

Title: Scaffolding the Interdisciplinary Research Experience

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Summary: A philosophy professor teaching an interdisciplinary course redesigns and re-scaffolds the research paper assignment to keep students engaged in the topic of the course as well as the process of doing interdisciplinary research.

Background:

I have come to believe that this portfolio describes a journey into the heart of the darkness surrounding one of the humanities' most notorious institutions: the research paper. It had become a source of banality in the Liberal Education Capstone course I taught each spring: LE300 "Seminar in Interdisciplinary and Integrative Learning." While the subject of the course I was teaching was exciting: the ethics and psychology of humor, the work took all the excitement out of the course.

In this portfolio I describe how, through the redesign and re-scaffolding of the research paper assignment, I managed to keep students engaged in the topic of the course while also keeping them engaged in the process of doing interdisciplinary research. Topics for the research paper turned from broad, banal topics like "Humor and War" to ethical and psychological explanations of the sudden creepiness of clowns (a fine art major), the socio-psychological ethics of tickling (a public relations major), and whether dolphins can really be said to have a sense of humor (a biology major).

In the process, I learned a great deal about the power of re-designing tools in a course to achieve intentional aims. However, I believe I learned more about how very small aspects of assignments can make a great deal of difference in how students perceive the meaning of a task. Often, as I describe later in this portfolio's section on Student Work, it was a very small change in how I asked students to work that ended up making the biggest difference.

The course I chose for this project has its roots in the humanities, but is not a humanities course itself – LE300R: The Ethics and Psychology of Humor. It is a 300-level course with no real pre-requisites other than being a junior. All students must take an LE300 course as part of the general education program at Park. The goal of LE300 (which is officially titled "Seminar in Interdisciplinary and Integrative Learning") is to teach students to think in an interdisciplinary and integrative fashion about the disciplinary work they have completed in their general education program so far. Each LE300 section has a different topic emphasis and the emphasis of this section is humor.

The course is divided into two main parts: the first part is dedicated to gaining knowledge about humor from various disciplinary perspectives and subjecting it to some critical techniques. The second part is dedicated to writing a longer interdisciplinary research paper and delving into

interdisciplinary skills. There were originally four main assignments in the course: two shorter papers that ask students to criticize disciplinary insights from philosophy and psychology about humor, one paper that focuses on a group reflection, and a “Core Assessment” Interdisciplinary research paper on a topic of the students’ choosing that is related to humor and the disciplines. There are also two main exams: the first one on humor and the second on interdisciplinary methods and terminology.

My goals for the course are as follows:

Primary (interdisciplinary skills goals):

1. Asking meaningful questions about complex issues
2. Collaborating well with others
3. Assembling and evaluating information from multiple sources
4. Comparing and contrasting issues to reveal patterns and connections
5. Synthesizing information to create integrative frameworks and holistic understandings
6. Writing an interdisciplinary research paper

There are also secondary goals that surround gaining knowledge of humor:

1. Theories of humor
2. Cognitive development of humor
3. The social psychology of humor
4. Ethics of racist, sexist, and other types of jokes
5. Humor as an aesthetic experience

The course’s purpose is not widely understood by students at Park. Other LE300 sections focus on War at Sea, Ethnobiology, Serial Killers as Heroes, and so on. Once students come to understand that the university does not require a seminar on a random topic to graduate, there are still some problems in setting up the interdisciplinary research exercise. While they have worked within them for most of their college careers, students are unfamiliar with the concept of academic disciplines, how to do research outside of their own disciplines, or how to integrate disciplinary insights. The Core Assessment papers tend to only approach the disciplines from the way in which they are covered in the course rather than doing independent research in the disciplines. They also seem very focused on the findings of disciplines rather than disciplinary methodologies and assumptions. Finally, their Core Assessment papers tend to make somewhat superficial points that would not require interdisciplinary research.

Right now, I would estimate that 25% of the students do very good work. Maybe one or two students will do an outstanding project. 5% fail utterly, and 60-70% of students do pretty superficial research papers that barely cross any disciplinary lines.

While I do believe that I can do a better job of teaching the material on humor, in this course redesign, I decided to focus on the primary goals of the course: the interdisciplinary skills. These are skills which students can apply to many other areas of their education and, later when they are not necessarily working in the disciplines, other areas of their lives. In particular, I wanted

to work on my ability to teach them how to ask meaningful questions and synthesize more holistic understandings. I wanted to learn better ways of teaching these skills so that they have the sense that they can bring together their insights from all of their classes in our Liberal Education program to confront big issues that arise in their careers, personal lives, and lives as citizens.

Implementation:

Before implementing my proposed innovation, I introduced the Core Assessment Project in a typical humanities fashion. Mid-way through the course, I gave the students a handout with the assignment on it. It described the outlines of the paper, what I expected in terms of research, and some basic guidelines on how to choose a topic for the assignment. The work I received in response varied in quality. Some students took the project very seriously and wrote excellent papers with compelling theses. However these papers were often based in one discipline with minimal interaction from other disciplines. Some students' projects never got off the ground – they never did any research or seemed satisfied with their topics. The vast majority of students wrote a typical paper in which they tried to research a paper about “Humor and X” (the Bible, racism, the military, etc). The topics were mostly uninteresting and students scrambled to find information on a topic that was narrow enough to be a good paper while being broad enough that someone had written on it before. Unfortunately, this meant the vast majority of these papers ended up being recitations of research that was already done without much critical thought. Students rushed through the paper at the end because of heavy schedules and the fact that they were expected to learn more information about the ethics and psychology of humor throughout the class. Both the midterm and the final exam were about humor.

I couldn't see myself teaching this course without therapy and medication for the next four years. While the original idea for the course was outstanding (who could pass up a 300-level college course where we got to analyze routines by Chris Rock and David Chapelle?), the research paper at the end of the course managed to create the worst scenario: a boring course about humor! I knew the course project was the weak spot of the course. But it is also an important piece of any capstone course. How could I get students to embrace it and learn something along the way?

My proposed innovation was to essentially re-tool all of the scaffolding around the Core Assessment, or final research project, in class. I created a more intentionally interdisciplinary way for students to choose topics, walked them through a guided research process involving the “building blocks” for their topics, and took the final third of the course and devoted it to helping students work on their research projects in class, guided by something called the “Broad Model Rubric”, created by scholars in Interdisciplinary Studies.

Early on, I intended to model topic creation in half of a class period by taking suggestions and breaking the topics down into disciplinary areas. For instance, say someone wanted to know whether it's still ethically appropriate to laugh at Bill Cosby's jokes about women. I showed them how one could break this down into disciplines like Women's Studies and Ethics and Psychology. Then I modeled how one can learn something about the psychology of humor, women's studies take on humor, the ethics of humor and bring them together to make an informed judgment on something that no one discipline could answer by itself.

Next, I intended to break them into groups that develop three research questions each and have them discuss which disciplines (I would supply a big list) would be relevant to answering those questions. I would have each present to the class and compile those into a document to put up in Canvas (our Learning Management System) and use in subsequent semesters. The next step would be to have students turn in (through the next class period) two sample questions and possibly relevant disciplines for each of those questions. Each person would present these to the class and use them as the basis for their Core Assessment Project in the course. Ideally this would happen right after we have a big discussion of disciplines at the beginning of the course.

Finally, for the in-class writing sessions, students followed along with a step-by-step chapter from a textbook on Interdisciplinary Studies and to achieve certain milestones in their projects, reported to me. During this time in the class, I introduced no new material, other than the chapters describing the Broad Model Rubric. This was designed to underline the capstone nature of the course and impart the importance of the research process. Originally, I also intended to develop an additional rubric for the project that should guide their achieving of a critical perspective on disciplinary research and an integrated, holistic approach to the issue.

Student Work:

Before implementing the planned innovation above, the majority of students' papers were, as mentioned above, poorly-researched, poorly chosen, and poorly presented. I calculated that 4 of the 17 (24%) research paper topics were not meaningful questions about complex topics. Evidence of two such papers are as follows:

- Paper A: Humor and Bullying
- Paper B: Humor and Health

After revising and implementing the new strategies for students to choose topics, students chose their topics much earlier and were able to think through them in collaboration with other students. Modeling an activity that our grant participants completed in our very first meeting, I had the students create "posters" using markers and very large post-it notes describing their initial ideas for the project, which disciplines they thought would be relevant, and what questions they thought they might face. Students put these up in shifts around the room and wandered from poster to poster asking questions.

After my planned intervention, students seemed much more involved in the research process and began to create topics that were considerably more personal to them and to their majors. While not every topic was successful, the number of original paper topics sky-rocketed and the better developed topics led to much better papers and presentations. I calculated that 14 of the 17 (82%) topics were meaningful questions about complex topics, in the first year developing the new assignment. See, for instance:

- Paper C: Clowns: Hilarious or Horrible?
- Paper D: Is Laughter Contagious?
- Paper E: The Ethics of Slapstick
- Paper F: Is Canned Laughter Ruining Our Sense of Humor?

This trend continued into the third year of the project and the second year developing the new assignment. I calculated that a full 15 of 17 (88%) of the topics were meaningful questions about complex topics. See, for instance:

- Paper G: Humor Through the Use of Homicidal Violence
- Paper H: What Makes Black Humor Black?
- Paper I: Is Magic a Parody of Reality?
- Paper J: Incongruity Theory and Memory
- Paper K: Incongruity Theory and Its Application to Childhood

Paper quality suffered somewhat in the final instance of the course, however. While students had excellent topics, and derived excellent questions from them, more papers lacked a coherent answer to their questions than in previous semesters. This suggests that a future

redesign opportunity lies in getting students to truly synthesize research gathered from different disciplinary sources with an eye towards answering (or making progress on) a complex question.

Since each student became personally invested in his or her topic and would be advancing what he or she believed to be a thought about the topic that no one had ever heard before, the second year's students scored much higher and wrote much more interesting, well-research papers.

Reflection:

The work I have completed in redesigning this course has created one of the more interesting branches in my career as an academic. I have always believed that I was good at analysis, critical thinking, and—sure—synthesizing information. But deciding to focus my redesign on teaching these skills showed me how undefined these terms were in my own lexicon. If I wasn't clear on what they meant, how could I be successfully teaching them to my students? How could our institution be successfully organizing an entire feature of our general education program around them?

What I've discovered in getting back to the basics of these skills is how much re-tooling the humanities have to do in order to get away from the idea that there is some kind of magic in the transmission of these skills. I remember this transition from the re-tooling I had to do in order to do graduate work in philosophy: de-mythologizing old geniuses and separating out the idea of wonder from the idea of magic. I now know the scale of the work that has to be done in order to de-mythologize skills of critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis, while keeping the wonder they can create front and center. I have even read two whole textbooks on interdisciplinary research trying to explain them to myself.

I was very pleased by the results of implementing my re-scaffolding of the research assignment, even one year in. My students' topics were—with one or two exceptions—tremendously better and more original. I am now eager to teach the course next semester again (and I would be eager to teach it even if the course was not about the ethics and psychology of humor!). The next project will be to erect the same kind of scaffolding around the “synthesis” learning outcome, which has challenged students in my most recent chance to teach the course.

In the end, I believe that the reimagining of the steps and scaffolding leading to the Core Assessment made this course much better at giving students skills they may use later in their lives and careers. Breaking their topics into more manageable “building blocks” also made the students' projects much easier to assess. However, it was a couple of innovations that I thought of “on the fly” which I believe might have turned out to have the best effect:

1. Because I wanted the students to take an approach where they researched the building blocks for their topic, I actually forbade them from doing a Google search or Journal search for the words that made up their actual topic. They were somewhat shocked, but after I recommended this, it occurred to me that this was a much more accurate simulation about how actual research occurs amongst professionals.
2. Because I hadn't had much success in setting up individual people in the class with smaller appointments during my office hours, I began to, when a student raised his or her hand during the workshops settings, raise the volume of my comments. Since I was usually able to be fairly helpful with the students' concerns and displayed excitement about the progress the student had made so far, I was able to more or less broadcast students solving problems with their topics within the classroom. This led to more

students seeking my help and a more interactive experience during the workshop times. It was the busiest workshop session I'd ever conducted as a professor.

3. Because students were not allowed (as per (1) above) to search directly for their topics, they were put in a situation where they were more involved in the act of creating knowledge rather than looking up what others have said about it. I advertised this in the class by telling them that they would, most likely, be the first people ever to have said something about their topics. This created a lot of eagerness for them to spend time on the conclusions section of their paper, where students before had concentrated much more on the body, research, and argument sections. The eagerness has yet to translate into exciting results, but helping that happen is my most immediate future plan.

Future Plans

My main goals now—in addition to getting some of the changes to the research project pushed out to other LE300 classes so students can have a more authentic interdisciplinary research experience—is to figure out how to teach students to synthesize the research they are doing from different disciplines in order to answer their questions. Demonstrating the ability to synthesize remains one of the consistent weak points in the students' final projects. I also plan to incorporate even more collaboration into the course. It occurred to me, when I was having students do research about their building blocks, that their reports on what women's studies has to say about humor, what biology has to say about humor, and what psychology has to say about joking and gender, their write-ups about these areas could be general enough that they could share them with their classmates who might be trying to pull-in another disciplinary insight. Furthermore, I believe I can have them turn these resources into persistent items to help other courses in future terms.