

Creating and Maintaining Team-Taught Interdisciplinary General Education

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Interdisciplinary curricula are gaining acceptance across the educational spectrum because they develop learners' ability to connect diverse areas of knowledge. Students gain critical thinking skills as they explore the complex issues and problems of their world through multiple perspectives. Typically students from kindergarten through college enter the kingdoms of individual teachers, learning to see the world from a series of compartmentalized perspectives. Through interdisciplinary initiatives, they are learning more connected modes of knowing (Fiscella and Kimmel, 1999; Klein and Doty, 1994; Davis, 1995; Newell, 1998). Faculty gain as well through increased opportunities for collaboration and professional development.

A combination of interdisciplinary studies and team teaching is particularly well suited to adult learners. Adults' comfort with experiential learning that is not bounded by the traditional academic disciplines provides a strong basis for integrative, interdisciplinary learning (Dinmore, 1997). Further, adults' experiences on teams of people with varying kinds of expertise and competing perspectives are good preparation for the collaborative learning modeled by teaching teams. Adults have also faced the complexities of social, personal, and professional issues. Thus, interdisciplinary team-taught courses allow them to study in ways they have experienced as essential outside the academy. Access to diverse faculty who can help them connect their life experiences with the perspectives of multiple disciplines and compare and contrast those perspectives also helps them gain a more comprehensive worldview.

We have observed that educators today seldom need to be sold on the benefits of interdisciplinary education; what they want to know is how to

do it. We are past and current directors of a twelve-year-old interdisciplinary studies program at a comprehensive university. When we attend professional conferences, conversations with faculty and administrators from other institutions often follow a predictable pattern. Upon learning of our program, colleagues respond, "What a great idea!" followed by, "But that would never work here," or, "We've tried that but it didn't work. We just never seemed to have enough [faculty, administrative, financial] support." A tone of frustration dominates.

As the conversations progress, we fill in some details, which often leads to an intense set of follow-up questions and even some "Aha!" moments: "How does your program actually work?" "How do you gain institutional buy-in?" "How do you afford team teaching?" "How do you form teams?" "How do you develop teamwork?" "How do you deal with dissension to your plan?" "How do you deal with institutional politics?" "How do you keep your program fresh and focused?" True, each academic institution has a character of its own, but our university is not an anomaly. Because we are confident that our experiences with these issues can be adapted elsewhere, this chapter presents our typical answers to these questions.

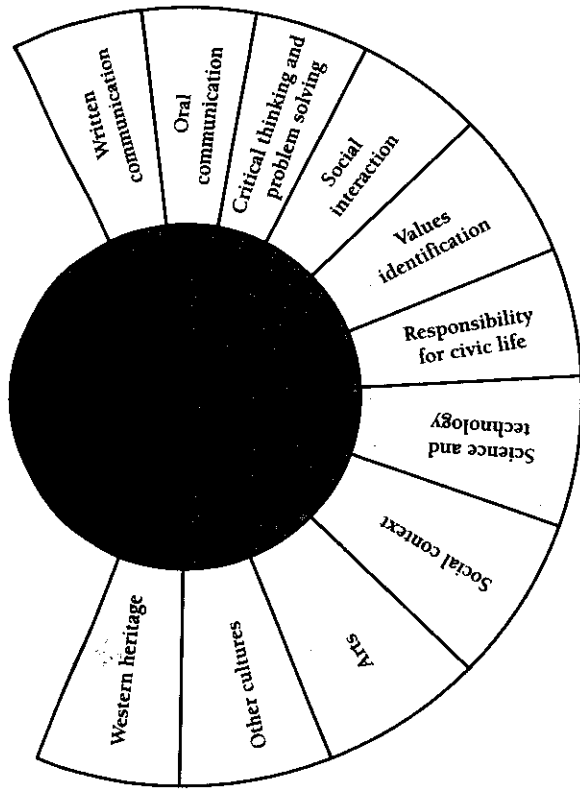
How Does This Model Work?

The University of Hartford's All-University Curriculum is an assemblage of approximately twenty-five interdisciplinary courses, all team developed and most team-taught, bringing together students, faculty, and ideas from across the units of the university. The courses are divided into five breadth categories; each course is structured to provide active learning opportunities and concentrates on the development of two essential abilities deemed necessary for educated undergraduates (see Figure 2.1). All students in baccalaureate programs are required to complete at least four of these courses, one from each of the categories furthest from their major. Most courses are taught in a dispersed team model. Two or three faculty from different disciplines come together once a week with their separate sections of about twenty-five students each for a joint discussion, debate, presentation, or performance. They also meet in individual sections once or twice a week.

How Do You Gain Institutional Buy-In?

Colleagues from other institutions often attribute their failed attempts to institute a university-wide interdisciplinary team-taught general education program to the fact that the change was mandated by administration. At our institution, change was driven from the bottom up and supported from the top down, an effective combination. Faculty frustration with existing general education requirements and compartmentalized disciplines, plus some faculty's desire to interact creatively and learn from colleagues, became starting points for discussions that eventually resulted in curricular change.

Figure 2.1. University of Hartford All-University Curriculum



A sustainable program must also have adequate administrative support, including recognition within the institution, sufficient allocation of resources, and a cohesive structure for day-to-day operation of the program. Interdisciplinary team-taught general education courses need to be housed within an appropriate, and perhaps innovative, curricular and administrative structure that encourages collaboration across departments, divisions, and even colleges. We recommend a centralized structure with a designated director, the role we both have held, rather than having administrative responsibility dispersed across units whose primary loyalties are to their disciplines. This leader needs an independent budget and a strong voice in broader policy and budget matters, either through a position on the governing body (such as the council of chairs or deans) or direct reporting to someone with that position (for example, a dean of undergraduate studies). The program needs a particular office location with adequate support staff. Typical responsibilities of the administrator may include scheduling, faculty recruitment, oversight of evaluation, allocation of funds for instructional materials and faculty development, and relations with students, administrators, departments, and colleges.

In addition, responsibility for the program needs to be shared by faculty representatives from across the units of the institution, so that the program continues to be something "we" want, not something "they" require. A committee of representatives, chaired by the program director, can oversee liaison with their units and share in faculty recruitment and decisions regarding curriculum and policy.

How Do You Afford Team Teaching?

When an institution is exploring the wide variety of existing collaborative teaching models, it must consider the impact they have on resources. Team teaching is often defined as an expensive approach (Gaff and Ratcliff, 1997). A common solution is to limit teamwork to either the planning stages or early iterations of a course. The assumption is that as faculty work together, they become more conversant with the methods and materials from other disciplines involved in a course and gain facility in teaching it themselves. This approach, however, relies on a traditional model of solitary expert plus learners. If we want to bring our students into a more collaborative model of knowledge and problem solving, if we want them to experience knowledge as negotiated among different, perhaps competing, perspectives, designing team teaching as an ongoing part of the program makes excellent sense. But then we are back to the cost of two or more faculty teaching a single class.

Hartford's dispersed team model deals effectively with such pivotal issues as class size, faculty-student ratios, faculty time, and the calculation of teaching load while enhancing overall quality. Since team members have their own sections, they receive full compensation and teaching credit. This model effectively "balance[s] the values of faculty collaboration and all the benefits it brings to students with the realities of administering and budgeting academic programs" (McDaniel and Colarulli, 1997, p. 30). It acknowledges that team teaching does not equal one-half the work and should not be an overload. Students gain the benefits of meeting weekly with the entire cross-disciplinary faculty team and sharing in their conversation about the complex issues at hand while also having regular small group learning activities; faculty gain the opportunity to work closely with diverse colleagues while also maintaining a good amount of autonomy. Colleagues from other institutions who question us generally find that this model offers long-term sustainability.

How Do You Form Teams?

The best teams typically form in the faculty dining room, corridors, and offices, with plans formed from shared interest in a topic, such as urban ethnic arts. But an open call, for example, to a meeting to discuss a particular topic area, may also yield new teams. Or the director, committee members, or others may identify faculty who come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds but work on related topics, and link them to create a team. The literature contains many discussions of team teaching as similar to a marriage. Extending this comparison, one sees in practice that many arranged marriages can end up working as well as those born of long association and common passion. Some such teams will decide to continue work together over many subsequent years, having formed a productive collaboration.

("We've bonded," says one of our colleagues, rather surprised.) Other cases involve potentially provocative differences in ideas or teaching styles that look to make a wonderful mix for students—a biologist who emphasizes scientific objectivity with a sociologist who emphasizes the social construction of knowledge, for example, or a dynamic lecturer with an excellent facilitator of group projects—but after perhaps one attempt, faculty may not be interested in facing those differences day after day. At the very least, one has introduced faculty who could be on the same campus for years without ever becoming acquainted and sharing ideas.

As teams form, the director needs to be ready to deal with an array of practical complications beyond those typically involved in departmental planning. For example, the myriad pieces of university scheduling need to be worked out anew each semester, including the relationship of a team's schedule to the schedules of each participating department and the availability of rooms. All this can become a complicated task in institutions where scheduling can be equated with a house of cards or even gridlock.

How Do You Develop Teamwork?

For each facet of a course that the student masters, so must the teacher. Before faculty members can effectively team-teach an interdisciplinary course, they must become the learner, crossing the boundaries of their own professional discipline and expanding their scope of knowledge. As a team, they must work cooperatively with others to select and revise content, develop a syllabus, formulate objectives, select readings and assignments, and create evaluation tools. Faculty members have unique teaching styles, different comfort levels with the subject matter, and varying experiences in working on teams. They also have a varied ability to deal with group dynamics and to give and take to strike a balance that results in an effective learning environment for students. This scenario may appear to be daunting, but it is not insurmountable.

A wide variety of faculty development opportunities can encourage participation in collaborative work. One excellent approach, offering specific guidance with both content and pedagogy, is to have faculty sit in on a team-taught course the semester before teaching it (with a stipend or course load reduction if the institution can afford it). Another good option is summer workshops. Either internally or externally funded if possible (even a modest amount helps), these create a concentrated space for faculty to work together, read and discuss shared texts, plan, and evaluate. They enable the formation of new courses and new teams, as well as keep ongoing teams motivated and courses evolving.

Even with experience, many faculty lack confidence in their ability to help students compare and contrast disciplinary perspectives, design assignments outside their usual modes, and work well with other faculty in the classroom. We have held ongoing workshops, cosponsored with the campus's

teaching and learning center, about these issues and many more. Arranging for workshops across collegiate lines amid competing meetings can be tricky, but even given fluctuating attendance, they keep important issues at the fore and attract good numbers of interested faculty.

Faculty need further support to make collaborative interdisciplinary work a regular part of their professional lives. Funding from the program for travel to professional conferences offers important tangible support. Our faculty now travel, sometimes in teams, to present at such conferences. Moreover, policies for promotion and tenure and for merit must support rather than deter faculty from engaging in collaborative interdisciplinary work. Faculty repeatedly cite the intrinsic rewards of doing such work but need to know that the extra time and effort they have invested will receive external recognition as well. Promotion and tenure guidelines and annual report forms can invite mention of collaborative interdisciplinary activities, and voices from outside the faculty member's immediate unit can be allowed key input during the promotion and tenure process.

How Do You Deal with Dissension to Your Plan? (Or, Does One Size Fit All?)

The best attempts at designing a program in harmony with the goals and politics of an individual institution and getting all constituents of a campus community to buy into it almost inevitably come up against the will of individual faculty members. Faculty development activities can win over many but not all. Amid the designing of our program, it became clear, for example, that one course team was composed of experienced humanities faculty who already felt comfortable crossing disciplinary boundaries and had no intentions of working together. Faculty on another team—and excellent ones at that—stated that they would not team-teach. One school of thought would be simply to muscle all these recalcitrant folk into line. But they would have simply withdrawn from the program, depriving students of the opportunity to work with some truly interdisciplinary scholar-teachers. The former team ended up meeting regularly, arguing out a couple of common texts each semester and sharing course materials, but teaching separately, while the latter has some teams alongside some self-contained sections.

Another kind of problem concerns the intended team of Person A who teaches Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings and Person B who teaches Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Neither can or will change schedules (sometimes it is difficult for an administrator to distinguish the operative verb here). The result in this case is perhaps joint planning and periodic visits across sections by each. Such flexibility can be particularly useful in a program serving both traditional-age and adult learners, since the time spread of courses is so great—often from 8 A.M. to 10 P.M.

Another variation is that after agreeing to try the dispersed team model, some of our faculty said their own teaching style made them never want to

put more than twenty-five students in a room together. Some such teams may work out a compromise whereby they plan jointly but bring their sections together not every week but perhaps at the beginning or end of each unit, for special happenings staged by either faculty or students (for example, student presentations or role plays). Once again, forcing all faculty into a common mold can result in losing good faculty.

And then there is the other side: some pairs of faculty may have so much fun being in the classroom together that they do not want to split up for discussion groups. One of our course teams found that they enjoyed arguing with each other in class so much and that students became so drawn into the debate that they continued to meet with combined sections.

We have found that effective structure plus flexibility in practice makes good sense politically and pedagogically. We know many disagree and would insist on a single plan to avoid diffusion of program goals and ultimate entropy of the program itself. To the contrary, programs that insist on common practice can easily lose faculty support and ultimately be voted out of existence. Regardless of the eloquence of program goals and elegance of enactment plan, one size does not fit all and does not need to; a structure with stability may be the one that can bend a bit.

How Do You Deal with Institutional Politics?

To sustain a team-teaching program, the program administrator needs to be a proficient negotiator. In a curriculum cutting across the vertical structures of an institution, every course demands negotiation. Sometimes a long-term pattern results, with departments or individuals so committed to a course that they staff it semester after semester. Other negotiations are far less simple, for the fact remains that most team-taught general education programs rely on faculty hired, tenured, and promoted from within departments. It is of course possible to create a program with its own faculty lines, but many institutions will need or want to draw on the expertise of faculty within their diverse units. Indeed, bringing faculty together across boundaries, and thereby creating a sense of community, not designing yet another new department or division off in its own corner, was one of the goals of our program.

Faculty with disciplinary homes, however, have competing allegiances. Departments need to staff introductory courses as well as an adequate number and variety of upper-level offerings. Despite philosophical commitment to the goals of general and liberal education, the refrain from beleaguered department chairs and from some who are less beleaguered but also less committed to the program is, "I'd love to supply someone for the Adult Journey team, but we simply can't spare anyone this semester." And the refrain even from willing faculty members might be, "I'd love to join the team this semester, but we have no one to teach. Maybe next semester."

A supportive institutional culture in which chairs willingly allow and even encourage their faculty to participate is the ideal starting point. A

director will still need to negotiate semester commitments. Various kinds of budgeting procedures can assist the process, such as funds to reimburse departments for adjunct replacement. Beyond this approach are a variety of both carrots and sticks to be considered within the political and financial situation of the individual institution—for example, incentive funds to departments whose faculty participate beyond a certain minimum level, or quotas that departments are simply required to meet. But an institution may lack resources for the former and may rightly see problems in the latter (such as a department's forcing unwilling faculty into interdisciplinary team teaching, with predictably less-than-optimal results, or a department's meeting a quota with its less strong teachers). The buy-in with practical follow-up promises better results than a strong-arm approach.

Some programs have been able to secure faculty through joint appointments with a department, or through having department-based faculty appointed as full- or part-time fellows to the interdisciplinary program for a specified length of time. The political climate of the institution needs to be considered with such realignment of faculty positions. Faculty may want to team-teach but do not want to endanger their status within the institution.

A part of the negotiations may be an acknowledgment that faculty availability to do team teaching will fluctuate according to student enrollment patterns and other external factors, such as accreditation requirements. Even as some faculty have to pull back to handle departmental courses, others may become available as the inevitable swings in majors leave their area temporarily underenrolled.

How Do You Keep Your Program Fresh and Focused?

The process of creating an interdisciplinary team-taught curriculum is never over. Inevitable faculty turnover, changes in research interests and teaching priorities, and so forth will cause teams to dissolve and even whole courses to lose their momentum, even as those same factors can bring new faculty into the program. Further, many teams go through a natural life cycle. At the beginning, everything is new and exciting. (To change the image and emphasis, one of our colleagues has claimed in print that the first offering of a team-taught interdisciplinary course should have a warning label on it. Faculty almost universally feel they need a second time to make changes.) But after a few times through, they may get restless and want to go off to new endeavors, whether a new team, new course, or new project entirely. Many particularly enjoy the early days of discovery, the serendipitous connections, before they feel they know what each other will say next. But other teams keep reinventing their course, changing materials and changing approaches. Many want to continue to work together semester after semester; when proposed a change, for variety, they respond, "No, we like each other; we're having fun."

Overall, the process of team building needs an ongoing proactive stance by director, cross-college committee, and the departments themselves. Otherwise the pulls back to traditional modes can hold sway. Indeed it is easier to

teach a self-contained course within one's own department. And when faculty get busy with multiple competing demands on their time, the easier is all too tempting.

A variety of approaches in addition to the faculty development options can assist the process of ongoing team building. A university can specifically seek to attract faculty interested in collaborative and interdisciplinary work. Job ads for our institution typically note that applicants will have the opportunity to do such teaching. Departments can receive some leverage in obtaining faculty lines if either the new professor or current members of the department will teach in the program. Orientation for new faculty can include orientation to the institution's options for team teaching and interdisciplinary studies.

Finally, nontraditional programs especially need ongoing visibility and focus. As the original enthusiasm wears off and new initiatives divert both faculty and student attention, strategies need to be in place to keep both faculty and students aware of program rationale: why, after all, are they being asked to enter a classroom with two or three faculty representing two or three disciplines? Syllabi can contain explicit comment on how the goals and methods of a particular course relate to the goals of the program. Classes can take a step back from a particular discussion to consider issues of team teaching and interdisciplinary learning: "What are the implications of faculty's arguing with each other in class? Does it mean we don't get along? What other possible implications are there? For example, how do competing views of world hunger get negotiated into programs and policies?" University catalogues can give appropriate visibility to team teaching and interdisciplinary learning. A newsletter can reach the entire campus community, and a regular or occasional column can appear in the campus newspaper.

Conclusion

Underlying all our suggestions about the practicalities of creating and sustaining a program is a firm belief that the complications are worth it: that the solitary expert and an approach to important social issues through a single discipline are not the only modes to which we should expose undergraduates. A flexible team-teaching model should continue to be one of the options for creative faculty who want to encourage both traditional-age and adult learners to make connections across disciplines, their schooling, and their lives.

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