

Fostering Integrative Learning through Faculty Development*

Pat Hutchings, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

It would be hard, we suspect, to find a faculty member who opposes integrative learning. Whatever the field or institutional setting, learning that pulls the pieces together and “adds up” is something educators are likely to want for their students. Indeed, the theme of integration is a long-standing goal of liberal education—one whose importance has arguably been heightened as the capacity to make connections has become both more challenging and more important than ever (Huber and Hutchings, 2004).

Teaching for integrative learning is not, however, something that comes naturally. In many academic settings, powerful forces work against such teaching. Graduate education prepares young scholars to focus on specialties and sub-specialties within their disciplines. Promotion and tenure guidelines - and patterns of external funding - often reinforce the tendency towards work that is narrowly focused. Curricula are divvied up into “a collection of disconnected individual courses” (Leskes, 2006, p. 31), and there are few mechanisms for knowing how well students connect ideas across courses (be it within the discipline or across fields, between curriculum and co-curriculum, or between academic work and engagement with social and community issues), making it difficult to get integrative learning clearly on the agenda or seen as something that needs further attention. The bottom line is that teaching students to make meaningful connections across the various aspects of their educational experience presents significant challenges even for faculty who are thoroughly “on board.” Thus, campuses committed to integrative learning

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must make a serious institutional commitment to providing resources and opportunities through which faculty can become more integrative teachers.

Occasions for Learning about Integrative Teaching

The good news is that there are many routes to this end. On a growing number of campuses, centers for teaching and learning offer workshops, brown bag sessions, and various resources on new or newly discovered classroom approaches - like collaborative learning and problem-based learning - that can help foster integrative abilities. In collaborative learning groups, for instance, students must grapple with ideas from their peers, sorting out diverse perspectives and experiences; at their best, these kinds of exchange help students see their own ideas as part of a larger weave of understandings. In courses that employ problem-based learning, disciplinary concepts are explored in the context of cross-cutting themes and issues, or social problems. With approaches like these increasingly in evidence today, more and more faculty are taking the initiative to learn about them and try them out in their own classrooms. And those classrooms are, after all, an excellent place to begin. While integrative learning requires connections beyond the level of the individual course, building skills and habits of integrative teaching into the "regular" work of as many faculty as possible, in their own "regular" courses, is a necessary foundation for more ambitious cross-cutting approaches.

Necessary but not sufficient. Faculty also need opportunities to think about and design approaches that allow for connection-making across courses and over time—and some of the most powerful of these opportunities emerge around curriculum because it raises questions about the relationship between and among courses. It was in fact the failure to grapple with these questions that left many in higher education disappointed with Harvard's recent decision not to overhaul its general education requirements (see Ehrlich, 2006). But on many campuses curriculum is fertile ground for developing faculty's commitment to and capacity for integrative teaching. At Carleton College, for example,

faculty have been working to identify and articulate a number of cross-disciplinary literacies (quantitative reasoning, for instance, and information literacy) that can be the basis for powerful connections across the curriculum. Notably, this approach to integration does not mean that everyone must teach to an identical set of goals; indeed, the approach has freed faculty from the sense that they are, as individuals, responsible for all aspects of a broad and deep liberal education in a single trimester, because the literacies provide a map for how and where connections can most effectively be made. Carleton's experience illustrates an important point: what faculty may find most helpful in advancing integrative learning is often not a particular classroom method or curricular design but a better sense of what faculty and students are doing in other classrooms, and how to build on (but not duplicate) the efforts of their colleagues. It is for this reason that work on general education and core curricula is so powerful for integrative teaching: it invites faculty to rethink and understand their courses "as related to one another—from the perspective of student learning" (Leskes, 2006, p. 31).

Additionally, one of the most suggestive lessons from the Integrative Learning Project is about the gains to be made by focusing on key moments in the curriculum. At Massachusetts College of the Liberal Arts, for instance, the design of upper-level integrative capstone courses has been a powerful source of faculty reflection on the goals of the larger curriculum and how those can best be brought together for students in their final semesters of work; a series of workshops in which faculty collaborate to design such courses has been an opportunity to talk together about how MCLA students make connections and to build a repertoire of strategies to help them do so. At Portland State University, a special focus of work has been the "middle years" and how, in particular, transfer students do (or do not) connect their prior educational experiences with the context provided by PSU's distinctive core curriculum.

At the College of San Mateo - as on many campuses across the nation - the focus has been on the experience of beginning students, with a new team-designed and team-

taught learning community - organized around the idea of the "tragedy of the commons" - linking seven different classes. Especially because this structure is still new, faculty meet every two weeks to work on the nuts and bolts of integrating the curriculum - and also to compare notes about the theme of the commons and how it looks from various disciplinary vantage points. In one such meeting, members of the learning community team practiced mini-lectures they planned to present when the seven classes met as a group (as they periodically do): "As we listened to and critiqued these different disciplinary viewpoints," says one member of the team, "we found ourselves asking questions and discussing issues as if we were students ourselves. By teaching one another, we all felt more able to teach and model integrative thinking in our own classrooms" (Mach, 2006). The San Mateo experience illustrates an important theme from work in the national learning communities movement: linked curricular structures "serve a dual agenda of providing an alternative general education pathway for students and an opportunity for faculty development in which teachers 'break frame,' thinking about curricula and teaching in a new way" (McGregor, 1996, p. 68).

It is not only at the point of design that curricular work is a powerful occasion for work on integrative learning, however. Occasions that bring educators together to assess the effects of curriculum (and teaching) are also powerful. Indeed, assessment, done right, can be a rich context for faculty development around integrative learning. At Philadelphia University, for instance, faculty from professional areas have worked with those in the liberal arts to assess an integrative senior paper assignment that requires students to connect knowledge of their professional specialization (textiles for instance) with a sense of larger historical, cultural, and economic contexts. The design and evaluation of such assessments can bring faculty together across different disciplinary cultures to clarify their collective goals related to integrative learning, make judgments about whether those goals are being met, and strategize about possible improvements.

The power of assessment as an occasion for faculty reflection on integrative learning also brings to mind the growing use of electronic portfolios in which students document and reflect on their work over time (be it a semester or across several years). At La Guardia Community College such portfolios not only assist students to construct a more integrated educational experience; they provide grist for faculty to examine how that construction occurs, and how well it's working. More specifically, La Guardia portfolios invite faculty discussion about how to support and document individual student development, and how to encourage and assess the sort of reflection that facilitates integration (Eynon, 2006).

A Culture of Integration

Of course integration is not simply a matter of capacity. One may have the skills and know-how to connect ideas but not the inclination. In this sense, integration is also a matter of culture and values, and both students and faculty are more likely to embrace integrative thinking if the campus is a place where one finds a lively exchange of ideas and perspectives about big ideas and issues that people care about—topics that call on people to contribute different perspectives and bring their varied expertise and experience to bear in ways that create new understandings.

This kind of culture is not something that can be achieved by policy or mandate, but there are elements and activities that can nurture it. Some are informal and unscheduled: shared meals, a place for faculty to congregate and share a cup of coffee, Friday afternoon wine and cheese gatherings. Others are more formal and organized. Some campuses, for instance, identify a book that serves as a focus for discussion among both students and faculty for the year; at Salve Regina, for instance, *The Question of God*, by Armand Nicholi, was selected as the summer reading for incoming freshmen and as a focus for an ongoing faculty colloquium.

What we see in examples like these is that a serious commitment to integrative learning for students requires something that goes beyond what is usually meant by "faculty

development.” Workshops on classroom approaches that promote connection-making, work on curriculum design, and exchange around assessment and the scholarship of teaching and learning are important contexts for getting smarter about the character of integrative learning and how to promote it. But just as important is the creation of a campus culture where the academic community - faculty, staff, and, importantly, students - is engaged in the hard but joyful work of integration.

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