, which is about an interracial love affair between a young black man and an Indian woman whose parents try to keep the couple apart, the class engaged in a discussion about the ethical categories. The Sociology professor brought in other relevant terms, such as cultural values and social Darwinism, while the Literature professor referred to literary themes of self-reliance and gender identity raised here and in the short stories, «The Lottery» by Shirley Jackson, and «Boys and Girls» by Alice Munro.¹

As a way to extend the discussion and provide more of an interchange between the classes, the Literature Professor and Sociology Professor asked students to post messages on our online discussion forum, WebBoard, and to reply to another's message. The directions asked students to address the following: «What you found most interesting about the joint class, what you learned, what you might have a question about, and what connection you can make between a reading and one of the concepts discussed.» Many of the responses, though not all, were insightful and helpful to us in planning for our next session. A few complained about the lecture hall atmosphere and the lack of a microphone, and a few questioned the relevance of learning philosophical concepts while taking a literature or sociology class (just the kind of narrow viewpoint that we are trying to change). However, many recognized the benefits. For example, one student commented:

What I found interesting was how all three courses easily interlink to each other. Dr. Vallone's definitions on normative ethics gave the characters in «The Lottery» anew dimension. The story was no longer just about tradition and customs, it has become a scene, with Agents who are patients and judges. Mrs. Hutchison was once just an agent in an act. But she was also a judge in the scene. After the results of the lottery, she becomes a patient who also is a judge, a judge with a different view: «It isn't fair. It isn't right.»

Many students wrote about how much they liked the movie, (especially Denzel Washington) and appreciated its relevance. Tammy wrote,

I found the lecture interesting, particularly the movie. I learned for the first time about Social Darwinism. I had never heard of the term but I am familiar with the concept of people attempting to conform to the environment that they find themselves in. The movie addressed some timely issues like racism and the struggles that some face in their everyday lives.

Another student did a great job of summing up her understanding of the linked class:

...this was a fascinating class which tied in very nicely with the main thread of our literature theme, «on becoming a person. « The classifications and definitions of ethics provided by Professor V gave me a tool for not only deciphering the behavior and actions of the characters we've encountered in our reading, but a concrete way of understanding the motives for these behaviors...

The second session was held in the eleventh week of the semester and focused on the issue of moral development by first exploring a series of poems, «Boy at the Window» by Richard Wilbur, «Richard Cory» by Edwin Arlington Robinson, and «The Snow Man» by Wallace Stevens.(Appendix A) We were able to make modifications in this session, taking into account student satisfaction with the first joint class. Using a microphone and small group as well as whole class discussion engaged more students, and enabled them to construct some meaning about these categories before we introduced new terms. Students worked in heterogeneous, mixed class groups, reading and discussing notions of differing perspectives and attitudes before learning about Piaget's cognitive development theories, Lawrence Kohlberg's «justice perspective», and Carol Gilligan's «care perspective» theories. Some students made dynamic connections between the orientation of the poetic speaker and the judgments he makes. While each poem could be said to illustrate a different stage or aspect of moral development, and different ethical perspectives, the metaphorical language could also enable students to break through towards higher order thinking and feeling. The speaker of «The Snow Man,» captures the state of «mind of winter» that eliminates all irrelevant feelings.

For the listener, who listens in the snow, And, nothing himself, beholds./ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

One student noted in his final evaluation that a highlight of the three classes was the reading of the poetry, which «sparked many interesting conversations among the three classes.» These conversations ranged among philosophical, literary, and sociological concepts. The Sociology professor, towards the end of the lecture, brought together many strands of the discussion as he related the poems and theories of moral development to some sociological concepts. George Herbert Mead, one social psychologist, describes how socialization evolves: young children in a «play phase,» taking on roles of others, and older ones, in games, learning to play by societal rules. Another theorist, Charles Horton Cooley, building on the work of William James, provides the concept of «the looking glass self,» which says that children develop a sense of self based on the way others respond to them. At this point questions were raised about how men and women are socialized differently, leading to workplace biases and obstacles like «glass ceilings.» The multiple perspectives offered, and what one student called «the interesting

collaboration between English, Ethics, Philosophy, and Sociology,» led to an opportunity for better understanding and integration of the material, different prisms with which to understand ethical issues, and more interaction with one another.

During the third session, held in the thirteenth week, members of the English class presented the 1916 one-act play «Trifles» by Susan Glaspell, about a woman in a rural New England town who is accused of murdering her husband. The quick observations of the women neighbors are cleverly contrasted with the men who are investigating the crime scene. Because this play raises questions about moral behavior and gender differences, it served as an excellent vehicle for weaving together various philosophical, sociological and literary strands of the three courses. In a lively discussion after the play enactment, one student observed, «Many people were speaking up and voicing their insights and opinions.» The issues ranged from the play's symbolic significance, to questions of value differences, and moral guidelines of right and wrong, and to what constitutes deviant vs. criminal behavior. Here is one student's journal entry reflection about the class:

Issues brought up during the class included whether the act committed by Mrs. Wright was actually a crime. This was highly debated since from the play it was established that she had undergone considerable emotional abuse from her husband. People from the Philosophy class came to the general conclusion that Mrs. Wright was operating from a pre-conventional level of development. ...Students from the Sociology class seemed divided as to how to term this act. They seemed to agree that it was an act of deviance on the part of Mrs. Wright to kill her husband. .. There were questions about this though, such as «Many abused women kill their husbands; therefore, given her circumstances was her act actually criminal?» Students from English seemed concerned with the symbolism of the play. We found out many meanings behind the title of the play, as well as the broken bird cage door, and Mrs. Hale's loaded statement: «We call it-knot it Mr. Henderson. «The irony was the women that were not looking for anything in particular except for trifles were the ones who succeeded in finding a motive for the killing of Mr. Wright... «Having the three classes together showed just how many angles a work can be viewed from depending on the observer's background in that subject area.

This joint session ended with the showing of a cartoon based on the children's book, *Dr. DeSoto* by William Steig. In a whimsical way it summed up many of the moral issues we had been dealing with throughout the three sessions.² Should Dr. DeSoto, who is a mouse dentist, and his wife assistant treat the fox whom they consider to be a dangerous animal? We could apply the terms situation, agents, acts, patients, judges, values, principles rules, and facts, as well as Kohlberg's justice perspective and Gilligan's care perspective. Dr. DeSoto and his helper-wife functioned as judges, agents, and patients.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

According to the Boyer Report on Educating Undergraduates (1998), «The Freshman year experience needs to be intellectually integrated one, so that the student will not learn to think of the academic program as a set of disparate unconnected requirements.» Although not all of our students were in their first year, they were all taking required core courses, and we did attempt through our collaborative efforts to stimulate our students' intellectual growth. Overall, we suc-

ceeded in establishing a new kind of learning community for us as professors as well as for our students, who became over the course of the three sessions, more and more involved in the process. However, it is important to address some of the problems that arose in order to explore where we might go from here.

Some of the problems, as mentioned, were logistical, in terms of finding the right space, making ourselves heard, as well as melding the classes together so that the students would engage in meaningful discussion. Because our teaching styles varied, from more presentational and directive to casual and facilitative, the three of us needed some time to better learn how to orchestrate the sessions, so that one professor didn't necessarily dominate or lecture for too much of the time. We developed a great camaraderie during this process, learning from each other, but we also needed more carefully and strategically to plan each session, better balancing content with application. We learned from the students after the first session that they wanted more interaction and involvement «to pay attention and understand better,» (as one wrote in her final evaluation). One of the biggest challenges we faced was overcoming student passivity, and having students become more invested; by the third class we seemed to be on the way towards total class participation and a high level of interest in the topics of moral development, gender differences and the definition of criminal behavior. Many students suggested for the next linked class project, each joint session should incorporate student presentations from the three different subject areas. According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999), «For learning communities to be effective, they must emphasize active, focused involvement in learning and collaboration that stimulates and promotes the group's and group members' learning.» (p. 8)

Many questions still remain about the viability of such an experiment. Is the time spent out of the classroom worthwhile for professors and students? Would this linking work better with two rather than three content areas? Is there evidence that these sessions led students to higher levels of thinking, greater understanding of subject matter? These questions to some extent remain unanswered. However, we do have some data based on student WebBoard postings, informal evaluations, and final questionnaires that show changing attitudes toward learning, real synthesis, and an appreciation of a different, even invigorating, classroom experience. More formal assessments, and, perhaps, a final collaborative writing assignment might give us better evidence of positive learning outcomes. One student from the English class did mention that learning «the ethical considerations of men and women and how they are applied to real life, ... really helped me with my paper.»

We do expect to pursue other interdisciplinary opportunities and to create the kind of learning environments and experiences Robert Barr and John Tagg(1995) discuss in *Change Magazine*, «that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems.» (p.15) Next fall our Dean is supporting an effort to cluster Freshman classes in English Composition, Sociology, History, and Philosophy, with a cohort of first year students who will be together in at least three courses with a group of professors who will plan, confer, and redesign their courses together. Other initiatives we hope to undertake in the future involve teaching upper level interdisciplinary Sociology and Literature, and/ or Philosophy and Literature courses around a theme. We agree with Gabelnick and others(1990) that collaborative models such as these «facilitate sharing knowledge ..., thus enriching the presentation of the traditional liberal arts and furthering the goals of general education.» (p. 90)

NOTES

1. These stories and the other readings are in the anthology used for the Eng. 102 course: *Writing Through Literature*, ed. L. Anstendig and D. Hicks, Prentice Hall, 1996

2. This documentary by Western Woods, Weston, Connecticut produces excellent video tapes of children's books from the book's own illustrations. They can be contacted at 1-800-543-7843 for their catalogue.

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Address correspondence to:

Linda Anstendig

Gerard Vallone

Joseph Franco

Pace University

861 Bedford Road

Pleasantville, NY 10570 USA

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