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Moving from courses to a curriculum

What does it mean to offer students a curriculum, as opposed to a series of related courses? How does a program, major, or minor encourage students to make meaningful connections between their classes so that they can truly develop the professional identities we desire? These questions have been on my mind quite a bit because I recently made the transition from a larger, public university where students tended to take an “ala carte approach” to completing a program of study, to a smaller, liberal arts college, where students follow a much more prescribed sequence of courses and we *require* students to make connections between courses. My experience this year has taught me that it is not necessarily the sequence of the courses that matters most—although that helps—rather it is the intentionality with which instructors provide students with opportunities to make meaningful connections between their courses, basically the degree to which we see our courses comprising a *curriculum*.

Granted, there were many wonderful, dedicated professors and hard-working, intelligent students at my previous university that were able to make meaningful connections between courses, but as a general rule there seemed to be very little communication about how our courses form a *curriculum*, defined by Hlebowitsh (2005) as “the deliberate, thoughtful and conscious design of the totality of the school experience in the interests of producing an educational effect.” What I have discovered since arriving at a small, liberal arts college is that there are some fairly straightforward things we can do as professors to turn our courses into a curriculum. Some of these strategies are certainly made easier by realities that are more commonly found at small, liberal arts colleges, however, my colleagues and I would argue that these strategies could easily be adopted by larger institutions, provided professors are given the time and space to talk to each other about their courses and ways to implement these relatively straightforward changes.

The first strategy we use is to provide our students with the same guiding, or essential, questions for all of our courses. Our three guiding questions reflect what we as a department believe to be the overarching questions that should guide our students’ thinking. As they move from course to course through our program they are continuously being reintroduced to these questions and then asked to think about them in light of new content and experiences. These

questions help our students see how the content of each of our courses addresses fundamental questions in the discipline and also how each of the courses contributes to a broader disciplinary understanding, which will lead to a stronger sense of identity that will stay with them as they eventually leave our program.

Rather than just having our guiding questions be relegated to the syllabus and never heard from again, we also require our students to make connections between our classes by having them work on an assignment throughout the initial sequence of three courses. This major assignment, called the Teaching Story, is started in the first course and then revisited in the next two courses. The assignment is an opportunity for our students to think deeply about our guiding questions and to make sense of them within the framework of their shared experiences. Every time they revisit the assignment in subsequent courses they are able to look upon it with fresh eyes and renewed purpose because the content of each course requires they address a different part of the issue.

Something else we do in our courses is assign the same readings in multiple classes, so, rather than simply selling back the text at the end of the term our students know that they need to hold on to those texts because they will be revisiting them in subsequent terms. Why would we trouble our students by making them read the same chapter twice in different terms? For a reason similar to why I pick up and reread important works in my field: to remind myself of the ideas that have shaped the discipline, particularly as the context in which I read them changes. In our department we believe such purposeful overlapping of content encourages our students to see connections and make meaning of material in ways that were unlikely during previous terms. Just as our students' understanding of our guiding questions change as they progress through our program so do their understanding of the content. Also, each professor brings a different interpretation of the text to the classroom so that, while the student may be reading the same text, they are being asked to think about it differently because it is a different professor asking the questions.

Another strategy, which is perhaps beyond the reach of many post-secondary institutions, was the reduced teaching load I had during my first term which allowed me time to sit in on the first and last courses in our program's sequence. This enabled me to learn firsthand exactly what our students learned in the course prior to mine and what they were expected

know, do, and become right before graduation. Simply sitting in on a colleagues course is a much more powerful way to learn what your students know than reading over the syllabus. I have grown tremendously from the opportunity to watch my colleagues teach and my courses are designed with this new knowledge in mind. Our ability to require students to take courses in sequence, essentially as a cohort, has also facilitated the coherence of our program, but I don't consider the strategies discussed in this article to be dependent on a prescribed sequence of course.

When I asked my students how they understood our courses to be connected I was surprised because their responses pointed out what I felt were less obvious, but apparently meaningful, ways our courses connected. For example, several students pointed out similar teaching methods used in our courses, reflecting the particular philosophy of education shared among the members of our department. While this ideological cohesiveness may be more common in education programs in which different approaches to teaching are studied, we feel that openly discussing what it means to teach and learn amongst non-education faculty can be a healthy way to examine how and why we do what we do in our classrooms, which could lead to overlap in both content and pedagogy in our classes.

Much has been written about student engagement, active learning, and high impact instructional practices. These are desired experiences in the college classroom and it is easy to endorse the pedagogical movement that frames them. However, even with interest and full-fledged support, there remains a short-sightedness when it comes to creating a powerful learning environment. Simply reflecting on one's own courses and teaching practices is critical, but unless we examine how our courses fit together to create *a curriculum* and purposefully designing experiences to require our students to see these connections, the silos will remain intact.

