

Colleges Need a Makeover: Adapting to Change One Class at a Time

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Educators are constantly improving their curricula and teaching philosophies. What works for some students does not always work for others. The current essay documents and comments on educators' attempts to teach community college students through Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS). To that end it defines IDS, argues for its pedagogical value, and provides ways to implement interdisciplinary coursework in the community college to help with student retention, build a sense of community, and augment skills for today's workforce.

Keywords: interdisciplinary, retention, team teaching, learning communities, critical thinking, collaborative learning

INTRODUCTION

In general, twenty years ago, average community college students were eighteen years of age, living at home and attending face-to-face classes. Today, they range in age from 17-70; many work one or two jobs, raise families and/or attend evening or online classes. According to Freedman (2013), "College is not one singular beast. If anything, it is a variety of beasts – very few of which resemble what many of us, or many of those in positions of leadership, have ever had a chance to wrestle." Many professors had a very different college experience from that of their current students. In order for us as instructors to reach our audience, we therefore need to use strategies designed to meet their diverse interests. One size does not fit all. Why is changing our approach essential? Freedman (2013) continues, "Overall, the largest group of students is neither four-year public college students nor four-year private non-profit students but two-year public-school students. Nearly four in ten college students are community college students. More than twice as many students were enrolled at two-year public colleges than at private, nonprofit ones – despite the fact that the programs are half as long." Community colleges are serving more students than any other post-secondary institutions; therefore, they are under more pressure than ever to ensure the success of their graduates who are entering the workforce, as well as pre-professional or other specialized bachelor's degree programs.

The challenge community colleges are facing is multifaceted: the demographics of college students are different; the digital age is upon us, and some reforms that are taking place are doing more harm than good. One change attempted by state and local governments seeks to "reduce public funding for higher education, by eliminating so called 'frills' and focusing on 'skills' that make students 'work-force ready'"

(Galles, 2005). While being “work force ready” is important, so is being able to communicate effectively on the job, a skill often underdeveloped in today’s community college graduates. A pedagogical approach that fulfills all these needs is therefore indicated. IDS (Interdisciplinary Studies) is typically defined as team-taught coursework presented by at least two faculty members from different disciplines. It is, in our experience, best implemented by two professors sharing the same classroom live, conversing with one another and with students extemporaneously regarding prepared curricula. Formal lecture, slide presentation, guest speakers, and the like typically take up part of the class, but intensive student-centered discussion is expected to follow. Student presentations, especially in groups, are emphasized so that participants learn how to learn and convey their knowledge cooperatively. Evaluation may be in part by objective testing, but essay examinations, papers, presentations, and class participation are the key components in measuring student performance. Unfortunately, in the service of workforce readiness, classes with low enrollment and those considered inconsequential for the projected workforce are being cut. IDS, for example, when team taught, requires two professors at the same time, is time-consuming to prepare, and is not a normal part of the community college curriculum. As a result, IDS is one of the first courses on the funding chopping block.

Another troublesome reform that is directly in conflict with the interdisciplinary style is the birth of “Adaptive Learning.” It involves courseware designed by leading textbook companies: McGraw Hill’s Connect, Pearson’s MyWritingLab, Cengage’s Aplia (just to name a few) which are designed for English classes; McGraw Hill’s Alex for Math and OLI (Open Learning Initiative) for science classes; as well as Mindtap and Smart Sparrow for humanities courses. The courseware is purchased by each student (with prices ranging from \$60.00 to over \$100.00). In short, these systems are expensive and focus on personalized study practiced largely outside of the classroom at the risk of losing the sense of “community” in community college.

In our view the aforementioned cuts to the curriculum and emphasis on individuated learning are mistakes. IDS, in contrast, is designed to meet a complex of needs: knowledge of specific content areas (mathematics, biology, literature, speech, etc.); skills in communication and critical thinking crucial for success in the academy as well as in the private or public workforce; and camaraderie derived from learning in a community of commuter students for whom shared experiences might otherwise be missing from college life.

STUDENT POPULATION AT ST. PETERSBURG COLLEGE

St. Petersburg College’s population is typical in terms of the trends described in College Board Research Brief (April 2016). In 2016, SPC statistics revealed that 59.5% identify as female; the median age is 28.8; about 31% are minorities; 51.8% are twenty-five or older (“Enrollment Statistics,” 2016). There is a large veteran population. In 2009, St. Petersburg College had about 500 veterans in attendance; by 2014, that population had more than quadrupled (Steinle, 2014).

In our entry-level IDS course, we typically enroll a majority of millennial students (born after 1980), whose perspectives on the world are very different from those of older students and from our own. This is a unique population whose interests and learning habits require special attention. As Worley (2011) argues, “in order to meet the challenges of teaching millennial students, colleges must discard traditional teaching and learning methods and ideas.” In general, these young people are goal-oriented and believe that they will be successful, both in their educational pursuits and in the workplace. Interestingly, they tend to be traditional in their core values while simultaneously being accepting of others’ values and lifestyles. They are “digital natives” and therefore impatient with outdated methods of information-gathering, as they are used to having the answers they want at hand immediately. Overall, they are a group that presents unique challenges to their instructors (Schultz, 2015). As Worley states, “Traditional methods of instruction will no longer suffice in a society that has encountered ‘a paradigm shift from emphasizing teaching to emphasizing learning’” (qtd. In Wilson, 2004). As faculty members, we must be sensitive to different cognitive styles, knowledge bases, and values among our students, so that our educational philosophies and practices are effective with a new generation of learners (Worley, 2011).

DESCRIPTION OF SPC IDS CLASSES AND TEACHING METHODS

At St. Petersburg College, IDS 1106 combines first-semester composition and an introduction to humanities into a class that meets twice a week in approximately three-hour blocks and is distinctly interdisciplinary. We employ ". . . [a] curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience" (Burton, 2001). The course material is organized in terms of a theme, "The Other" (we have also been successful with "The Nature of Evil"). All the materials we use—PowerPoints, videos, readings in history and literature—are selected so that they may be analyzed as cultural artifacts that signify the alienation of individuals or groups. Because our HUM 1020 (Intro to the Arts) course is neither chronologically ordered nor geographically restricted, we are able to take what is literally a global view of various cultures, narrowed by and made understandable in terms of this theme that unites people's experience. We examine "othering" in terms of gender, race, and religion; our final unit introduces the theme of our second-semester course, "Monsters and Monstrosity." We recognize that human beings are marked by unique and indelible effects of geographical difference. Our concern, however, is to identify the cognitive and emotional responses that are fundamental to us all (Chakrabaty, 2009). Among the materials we have used are the texts of feminist writers and transgender artists; African, African-American, Indian and Amer-Indian artworks and music; as well as art and literature of the Holocaust and responses to other historical acts of genocide. For our final unit we examine Mary Shelley's "daemon" (*Frankenstein*, 1818) and Kazuo Ishiguro's clones (*Never Let me Go*, 2010) as "other." We do not use a textbook. Except for a couple of novels and films, all academic readings are posted online.

Our second-semester class, IDS 1112H, is on the honors level. It combines second-term composition (ENC 1102H, writing about literature) with HUM 2233H (Western Humanities II, European culture from the Baroque to the Modern period). We organize the material chronologically, but we still focus on the theme of monsters and monstrosity by identifying events and persons whose characteristics fit the category (e.g., colonialism /imperialism, negative consequences of the industrial revolution, Hitler and Stalin). Most of our IDS 1106 students are able to follow us into IDS 1112H. Particularly for those who have not been successful in other courses in the past for a variety of reasons, we find that the approach to learning taken in our curriculum unites our students, empowers them, enables them to learn, retain information, and think for themselves in new ways.

In the classroom itself, we employ a strict team-teaching method; that is, we are both at the front of the classroom engaged in instruction or discussion facilitation whenever those modes are used. During group work or time spent on individual projects, we both circulate among the students and assist them. We feel it is very important for us to model the paradigm we want the students to use: cooperative interaction. The class as a whole is our Macro Learning Community. Within it, activities, besides those already mentioned, include students working in Micro Learning Groups (explained below); collectively brainstorming; watching and responding to videos; listening to and responding to music; working on and performing skits or other activities based on course material. Outside of class, students participate in field trips; complete creative as well as more formal academic writing; take online quizzes, and post on discussion boards.

For an IDS program to be successful at the community college, it must include several "tools." One is the formation of Learning Communities (as mentioned above). This kind of cooperative learning does not always work with random groupings; however, by creating Micro Learning Groups where we place stronger writers with weaker writers, second language speakers with native speakers and those with similar career paths together, the groups can be quite successful. When students are comfortable in their Micro Learning Groups, they are more likely to open up and ask questions that they might not want to ask the instructor or in the classroom setting because they are self-conscious. These group activities are a good way to start a larger class discussion or to have students work together on a Micro Learning Group project after a short lecture.

IDS provides students with a sense of belonging; it is not just a course that is taken by a select group of highly motivated students in a specialized program at a private or public university, but one that can

help elevate an average student into entry into an honors program by providing the personal bonds that occur in learning communities, boosting confidence through camaraderie, improving communication skills in a variety of settings, encouraging team building and relating material to real-world problems. IDS develops critical thinking skills which is an area that graduates seem to be lacking. White (2013) states, “[one] employer survey, this one by staffing company Adecco, turns up similar results [to other studies]. The company says in a statement, ‘44% of respondents cited soft skills, such as communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration, as the area with the biggest gap.’” IDS provides many benefits, and critical thinking, collaboration, and communication are just a few. Casey Jones (2010) argues, for instance, “[IDS] students learned tolerance from their peers as well as leadership and collaboration skills. The study found that the majority of students found the experience beneficial and that the students ‘spoke of long-term relationships and of a demographic learning environment that honored their voices and empowered them as learners.’” Now more than ever, it is the college professor’s job to teach students acceptance of and respect for the opinions of classmates and colleagues.

Too often, students are distracted by personal electronic devices and not fully participant in their education. As a result, graduates may not possess the social skills that employers are looking for in the workforce. For example, White (2013) comments, “As it turns out, they can’t even show up on time in a button-down shirt and organize a team project.” Millennials’ attitudes about what is socially expected of them at the job site are sometimes shocking to employers. White (2013) goes on to say, “A survey by the Workforce Solutions Group at St. Louis Community College finds that more than 60% of employers say applicants lack ‘communication and interpersonal skills’ — a jump of about 10 percentage points in just two years. A wide margin of managers also say today’s applicants can’t think critically and creatively, solve problems or write well” (2013). IDS is one way that we can bridge the communication gap graduates are demonstrating in the work force. Jones (2010) states, “Students who have the skills that interdisciplinary courses provide are so valuable to our future that they are now sought out by colleges and businesses.” After all, most college students are taking classes to further their careers or enter the workforce, and the community college professor’s job is to help them reach those goals.

In another example similar to what we are doing at SPC and supportive of our argument in favor of an interdisciplinary makeover for colleges, an IDS course called “Modern Times” is taught at the University of Wisconsin. An English professor and history professor teach American Literature and American History in a six-credit undergraduate course. They also have found that cooperative learning in the IDS classroom allows for greater college success. In their research they quote V. Tinto who completed a study at a large, two-year college and discovered that “students in intensive integrated programs that use collaborative pedagogy have significantly higher college persistence rates and intellectually richer experiences than their peers who follow a traditional curriculum” (qtd. in Oitzinger, 2004). The professors decided to conduct a study using their course “Modern Times,” assisted by a grant from the University of Wisconsin. Here is a summary of their findings: “Our fall-to-fall freshman retention rate was 77 percent, which was 24 percent higher than the campus average. On the Measure of Intellectual Intelligence (Moore 1996), ‘Modern Times’ students showed gains three times greater in cognitive growth than their peers in the single-faculty, lecture-oriented control group” (Oitzinger & Kallgren, 2004).

CONCLUSION

We hear the term “critical thinking” in academia on a regular basis: “students aren’t using critical thinking skills; more emphasis needs to be placed on teaching students how to learn,” and so forth. By incorporating cooperative learning in the IDS classroom, we are helping students to attain more effective learning skills. Galles (2005) states, “At elite institutions as well as regional public universities, at liberal-arts colleges and community colleges alike, innovative professors are teaching students not just what to think but also how to think. They are helping them master the skills that will last a lifetime: learning how to learn.” Improved strategies for learning are imperative in a society that is facing major changes in virtually every facet of life. Galles (2005) goes on to say, “The new education must prepare our students to thrive in a world of flux, to be ready no matter what comes next. It must empower them to be leaders of

innovation and to be able not only to adapt to a changing world but also to change the world.” When students learn to communicate effectively, starting in their learning communities, they take that confidence and skill into the workforce, but even more importantly, they take it out into the community.

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