



Teaching From a Liberal Arts Perspective

Discussions continue in the higher education community regarding the value and need for liberal arts as a key component in a college education (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008). Two questions often emerge from these conversations:

What is the ultimate value and purpose of a liberal arts education?

Karoff (2003) states

A good liberal arts education teaches students to negotiate the world around them through the development of communication, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, a sense of ethical and civic engagement, and a host of core competencies (including cross-cultural, technological, and scientific). (para 2)

Additionally, the value-added dimension of the liberal arts experience can be directly connected to “success in learning, careers, and community life” (AAC&U, 2005, p. 2). Further, Hart and Associates (2010) report that employers frequently prefer hiring students with a liberal arts college experience, noting that these students consistently demonstrate enhanced workplace skills, knowledge, and etiquette.

Which courses, competencies, and learning outcomes are most valuable and appropriate in the design and implementation of a liberal arts curriculum?

Liberal arts courses frequently form a core curriculum that embraces the natural sciences, the social sciences, mathematics, the humanities, and the arts—loosely based on the trivium and quadrivium of classical liberal arts studies. Additionally, this core curriculum often includes provisions for the demonstration of skills or competencies, including written and oral communication, critical thinking, information literacy, and civic responsibility (AAC&U, 2005). While it is generally accepted what constitutes a standard liberal arts core curriculum, institutions continue to question the details. A recent survey by Hart and Associates (2009) indicates that a remarkable 89% of responding institutions describe themselves as currently either “assessing or modifying their general education program” (p. 2). As institutions around the world grapple with curriculum issues, the typical response is to engage faculty in campus-wide investigations in search of the best collection of courses, learning outcomes, and instructional experiences.

In the search for finding the best course selections and class combinations, clearly important questions, identifying the most effective teaching



There is much at stake in seeing wider appreciation of the value of linking liberal education and effective practices as well as greater understanding of the role experiential education can play in establishing that link.... We need to take a clear, fresh look at the qualities needed for effectiveness as professionals and as citizens, to compare those qualities to the outcomes we cultivate through the arts and sciences, and to design educational formats that will empower our graduates to translate the values and skills we nurture into constructive social action. (Freeland, 2008, p. 13)



strategies to promote liberal arts across the curriculum, while equally important, often is ignored. Successful instructional experiences tend to be a combination of both content and process (i.e., what you hope to accomplish and how you plan to get there). This last element, teaching strategies, will be explored in greater detail in this issue of *The Toolbox*.

Three Approaches to Teaching That Promote Liberal Learning Across the Curriculum

By embracing the liberal arts as a pivotal aspect of campus culture, faculty reinforce the idea that well-rounded citizens are able to apply knowledge from the arts, humanities, and sciences in all aspects of their lives. In this way, liberal arts teaching concepts can be applied to every course offered at an institution regardless of whether classes are formally defined as part of a liberal arts core curriculum. Imagine the potential influence of a campus-wide initiative designed to ensure that the liberal arts become part of the total ethos of the college campus. Regardless of your academic discipline or training, consider the possibility of approaching course content, learning outcomes, and the teaching or learning experiences from a liberal arts perspective through contextualization, collaboration, and connection. This mindset provides a means to promote and celebrate the learning outcomes that are inherent in a liberal arts curriculum.

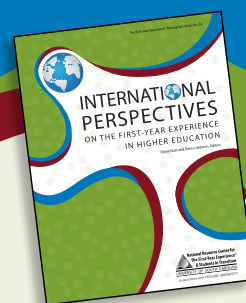
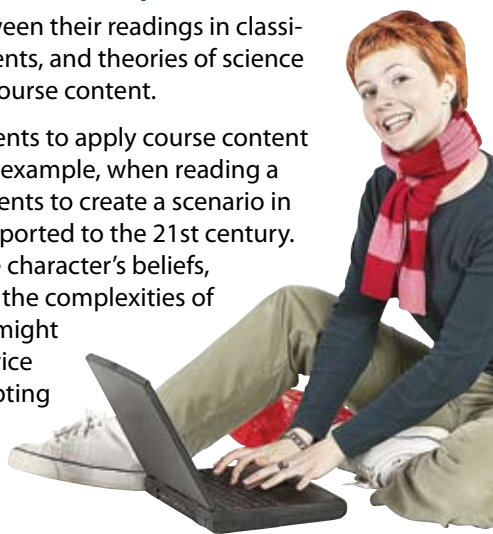
Contextualization

Contextualization is the process of translating course content into the lives and experiences of 21st-century learners. What is it about your course, its big-idea questions, readings, and class lectures or discussions that can be connected to the life and times of the millennial learner? That is a challenging question and one that all teachers should consider with due diligence.

The research of Astin (2004) and Lindholm (2007) has called attention to the interior lives of our students—their thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and commitments—and proposes that these internal variables can serve as a mechanism for driving and deepening the quality of student learning. By making a conscious choice to move beyond simply teaching facts, figures, dates, and names to more challenging issues (e.g., Why is this important? or What does this mean for you?), faculty are creating a forum for enhanced student learning and the creation of contexts for understanding (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Contextualize your students' learning experiences by

- Helping students connect-the-dots between their readings in classical literature, discussions of historical events, and theories of science with current events in the world and in course content.
- Providing assignments that require students to apply course content to modern-day issues and problems. For example, when reading a piece of 18th-century literature, ask students to create a scenario in which the main character has been transported to the 21st century. This could include an analysis of how the character's beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge would work in the complexities of a 21st-century life experience. Students might also be asked to identify the types of advice they would offer to this character in adapting to the demands of modern living.



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Diane Nutt & Denis Calderon, Editors
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Collaboration

Collaboration involves finding ways to partner with colleagues inside and outside of your discipline or department for the purpose of creating interdisciplinary learning opportunities for your students. Quite often, teaching becomes a solitary event. Although students are taught in groups, instructors rarely observe each other teaching or actively seek collaborative teaching opportunities.

By collaborating with colleagues from disciplines different from our own, you are modeling the dialogue and exchange of ideas that can lead to new levels of creative thinking. Imagine the energy that could be derived from explorations of controversial topics of discussion and the infusion of information that is relevant to your own area of teaching but outside your personal areas of expertise. Collaboration can provide those opportunities.

Collaborate with colleagues by

- Having lunch with coworkers to discuss areas of common interest, connection, and overlap between your academic disciplines. Never underestimate the power of sharing a meal together as a way of beginning the collaborative process.
- Starting a reading group to discuss the content and share opinions of a book that everyone has read.
- Talking about ways that you might do trade-offs with colleagues (e.g., exchange teaching a class in each other's courses or coteach a class)

Connection

Connection requires making a dedicated and concerted effort to bridge the gap between your course content and the academic disciplines of the liberal arts. This process strengthens your coverage of course content and validates the importance and breadth of the liberal arts.

Connect by

- Expanding the diversity of your own patterns of reading and activity (e.g., subscribe to a journal outside of your area of expertise, attend campus lectures on topics that are foreign to you, spend some time watching the History channel and C-SPAN).
- Investigating places in course content that lend themselves to amplification by bringing in music, art, history, science, or literature to the instructional process.
- Creating assignments that require students to write on a topic that is outside the discipline of your course but connected with the topic in some manner. They learn and you learn!

Contextualize! Collaborate! Connect!

Embrace the liberal arts through effective teaching.

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