

“INTEGRATED STUDIES”—ISSUES & POSSIBILITIES

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I have been pondering the idea of “integrated studies” and am excited about the possibility that BYU-Idaho will seriously attempt an interdisciplinary approach to education. I have a few ideas and suggestions which I hope will prove helpful as we consider moving this concept forward.

Because of my academic and professional background, I have some experience with integrated studies. Courses which integrate theories from different disciplines—sociology, economics and anthropology, for example—are common with 300-level (and higher) history courses. Usually, a mode of inquiry is adopted as a central problem-solving approach for the course, and applied to one or more historical periods and settings. The reason this integration is not done more often in 100- and 200-level courses is because they are survey courses, too broad in scope to lend themselves to integration in this way. Moreover, the students in introductory courses (often freshmen and sophomores) are not ready to undertake integrated approaches. History, given the fact that it studies and explores most facets of human activity and experience, is by nature an integrated study forum.

When I was a student at the University of Utah College of Law, the law school adopted an integrated studies type of requirement. Each student was required to take two semester-long “Cornerstone” courses, which focused on comparative studies, and the application of legal concepts learned in first-year courses into new venues. Additionally, each student was required to take a year-long “Capstone” course. Since these requirements came into being during my Junior year at law school, a lot of creativity was being put into their first iteration. I was selected by Professor Ed Firmage to assist in designing and teaching a capstone course on normative and religious restraints on force and violence. The capstone courses accomplished integration by selecting teams of students to work on particular issues, given their areas of study and expertise. For example, our class included economics majors, a policeman with South Salt Lake City, historians, MBAs, music majors, etc. The course drew directly and heavily upon the experience and talent represented by its students, providing a very rich integrative atmosphere.

At Ricks College, I have taught a course on the Arab-Israeli conflict for the Honors Department since 1995. Last year I felt that I understood our student capabilities well enough to try a more integrated approach to the issue. We spent the first half of the semester acquainting ourselves

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with the history of the problem. Thus we identified major issues and personalities involved in the conflict. We also identified approaches to peace that met with success (e.g., the Camp David Accords) and those less successful (e.g., the Rogers Plan). I divided the students (about 16 of them) into two teams, one designated as the Israeli Peace Negotiation team, and the other the Palestinian team. Each student then had one month to become an “expert” for his or her team, in a variety of areas: economics (Palestinian or Israeli), politics, society, military, natural resources (especially water), technology, etc. The experts presented a one-page summary of issues within their respective areas of expertise that impinged upon the peace process. The experts in each area were selected by the students themselves and utilized, insofar as possible, that student’s college major (political science, computer science, and so forth). Next came the creation of a policy in each area of expertise regarding how to approach the issue during peace negotiations, and the position of the team on the issue. Finally, each team had to develop an actual peace proposal, and submit it to me prior to the commencement of one week of peace negotiations in class. The result was impressive. The students were creative in the context of common sense and pragmatic considerations. They taught each other for the last half of the semester. They developed an empathy and understanding of both sides of this issue. They learned how to pool talents as a team to achieve a synergy otherwise unobtainable. I hope to refine the class during the coming year.

Finally, my dissertation is essentially an integration of a variety of disciplines. The subject involves that interconnection between access to foreign mortgage capital, the purchasing of cotton-producing lands and occasional foreclosures, and upward social mobility in Egypt from 1880 through 1939. The study draws upon a variety of disciplines (banking, agriculture and agronomy, irrigation engineering, legal systems) and skills (Arabic and French). This sort of integration is bread-and-butter for today’s historian. That is why historians are becoming increasingly valued in the private sector as companies utilize their skills in information acquisition and interpretation.

These experiences helped me develop an appreciation for integrated studies as a dynamic educational system in which subject matter, methods, and student competencies are combined to produce a synergistic result.

A VISION OF INTEGRATED STUDIES

I envision courses that bring history to life for students by giving contemporary problems a meaningful context, and by investigating ideas and

methods that have proved efficacious in the past as a guide to their use in the present. Here are some examples:

Imagine a capstone course that addresses the techniques of “just in time” project planning. For example, the just-in-time technique was pioneered by the Japanese immediately prior to World War Two, and adopted by the USA as a method of building large amounts of military hardware using a minimum number of resources, personnel, and workspace. It proved particularly important in building up the US Navy, given the shortage of dry dock facilities. For one half of the semester students would study the reasons why the technique was developed and how it was used, and assess its benefits, drawbacks and conditions requiring its use. The last half of the semester, the students would be given an assignment that employed the technique in a contemporary setting. For example, they could research Jane’s Encyclopedia of Military Hardware for the components of a relatively simple weapon, such as the M16 rifle. They would then determine the order of assembly and the parts required. Given a facility of a certain size, and a certain number of manufacturing personnel, they would be challenged to maximize the output for a certain period of time. Computer project planning software could be used, and students could be required to measure the success of their plan using graphical and statistical modeling done on the computer. They would be given time to evaluate the projects of other teams and assess them. Finally, in a friendly competition, the students could vote on which team’s project seemed most workable and most productive. Wouldn’t that look good on a résumé?

The use of history as a venue for contextualizing a problem and investigating solutions seems appropriate, yet this is hardly how most people view history. Still another example serves to illustrate its contextualizing role. This example involves teaching math and engineering principles in their historical context, using the same experiments that Galileo used, making the same observations he made, and deriving the mathematical solutions he derived. Other problems could be addressed this way. For example, students could learn about the use of psychohistory (the critical biography) in the context of international marketing. The student would learn the technique of assessing the psyche of an individual leader (say the dictator of a third-world country), with a view to marketing their product in that country. Because history studies humans and their behavior in virtually every area of activity, it is an ideal setting for integration of the many disciplines that guide, govern and interpret human behavior. The possibilities are virtually endless, and historians are trained to do this very thing.

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TAKING CONTROL OF GENERAL EDUCATION AT BYU-IDAHO

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So long as this institution is tied to others through articulation agreements, we are bound to their ideas and philosophies regarding GE. Given the creation of a four-year university, perhaps consideration should be given to a plan to reduce or even eliminate articulation and transfer GE issues. Assuming that BYU-Idaho offers AA and one-year certificates only in those programs where the degree or certificate is functionally terminal (i.e., where transferability of the degree is not an important consideration), the balance of programs at BYU-Idaho would be either four-year majors or some form of minor. The University would be able then to “internalize” to a much higher degree the structure and content of GE generally. Departments and divisions would be able to create what I think of as “level one integration.”

At level one, a narrower integration could take place within closely related disciplines (such as chemistry and biology, or business and economics, or religion and humanities, etc.). Such integration is within the grasp of freshman and sophomore students. In summary, level-one integration is oriented toward freshman and sophomore students, seeking integration within closely related disciplines. The GE requirements could be restructured to allow credit for participation in level-one classes. The stress on faculty, administration, and resources is reduced. The problem of finding qualified and interested faculty within highly specialized areas to teach at this level of integration is not as great. Additionally, team teaching could be creatively employed to minimize load concerns. Such a course must not, however, be merely half a semester of discipline A and half a semester of discipline B. At some point in the course students must be required to apply both disciplines in an integrated fashion to address an issue or solve a problem.

As an example, the Music Literature class required for music majors integrates history and the development of musical ideas and attitudes. Dr. R. Kevin Call teaches the class in a one semester format, which would be expanded into a two semester format should Music develop into a four-year program. The first semester of the two-year format would integrate history and music by first teaching the history of a particular period, followed by the musical developments of that period. Thus, a discussion of the rise of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, would be followed by an investigation of the trends in music, and so forth. Dr. Call maintains that the question “Why did music develop along these lines?” can best be answered through the integration of history into the subject matter. Such a course would be an ideal

general education (social sciences) level-one integration experience for music majors. The ability of the Music Department to meet NASM's accreditation requirements, while remaining below the 120-hour limit, would relieve it of a significant burden, accomplished within the context of level-one integration. In addition to subject matter integration, selected student competencies could be targeted, so as to prepare them for future learning experiences.

If this approach were adopted, the amount of GE required for graduation might be actually reduced slightly in terms of credit hours, since an integrated combination of two closely related areas in Social Sciences and in Science (for example) could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. Areas requiring six to eight hours of GE might be restructured to require fewer hours (say four to six). Moreover, the distribution of faculty to teach GE-related courses could be re-evaluated and streamlined.

Finally, this would give the University the chance to review (and re-approve) all courses offered for GE credit. (Right now there are courses that are very narrow in scope and content that are being offered as GE credit that should be reconsidered from the point of view of GE needs. Many are simply approved to accommodate travel program interests, etc., and do not advance broader institutional interests.)

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THE CAPSTONE PROGRAM

Capstone courses would be a second level of integration. Level-two integration should maximize the scope of disciplines involved in a problem-solving situation in which seniors teach each other. The capstone should be administered campus-wide, supported by a committee composed of interested faculty drawn from a variety of divisions and programs. A chair (or similar title) should be appointed to administer this program on a day-to-day basis. He or she would oversee a Capstone Committee. The committee would define the specific requirements that qualify a course for capstone status, ensuring the integrity of capstone offerings as level-two integration classes.

With a reduced overall GE load at level-one, room could be made for addition of the capstone requirement within current GE load expectations and the 120-hour minimum/maximum credit hour limit.

IMPLEMENTING A REVISED GE AND CAPSTONE PROGRAM

The changes I have discussed could be "phased in" (pardon the employment of this well-used phrase). According to the most recent representations of the administration, the initial four-year programs will

be functional within a three-year period. As the focus of the college shifts away from transferability, the GE (level-one) changes could be implemented. The first senior class would not emerge until the summer at the end of the first year or the fall of the second, allowing delay of the capstone requirement until then. By assigning the issues of integration to a committee supervised by the administration and the Academic Council, and with a delayed implementation scheme, attention can be given by department chairs, division deans, and the administration to the creation of four-year offerings, new hires, and other needs. In September of this year an Integration Committee was created, and this is part of its mission.

The establishment of a senior capstone requirement creates a need for faculty to teach about ninety to one hundred courses per academic year, assuming an enrollment of 35 seniors per class. This really boils down to about thirty-five faculty members teaching one class each for three semesters.

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ONE OBSTACLE TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INTEGRATED STUDIES

I often experience a conflict of interests when teaching GE courses within my department. Am I directing my efforts toward the needs of the general education students, or toward the history majors in the class? I try to balance these issues but often feel that I am sacrificing the GE issues to the needs of majors. I don't believe that I am alone in this regard. It seems that so long as GE is controlled by departments and divisions, it will be bent to serve their narrower interests. Whatever integration is proposed within a department may inevitably be bent too far in the direction of department needs. Perhaps the solution lies in detaching some level of integrated studies (at least the capstone offering) from department and division control. Should BYU-Idaho establish some form of "integrated studies" program independent of any particular department? This raises several new questions, but may be worthy of consideration. ☺