

Using an Interdisciplinary Course to Teach Intercultural Communication: Helping Students and Faculty Bridge Disciplinary Divides

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ABSTRACT

There is great value in helping students bridge both cultural and disciplinary divides as we prepare them for the challenges of citizenship in the twenty-first century. This paper describes, *Global Perspectives*, an interdisciplinary course taught by a faculty member in a technical communication program together with a faculty member in a political science department. The course focused on issues of power and communication as they relate to global issues: world hunger, environmental concerns, world health, and human rights. Through this course, the faculty members addressed a major concern in higher education today: the need to educate students to be global citizens capable of meeting the serious challenges facing the world in the twenty-first century. This concern is relevant for all college students regardless of their majors.

Keywords: disciplinary divide, global citizenship, intercultural communication, interdisciplinarity, international education, team teaching, transdisciplinarity

INTRODUCTION

Due to recent developments in telecommunications and technology, today's students will face an increasingly globalized workplace when they graduate from college. They will also face the challenge of functioning as citizens in a global society. There has never been a greater need for effective communication and cooperation among the peoples of the world than there is at the present time. In response to the increasingly global nature of society, a new concept of citizenship has arisen, the concept of global citizenship.

A global citizen is someone who understands the relationship between global and local events [1]. Global citizens are sensitive to cultural difference and know how to communicate effectively with diverse others [2]. In addition to understanding the need to communicate across cultures, global citizens are also aware of the need to address challenging world issues from an interdisciplinary perspective.

There is great value in helping students bridge both cultural and disciplinary divides as we prepare them for the challenges of citizenship in the twenty-first century. Experiential learning is an effective means for preparing students for the challenges they will face both in the workplace and in their lives outside of

work [3]. Since 9/11 there has been recognition of the need for American college students to have greater international awareness and better knowledge of other cultures [4]. Gacel-Avila states that institutions of higher education are charged with the responsibility of "fostering a global consciousness among students" [5]. The development of an interdisciplinary course team-taught by faculty from technical communication and international relations serves the purpose of expanding students' global awareness generally at the same time that it imparts the specific knowledge and skills needed to internationalize documentation.

A TYPOLOGY OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Generally speaking, "interdisciplinarity is the integration of existing disciplinary perspectives" [6]. An interdisciplinary course is one that is grounded in more than one discipline; such a course may be team-taught by instructors from two or more fields. In an empirical study of interdisciplinary research and teaching, Lattuca derived a typology of four different forms of interdisciplinarity: informed disciplinary, synthetic interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and conceptual interdisciplinarity [7]. *Informed interdisciplinarity* is instruction focused on a single discipline that calls upon other disciplines to enhance course content. For example, an instructor teaching a course in visual design in technical communication may include discussion of the fields of graphic design, fine arts, and film.

Synthetic interdisciplinarity involves instructors from two distinct disciplines working together to combine the theories, concepts, and research methods from the two disciplines. The two disciplines still remain distinct from one another, but the instructors demonstrate areas where the two overlap and influence one another. The course described in this paper is an example of synthetic interdisciplinarity where instructors from two distinct disciplines (technical communication and international relations) combine theories related to communication and power while at the same time instructing students in the distinctive methods of inquiry used in each field.

Transdisciplinarity is an approach that does not focus on the disciplinary sources of theories and methods, but rather applies them across disciplines. A course that applied one overarching theory of learning across all disciplines and tested that theory in the realm of various distinctive disciplines would be an example of transdisciplinarity.

Finally, *conceptual interdisciplinarity* is an approach that explores a topic from the perspective of multiple disciplines without privileging any disciplinary perspective(s). For example an instructor might have students explore different theories of how humans learn from the perspective of various disciplines and then encourage the students to critique the theories and note their limitations. This approach is consistent with postmodern and feminist inquiry methods that suggest all questions should be answered from an interdisciplinary perspective.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES: A SYNTHETIC INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSE

The course described in this paper, Global Perspectives, was a synthetic interdisciplinary course taught by a faculty member in a technical communication program together with a faculty member in a political science department. The course focused on issues of power and communication as they relate to global issues: world hunger, environmental concerns, world health, and human rights. The faculty members sought to broaden students' perspectives while at the same time strengthening core skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and reflective judgment. Research on situated learning theories suggests several benefits from having students address complex real-world problems because they require students to engage in activities like the ones they will have to perform in the workplace. When doing so, students develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills [8].

The majority of the students enrolled in Global Perspectives were majoring either in English/Technical Communication or Political Science/International Relations. There were also a few students from other majors like liberal arts, business, and communication.

The instructors sought to increase students' awareness of global issues and also to help them understand the role played by political power and effective intercultural communication in addressing these issues. In addition to the general knowledge that all students would get from the course, for the technical communication students the emphasis was on improving their knowledge of international issues and world events and their intercultural communication skills. For the international relations students, the emphasis was on improving their written communication skills.

An Improved Understanding of International Audiences

The better understanding writers have of their audience, the more effective their documents will be. When writing for international audiences, students must have an understanding of intercultural communication. Instead of merely introducing students to various concepts drawn from the field of intercultural communication, however, the instructors in the Global Perspectives course sought to contextualize the study of intercultural communication and to give assignments that would require the active participation of students in addressing global issues.

In line with the desire to fashion a higher education curriculum that develops global citizens, the instructors began the course with discussions of global issues facing the world today. Although the instructors wanted the students to develop knowledge and skills relevant to their professional careers, first and foremost, they wanted students to develop those skills in a

broad context not limited by boundaries of disciplines or borders between nations.

To this end, instead of having students learn specific facts about other cultures and then apply them to their own disciplines, the instructors began with the big picture and let students direct precisely how it would be narrowed down and what specific aspects of intercultural communication would be emphasized. Offering students choices and allowing them to guide the class discussion can increase their motivation and interest [9].

The course began with a discussion of what students felt were the key issues that affect all people in the world. The issues they mentioned were the environment, terrorism, world health, world hunger, and human rights. After each instructor gave an introductory lecture related to his/her respective discipline, students were then asked to discuss how they thought issues of power and issues of communication impacted the global issues they had previously identified. This discussion naturally led the class to examine the importance of understanding power and power differentials in relationships and also to focus on the importance of effective and unambiguous communication among members of different cultures.

As the semester progressed, students were given a series of lectures by their instructors that developed these topics in more detail in relation to the fields of international relations and technical communication. In conjunction with the lectures, students were also given a series of assignments that required them to select one of the global topics identified and research it in greater detail. These assignments included an internet research assignment, a field research assignment, an audience analysis assignment, and a documentation project for an international audience.

Internet Research Assignment

For the internet assignment, students were required to find three relevant sources online that would help them further develop their understanding of one of the global issues being discussed in class. Students were given strict guidelines regarding which sources would be acceptable for this assignment. The purpose of this assignment was for students to become familiar with particular online resources related to global issues. This initial research also prepared students for the next assignment, the field research assignment.

Although internet research is nothing new to undergraduate students, this assignment was defined in such a way as to challenge students to go beyond their typical approaches (using a search engine like Google) and to expand their knowledge of databases for international research. Students were introduced to the vast array of electronic resources available for conducting international research. The University of Central Florida has an extensive and well-organized collection of electronic resources for international research.

The assignment also served to introduce students to research in another discipline. For this assignment, the students were required to find and analyze sources from outside their field of study. For example, students used sources like World News Connection, Columbia International Affairs Online, and The Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS) to gather information to help them develop an understanding of a particular cultural group.

Field Research Assignment

The field research assignment built on the internet assignment. Like the internet assignment, the field research assignment was designed to prepare students for the documentation project. Once the students had done some background research on their topic, they were given the field research assignment, which required them to go into the community outside the university to gather more specific information related to some aspect of the topic they explored in their internet research. In many cases, they would also become aware of a local connection to their topic when doing the field research assignment.

The students had a choice of either conducting an interview or attending the meeting of professional or service organization. When this assignment was given, students received a list of local consulates, businesses, and other organizations relevant to their research. In response to the assignment, students interviewed community and business leaders and attended meetings of organizations that included the Barbados Club of Central Florida, the Metro Orlando Economic Development Commission, and the International Visitors Council of Orlando. Students were required to write up the information they gathered from their field research and relate their findings to one particular global issue.

For example, the student who attended a meeting of the Barbados Club of Central Florida identified a need for better communication among members of the community of Barbadians living in Central Florida. She determined that it was important to build the community for several reasons: 1) it would provide social support for individuals recently relocated to Central Florida; 2) it would help organize and focus efforts by Central Floridians from Barbados to maintain contact with and to support the communities they left behind in Barbados; 3) it would help organize and focus efforts to raise awareness of the nation of Barbados and its culture and heritage (typically Barbados is only thought of as a tourist destination) within their community, Florida, and ultimately the United States. To meet all of these goals, she decided to create a newsletter for the Barbadian community within Central Florida.

Audience Analysis

Once the students had begun to develop a more thorough understanding of the global issues they had chosen to research, they were challenged to develop a documentation project related to that topic for a specific audience. For example, a student researching environmental issues might choose to create a brochure to raise awareness of the issues among college students internationally. Once the students had developed an idea for a project, they were then required to analyze one audience for their document. For example, the student who wanted to raise the awareness of college students regarding environmental concerns might choose to begin by addressing college students in Mexico and the United States.

The first step in creating documentation for any audience either domestic or international is to analyze the audience for that documentation. In conjunction with the audience analysis assignment, students learned about cultural variables and how to study them in order to understand audiences in other cultures. The specific cultural variables studied were the seven presented by Nancy Hoft in *International Technical Communication*: political, economic, social, religious, educational, linguistic, and

technological [10]. Examining these variables naturally included a discussion of issues of power from the perspective of international relations (political, economic, social, and religious) and of issues of effective communication from the perspective of technical communication (educational, linguistic, and technological). Of course, the discussion of the variables was not rigidly divided between the two disciplines. However, some variables, such as politics and economics, obviously lent themselves to discussing power; others, like education and linguistics, were relevant to concerns about effective communication.

Further, although students were expected to include a discussion of all seven variables in their audience analysis, they were not limited to these seven variables. They were also urged to include any other variables that they felt would be appropriate for the audience and the subject they were focusing on in their project. For example, students examining global health issues chose to include health as a variable because they wanted to understand cultural differences in attitudes toward health care and toward traditional and alternative medicine among members of their target audience. Once the students completed their audience analysis they were ready to write a proposal describing their plans for the documentation project.

A Documentation Project for an International Audience

The major project for the course was to produce a documentation project for an international audience. The instructors defined an international audience as any group of readers that included at least some members of another culture (outside the U.S. culture). Because of the way an international audience was defined, some students did projects for members of one other culture, some students did projects for an audience composed of members of several other cultures, and some students did projects targeted both to members of another culture and to members of the U.S. culture. For example, one student created a guide for business people in the United States and Germany who wished to work with one another. Another student created a web site on environmental issues targeted to an audience in Norway.

The guide for business people focused on the basics of intercultural communication in the first section and then went on to provide specific information targeted to communication issues likely to arise between U.S. and German business people. It discussed the verbal communication styles and business practices of the two nations, and also gave advice regarding differences in expectations regarding business etiquette, nonverbal communication, and negotiation strategies.

The web site offered practical suggestions for environmentally conscious citizens in Norway; it gave advice about water conservation, waste disposal, and fuel conservation. The purpose of the site was to enable the average citizen to take action to help preserve the environment. The site also gave contact information for key environmental organizations and government agencies both in Norway and in Europe.

The purpose of the documentation project was twofold: 1) it required that students translate their general understanding of a global issue into a small, but relevant, contribution to addressing that global issue; and 2) it required that students put into practice their enhanced communication skills, particularly their understanding of effective intercultural communication.

The student projects addressed a wide range of issues, some of which were more focused and defined than others, but all of which addressed some aspect of improved intercultural understanding. Several of the projects were geared toward preparing business people to communicate effectively across cultures. Others focused on preparation for citizen diplomacy. Many of the projects also addressed global issues such as the environment, world hunger, and international adoption.

BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

The students benefited by developing an expanded awareness of global issues at the same time that they strengthened core skills in problem solving and critical thinking. They also developed documentation projects to include in their professional portfolios.

Benefits of Interdisciplinary Courses for Students

Much research still remains to be done on interdisciplinary teaching and learning. However, existing research suggests numerous benefits associated with interdisciplinary courses. Interdisciplinary courses can enhance learning by facilitating the acquisition of new information. New information is learned by linking it to previous knowledge held in the learner's memory; a learner's previous knowledge and the activation of that previous knowledge will affect the acquisition of new knowledge [11]. Interdisciplinary courses enhance student learning because they provide students with more opportunities to connect new information with existing knowledge by calling upon disciplinary information and challenging students to relate it to new concepts and ideas [12].

Interdisciplinary courses that introduce real-world problems, like the global issues addressed in the course described in this paper, create meaningful contexts for study and help prepare students for the types of tasks they are likely to encounter in the workplace. Such courses help students develop their problem-solving and critical and reflective thinking skills. Interdisciplinary courses that challenge students to address global issues also help students develop comprehensive perspectives. Davis has argued that "students in an information society need to develop the capacity to cope with multiple perspectives on issues and problems" [13]. Interdisciplinary courses help them learn to "see, evaluate, and select from among differing perspectives that bear on a problem" [14].

Further, several studies have also suggested that student motivation and interest is likely to be higher when students have the more sophisticated views of knowledge that are encouraged by interdisciplinary study [15]. Certainly, the students in Global Perspectives exhibited a great deal of interest in learning about global issues and intercultural communication; their motivation was evidenced by their work on their documentation projects as well as in other student outcomes from the course.

Student Outcomes

Although their attitudes and competences were not measured, the students in Global Perspectives did display a high level of motivation. When the course is taught again, the instructors plan to conduct an empirical study in which changes in students' attitudes and development in the students' critical thinking skills are measured.

While the results discussed here are anecdotal, they are strongly indicative of very positive outcomes for the students; the overall

course evaluations for both instructors were well above their departmental and college averages. The scores for the students' self-reported assessment of the value of the course to their professional careers and their assessment of the improvement in their critical thinking skills as a result of taking the course were particularly high.

The students took on many challenging documentation projects which required that they use problem-solving and critical thinking skills. The success of their projects is some indication of the benefits they derived from the course. In many cases, the projects that students produced were, in fact, service-learning projects—although a focus on service-learning was not explicitly included in the course. One student project included a PowerPoint presentation on intercultural communication for business people working abroad that was adapted for use by the training department of a local corporation. This student was already working part time for DSE Corporation. She created a PowerPoint presentation offering an introduction to key issues in intercultural communication for employees going on assignments abroad. The PowerPoint included general information, but was also customized to present information on specific locations where many of the corporation's employees were likely to travel. Like the project for DSE Corporation, many of the projects were produced and used by their intended audiences, for example, the newsletter for the Barbados Club of Central Florida.

Further, as a result of taking the class many of the technical communication students were inspired to pursue further study of other cultures. Some students pursued additional foreign language courses, others chose to study abroad, and still others sought out and were granted internships with multinational corporations and government agencies.

The students majoring in Political Science/International Relations developed their communication skills as well as their knowledge of document design and production. They reported a new respect for individuals who prepare instructional documentation and web sites. Many of them also expressed the belief that their enhanced communication skills would be an asset in their future careers. Nearly all of them planned to use the documentation project as a writing sample to show prospective employers.

BENEFITS FOR FACULTY

The experience was just as educational for the instructors as it was for the students. Most institutions that offer interdisciplinary courses and programs, including widely recognized programs like Miami University's School of Interdisciplinary Studies, have faculty with traditional postgraduate training (i.e., focused primarily if not exclusively in one discipline). For most faculty involved in team-teaching interdisciplinary courses, initial exposure to the perspectives of the other disciplines comes through committee meetings in which courses are designed and by reviewing the readings suggested by other faculty members. Much of the command of the other discipline's perspectives is developed as the course is taught [16]. The two instructors who taught the course described in this paper were typical in that each learned about the other's field as they were teaching the course.

In addition to learning more about each other's fields, the instructors benefited from exposure to each other's methods of

lecturing, structuring and responding to assignments, and monitoring class discussions. Frequently, certain methods are used more in some disciplines than in others. For example, the technical communication faculty member used peer reviewing and project proposals in the course; these methods were not ones typically used by the international relations faculty member. Conversely, the international relations faculty member used discussion questions from assigned reading to structure in-class discussions; this methodology was not typically used by the technical communication faculty member.

While none of the methods are in any way discipline specific, by using a wider range of methods, the instructors enhanced students' educational experience, and both faculty members enlarged their repertoire of classroom methodologies. Instead of merely seeing the methodologies as something related to another discipline, both faculty members adapted them to other classes they teach within their own disciplines. Their experience is consistent with a report by Frost and Jean on a research study conducted at Emory University; the study, funded by a Henry Luce Foundation grant, examined discourse across scholarly boundaries. Frost and Jean report that about half the teachers who participated in the study altered their teaching styles and techniques based on their exposure to interdisciplinary discourse [17].

The study also found that the influence of interaction with scholars from other disciplines had a significant influence on faculty motivation. Participants in the study reported that they had increased motivation for their scholarly work as a result of interdisciplinary discourse [18]. The faculty members who taught Global Perspectives have gone on to co-author a scholarly book as a result of their experience teaching an interdisciplinary course together. The experience has also stimulated and broadened their individual research efforts.

The biggest drawback was that both instructors felt it was difficult to introduce students to the concepts of two very different fields in one brief semester while also having them produce a major documentation project. The challenge was most pronounced for students who were neither International Relations nor Technical Communication majors. Students who were majoring in one or the other field and were juniors tended to have fewer difficulties with the assignments than those students who were non-majors. This suggests that interdisciplinary courses may work better when students have a basic familiarity with at least one of the two fields being taught.

BENEFITS TO THE CURRICULUM

In general interdisciplinary courses provide students with a richer experience of their major field of study and help them develop the ability to see important connections that cross disciplines. Students develop a broader perspective on knowledge and improve their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In many cases, they may also have a higher level of interest and engagement in the course.

The particular course described in this paper addressed a major concern in higher education today: the need to educate students to be global citizens capable of meeting the serious challenges facing the world in the twenty-first century. This concern is relevant for all college students regardless of their majors. Beyond the general concern, this course addressed the need to further internationalize the curriculum, particularly for the

technical communication students. It greatly enhanced the technical communication students' knowledge of intercultural communication specifically as it applies to audience analysis for international documentation projects. Further, the course helped all the students develop their ability to understand the role of effective communication and power issues in addressing global concerns as well as their ability to view these concerns from a perspective that is not restricted by one discipline or by national boundaries.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that interdisciplinary courses provide many far-reaching benefits for students and faculty, and that such courses have the potential to greatly expand and internationalize the curriculum at institutions of higher education. When developing such courses it is useful for us to think beyond our tradition notions of which fields might complement one another. For example, many existing courses pair students in technical communication with students in engineering and science. While such collaboration has obvious value, there is also a need to expand our notions of interdisciplinarity and to seek out collaborations that span a wide range of disciplines which complement and inform our fields. Such partnerships have the potential to enhance the experiences of students and faculty, as well as to contribute to a richer curriculum that addresses the challenges of the modern workplace and of global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

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