

Integrating General Education into a Communication Curriculum: The Bigger Picture Question

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Abstract

This paper describes an ongoing attempt to modify the content of a community college communications course in the context of the institution's recently adopted General Education mission. This mission aims to provide students with a broad and deep knowledge base, in addition to a set of proficiencies, which will help them lead successful personal and professional lives. The Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York (CUNY) developed an assignment that primarily addresses the student's ability to integrate and reflect upon inter-disciplinary information. The paper reviews the student deficiencies that emerged in fulfilling this assignment and the group's ongoing refinement of the assignment to overcome these deficiencies and better promote an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all knowledge.

Keywords: general education; integrative learning; community college

Introduction

Community colleges, colleges and universities have considered and re-considered their individual underlying educational philosophies for higher education over many years. Since the publication of the Harvard "Redbook" (Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society, 1945), the term General Education has proliferated in the literature on education in the United States. General Education has been implemented in Europe as well (Ryba, 1995). Although specifically defined by each individual institution of higher education to meet their particular missions, a

common purpose of General Education is to provide students with a fundamental basis of knowledge, skills and experience that will enable them to thrive professionally, personally, and as citizens. Adoption of General Education by colleges and universities around the United States has proceeded at a variable pace; furthermore, modifications to established General Education programs continue to occur in response to intellectual changes, increased diversity of student populations, revised curricula, and for other reasons (Mardirosian, 2009).

Bronx Community College (BCC) first began deliberations on the topic of General Education within the institution's curriculum in 2002 in response to the initiative by the City University of New York (CUNY) to consider whether and how to implement General Education in the CUNY system within the larger context of questions regarding the nature of a 21st century college education. BCC is a part of CUNY, a public university system consisting of 23 institutions that include senior and community colleges. A series of discussions subsequently occurred over the following eighteen months at BCC that included input from the Departmental chairs' retreat, individual academic departments, the BCC Curriculum Committee, the Committee on Academic Standing, as well as extensive open forum debate in the Senate. In 2004, the Senate voted to approve a General Education mission statement along with a set of General Education proficiencies.

The General Education mission of BCC is the preparation of "well-informed, globally aware, engaged world citizens making a meaningful contribution to society" who are furthermore "self-directed, committed to their physical and mental well being, and to lifelong learning." Bronx Community College organises the General Education proficiencies into 6 areas: communication, reasoning and analysis, mathematical methods, scientific methods, information literacy and personal growth/professional development. The philosophy behind BCC's General Education requirements rests on the idea that the acquisition by students of a broad and deep store of knowledge as well as transferable general skills will generate lifelong thinkers and learners.

Zeszotarski (1999) identifies 3 basic varieties of recognised General Education structures: programs that emphasise core coursework; programs that employ distributional requirements, or that allow students to choose from among an array of select courses; or, programs where students draw entirely from electives to design their

individual programs. Bronx Community College adopted a core set of courses but added a set of proficiencies to support its mission. The incorporation of a proficiency or competency-based approach into General Education requirements is not uncommon (e.g., Schwartzman, 2006; Kiger, 1996; Outcomes Assessment Task Force at Owens Community College, 1994). Core courses at BCC include a Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication course, along with History of the Modern World and Fundamentals of Composition and Rhetoric courses from History and English. In addition, many students take mathematics and sciences courses. Development of the proficiencies is encouraged via numerous educational experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.

BCC shares the view that by providing students with opportunities to understand information within a broader, inter-disciplinary context they will develop skills needed to engage effectively as informed world citizens (Hurley, 2008; Mardirosian, 2004; Kimskey, 2002; Zeszotarski, 1999). In this view, the ability to effectively assimilate information across numerous disciplines provides students with an opportunity to do *integrative learning*, or with a means of understanding, noting the interconnectedness and reflecting on their otherwise unrelated experiences. Furthermore, such learning experiences lead to deeper, more comprehensive understanding.

Addressing some portion of General Education requirements in an introductory communications course is becoming more widespread (Meyer, Hunt, Hopper, Thakkar, Tsubakopoulos & Van Hoose, 2008). Fundamentals of communication courses are notably suited for addressing an integrative learning goal because they naturally draw on the input of various disciplines relevant to basic human communication processes that include sociology, psychology, economics, and art. Teaching students to acquire, use, and evaluate and communicate information is at the core of communications education. At BCC and other colleges, a fundamental communications course is part of the core requirement, and thus makes possible introducing integrative learning activities to the entire student body. Moreover, this course is generally taken early in students' academic careers, providing a strong foundation of shared knowledge upon which to build their academic and personal experiences.

The Integrative Question Assignment

The Communication Arts and Sciences (CAS) Department faculty established a written research assignment with the aim of encouraging the integration of information across disciplines in 2006. This assignment was initially dubbed the “integrative question” assignment. The department, in addition, created a bank of such questions from which faculty members could draw.

The Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication course is organised into thematic units including communication models/listening; culture; perception; nonverbal communication. The integrative questions were developed based upon key course topics within each of these units. For example, topics have included changing perceptions of the self, co-cultures, and object or pictorial language as a form of nonverbal communication. The questions are typically formulated with a broad question or introductory statement followed by a more specific guiding question. For example, a question requiring synthesis of information that intersects both economics and nonverbal communication was “Proponents of school uniforms argue that uniforms make school safer and reduce the cost of clothing for families. To what extent do you agree with this statement? And, if cost is a serious issue, what policies should be put in place for students who cannot afford to buy uniforms?” To integrate art and perception in communication, students were asked “Many people view graffiti as vandalism and others see it as a very real art form. How do you tell the difference?” Other questions dealt with the relationship between communication and other disciplines, such as history, medicine, law, and sociology.

In this original version of the assignment, faculty members individually chose one question from the bank and assigned it to their students with instructions to provide an answer in a five-page research paper. Students were asked to develop and support a thesis on the topic and include a minimum number of 5 peer-reviewed journal articles to support this thesis, meet the style and structural requirements of a college research paper and generate an appropriately formatted bibliography. Students also received instruction on the nature of plagiarism. Some classes reviewed basic writing principles (e.g., topic choice, planning, outlining, thesis development, etc.) as well. Student inclusion in classes that did or did not review basic writing principles was based solely on student self-selection of their class schedule prior to the beginning of the semester.

Although the writing assignment targeted primarily integrative learning it also addressed several General Education proficiency goals, including communication, information literacy (use of databases), and reasoning and analysis.

To determine the value of this assignment, 250 out of a possible ~1700 copies of students' research papers were collected and reviewed by the Director of Academic Assessment and by the Faculty Director of General Education, who also served as the CAS chairperson. The results of the review were disappointing, as they revealed several challenging deficits about students' preparation for this kind of assignment. In particular they suggested that students had difficulty with integrating information across disciplinary boundaries; additionally, the results revealed problems with undertaking adequate database searches, with using appropriate research manuscript style that included grammar, structural organisation and appropriate citation of source materials. Consideration of these results led us to consider several possible rationales for these deficiencies, including an absence of prior exposure to critical thinking tasks, a lack of understanding of the requirements of the assignment, or unfamiliarity with basic research paper style guidelines, or some combination thereof. Such problems with information literacy skills and with appropriate research paper formatting by students in communications courses have been documented elsewhere (Meyer et al., 2008).

Revising the Assignment

It was concluded that if a majority of the students had insufficient prior exposure to tasks that require integrative processing, then perhaps they needed clearer guided instruction to assist them in understanding what was required of them. This might include more explicit verbal and written instructions as well as the provision of models of integrative thinking. Accordingly, strategic adjustments to the assignment were devised for the following semester to address these concerns. These included the introduction of new classroom activities (entitled prompts) aimed to provide models of integrative processing. Professors explicitly described the goal of the prompt, dubbed the "bigger picture prompt," and clearly elucidated its relation to the written assignment, now re-named the "bigger picture assignment."

This adjustment was made in the hope that students would better appreciate the “bigger picture” connection. The discussion of the bigger picture prompts occurred on two occasions during the semester, in the form of a professor-guided classroom discussion. These discussions commenced with the presentation of a question from the question bank relating to the unit theme for that day. In the ensuing 5-7 minute discussion the professor elicited responses that exemplified how to analyse and integrate information from disparate disciplines. In addition, the professor elucidated the connection between that day’s discussion and the forthcoming written assignment, and explained how the assignment required the integration of information across disciplines as well. Students were also instructed on the acceptability of sources that could be included in the bibliography (e.g., peer reviewed journals, published books).

For example, in one class period where the relevant unit was nonverbal communication and the prompt was “Marginalised groups have been systematically denied access to the mainstream art world. For such groups art can serve as a source of identity and empowerment. How might graffiti do this?” the class would be engaged in discussion regarding how graffiti as a form of expression might influence group identity. Leading questions might be employed by the professor to assist students in exploring the connections between the use of an artifact in the formation of identity and sub-culture associations. Students could furthermore be asked how and if they think such associations might influence identity management by individuals. Psychological concepts of reflected appraisal and reference groups might be integrated into the guided discussion to allow students to cultivate these concepts and engage in integrative thinking. Then the professor could explicitly state how the preceding discussion, in terms of its exploration of connections between communication and psychology, was comparable to the expectations for their upcoming written assignment.

As a further adjustment of the written assignment, the CAS faculty developed additional questions for the question bank with continued emphasis on an inter-disciplinary theme. The questions were again written with the goal of addressing a particular connection between communication and another discipline. For example, a question that targeted the relationship between nonverbal communication and psychology was “Proponents of school uniforms argue that the uniforms help students feel more like their peers than different from them. What effect does this have on self-esteem?” A question targeting the relationship between communication in co-cultures and sociology/psychology

included “How does the use of the “n” word and “b” word in hip-hop music impact listener’s self esteem?” Additional information and activities were incorporated that aimed to improve awareness and understanding of appropriate writing style and plagiarism.

Student papers were again carefully reviewed after implementation of the prompts. On this occasion, CAS faculty members examined 2 randomly-chosen assignments from each of the 50 sections (a section is an individual class unit containing approximately 28 students) of the Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication course for the semester. Although some minor progress in terms of improved manuscript style was noted over the previous semester’s results, the changes were not entirely satisfactory. Despite the concerted effort made in this version of the assignment to clarify expectations, there was limited improvement in students’ ability to effectively integrate sources from communications and the relevant fields of study. Many students continued to demonstrate difficulties with research including with identifying and utilising supportive sources. Overall writing skills remained largely unsatisfactory replete with poor grammar and deficient structure. Finally, awareness and understanding of plagiarism remained minimal.

Despite the persistence of the problems noted above, the CAS faculty judged the benefit of an integrative learning experience from the assignment would be significant enough to justify further modification. A small committee engaged in extensive work to improve the specificity of the questions and to reconsider the overall format of the project. These efforts resulted in another iteration of the assignment. The existing questions were edited to provide greater transparency for the students. In particular, students were no longer asked to identify the targeted inter-disciplinary association between communication and other academic fields of study. These links were rendered more obvious by posing questions as a binary choice. An example of a question addressing nonverbal communication and the law was “Assuming that schools would provide the uniforms, do you think the government should mandate uniforms or do you think these laws would limit students’ rights to use clothing to express their sense of self?” A question addressing communication in co-cultures and the law was “Assuming that government medical insurance would cover the cost, do you think a law should be passed mandating that all babies born with profound hearing loss be fitted with cochlear

implants, or do deaf parents have the right to refuse?" Additionally students received instruction regarding grammar, overall structure, and information literacy. Finally, the minimum page requirement was reduced to three pages in hopes of improving the quality of the papers by allowing students to synthesise a potentially more manageable amount of information and focus on overall cohesion.

Discussion and Implications

Bronx Community College intends to prepare students for lifelong pursuit and acquisition of knowledge in the context of being productive and contributing members of our diverse society. General Education at BCC was developed in keeping with the school's larger commitment to developing key knowledge and proficiencies for their students as well as preparing them to transfer to 4-year schools.

In 2006, a project, initiated by the faculty from the CAS department, sought to create a written assignment for the Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication course which would encourage integrative learning. Results from the first iteration of the assignment revealed that students experienced difficulties including, integrating information across disciplines, deficient research skills, inability to produce well-structured and grammatically sound arguments, as well as a poor understanding of plagiarism. These latter results led to a modification of the assignment that now included supplemental activities and more explicit language to increase the transparency of the assignment expectations. Despite these changes, the original problems were found to persist with comparable deficiencies involving scope, content and form. A third iteration of the assignment with more focused and attainable goals has currently been implemented and is ongoing. Expectations for this version are that students will be better able to demonstrate an understanding of the integration of diverse perspectives, a goal at the center of the BCC General Education mission. While preliminary results seem promising, additional review is underway.

Integrative learning is frequently touted as part of higher education General Education objectives. A key objective of General Education requirements at BCC is to provide opportunities to learn from a broad scope of perspectives and subsequently integrate information across disciplines as well as appreciate the intersections between

disciplines. Current pedagogical options for implementing this goal include learning communities, capstone projects, inter-disciplinary programs, and electronic student portfolios (Huber, Brown, Hutchings, Gale, Miller, & Breen, 2007). The experience described above offers a useful potential supplement to these various integrative learning options.

What is clear already from this ongoing project is that the modifications did not yield the expected results. Perhaps faculty could take an even stronger instructional role in the teaching of information literacy, writing mechanics, correct citation, and making connections between different disciplines, as all of these abilities are essential to effective information acquisition. Other modifications might be considered, including alternative types of assignments (e.g., annotated bibliography; journal), or modifying the current assignment such that a scheduled peer assessment be included as a stage in the writing process. A key lesson from this experience then is that in achieving General Education goals, assignments such as the one at BCC need ongoing re-examination to better match student abilities and direct their outputs. While the particular urban demographics of BCC may have influenced to some degree the results of this General Education assignment, the similarity of these results to those of other studies in schools with different populations (Meyer et al., 2008) suggests that the experience is generalisable and is important to Communications professors and practitioners of General Education.

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