Integrative Learning and USC Connect
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Marissa studied educational systems in South Africa with an intended career in secondary education. During the course of her study abroad program she had the opportunity to do a practicum at a recently integrated Zulu-Afrikaner school. . . . The most significant thing Marissa said she learned through her experience was a greater understanding of the teaching issues in post-Apartheid South Africa. When we tried to extract the transferable teaching skills she used in South Africa, she flatly responded, “I told you, nothing there is relevant to teaching here (U.S.).” . . . We were astonished . . . Marissa had given examples of skills in understanding cultural differences, needs assessment, critical thinking, problem-solving, motivating others and innovating in the face of scarce resources. We challenged her by asking, “So, if you were working in a mixed classroom of students in the U.S. with students from different national or ethnic backgrounds and income levels, might you not also use some the skills you used in South Africa?” And suddenly, Marissa had that ah ha moment of new realization.

From: Gardner, Gross, & Steglitz, I. (2008, p. 8)

What is integrative learning?

Integrative Learning in the Literature

In the opening vignette, Marissa’s ah ha moment signified the point in time when she began to integrate her learning. At this moment, the connections between her experiences in South African schools, the theories and principles she had been studying in secondary education, and how it applied to her potential as a high school teacher, began to come together in her mind. These connections became apparent to Marissa through a workshop designed to help her reflect on her experience. She needed both her unique set of experiences and support in thinking through these experiences to reach a new depth of understanding and the ability to apply her experiential learning to possibilities for the future.

As stated by Lee Shulman (Huber, Hutchings, and Gale, 2005), all learning is in some sense integrative. Any and all new material or experiences must be considered and categorized in the context of one’s previous experiences and understandings. We can all improve our ability to make internal connections and apply them to new situations. We can learn to think more carefully when making comparisons (or even to recognize what kinds of comparisons might be made), seek and explore different perspectives, ask relevant questions, try out possible solutions. This is learning how to learn, how to think, how to solve problems, how to create.

Some scholars make a distinction between what could be called “interdisciplinary learning” and “integrative learning”. Newell (2010) suggests that “interdisciplinary learning” can be thought of as examining a complex situation from the perspective of multiple disciplines (i.e., the perspective of each separate “silos”) which he contrasts with integrative learning that actually brings “students into contact with people who are inside the complex situation” (i.e., “real world” settings) so that students experience the problem from an even broader array of angles. (p.8)

No matter exactly what type of experiences a student is considering, it is the habits of the mind that are built through integrative learning that is ultimately important. Ideas related to integrative learning hark back to Dewey’s focus on experiential learning (McDermott, 1981) and Piaget’s research on construction of knowledge (Piaget, 1985). Constructivism describes such concepts as the need for teachers to create mental “disequilibrium” for their students (introducing them to situations which challenge their ideas) and the significance of peer interaction as an impetus for students to rethink what they know (with the ensuing reflection resulting in deeper understanding). Kolb and Fry’s (1975) Experiential Learning Model emphasizing concrete experience, reflection, and application is well known in higher education and is based on the same concepts.
A statement on integrative learning was published jointly by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Carnegie Foundation (2004) which proposed that “fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campus and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education”. The statement continues:

The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, co-curricular activities, and “the real world” beyond the campus. But an emphasis on integrative learning can help undergraduates put the pieces together and develop habits of mind that prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of personal, professional, and civic life. (AAC&U/Carnegie Foundation, 2004)

Huber and Hutchings’ 2005 publication Mapping the Terrain does an eloquent job of bringing together key concepts and challenges related to integrative learning, including

- **Teaching the conflicts**: Helping students build new insights from “wrestling” with the conflict within and between curricula, perspectives, or experiences rather than compartmentalizing learning from each situation.

- **Habits of reflection and intentionality**: Recognizing the centrality of the learner! The vision is for students to be empowered to think through what is important to them, what connections make sense, what information they need, what questions they might ask or experiences they might need to advance their knowledge and skills. Challenging students to reflect on how they think and learn is part of the process.

- **Reflection as dialectical**: Putting multiple perspectives into play with each other to produce insight. Procedurally, reflection entails *a looking forward to goals we might attain, as well as a casting backward to see where we have been.* (Yancey, 1998, p.6).

*USC Connect* recognizes the centrality of providing opportunities for students to control their own learning (i.e., intentionality) and the critical role of reflection (both as an individual and in collaboration with others) in providing truly meaningful experiences in integrative learning.

**Integrative Learning as defined by USC Connect**

While the meaning of integrative learning has been described in variety of ways based on professional interpretations and related to particular contexts, experiences, and learner characteristics, for *USC Connect* integrative learning refers specifically to **integrating knowledge and skills across within- and beyond-the-classroom experiences**. At the highest level, integrative learning includes the ability to apply new understandings from within and beyond the classroom experiences to solving problems in new contexts.

**Within- and Beyond-the-Classroom experiences**

In relation to **within-the-classroom experiences**, students are encouraged to actively participate in class, seriously engage with readings and assignments, consider how each course relates to other areas of study, and be mindful of how course work informs their broader understanding of the world.

**Beyond-the-classroom (BTC) experiences** in *USC Connect* include both short and long term opportunities:

- **BTC short term experiences**: Students gain valuable experience by exploring areas of interest and gaining initial insights by attending one-time events such as artistic performances, guest lectures, and short term community service opportunities (e.g., MLK Service Days, “fill-the-van” Saturdays).

- **BTC long term experiences**: Typical long term experiences include internships and practica; peer leadership (as in student organizations, residential life, U101); service learning; study abroad; and undergraduate/graduate research. Long term experiences often, but not always, include a reflective
component. Long term beyond-the-classroom experiences may or may not be part of a credit-bearing course.

USC Connect focuses on five high impact pathways that research has shown to increase student retention and decrease student time to graduation. All pathways include long term experiences which students may combine with short term opportunities (e.g., guest lectures related to the pathway). The five USC Connect “pathways” are community service, global study (including study abroad), internships (and other work-based learning), peer leadership (i.e., campus engagement), and research.

Reflection and Integrative Learning

Although carefully selected, purposeful experiences are an important first step in students’ USC Connect journey, students do not necessarily integrate learning by simply having a wide variety of experiences (as Marissa demonstrated in the opening vignette). All students integrate learning at much deeper levels when they are systematically challenged to reflect on their experiences and to seek connections between and across classroom learning and out-of-classroom experiences. Integrative learning typically occurs when students apply their knowledge in order to produce (create) something such as

- a solution to a problem for a class assignment or in relation to a student organization
- an essay describing how their face-to-face experiences relate to principles they are studying in class
- a poster session describing their research findings or what they learned through study abroad
- a series of blog posts to make a persuasive argument
- a work of art (painting, music composition, theatre production) that communicates a particular point of view in relation to a social need
- a PowerPoint or video with insights into a culture they have explored through first-hand interactions (e.g., study abroad, domestic study away, interviews with local members of a particular group)
- an e-portfolio that presents what they have learned as they consider the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and dispositions they have gained across multiple experiences

How Students Demonstrate Integrative Learning

Students demonstrate their ability to integrate learning across experiences through their contributions to class discussions and through papers, projects, and other assignments.

A student demonstrates the beginning level of integrative learning by clearly articulating how a beyond the classroom experience (e.g., community service, study abroad, attendance at a series of programs/performances)

1. provided a valuable learning experience, and
2. relates to material being studied in class (e.g., provides an example or application of a theory/principle).

At a more advanced level of integrative learning, a student can

1. thoughtfully connect examples, facts, and/or theories across multiple experiences,
2. apply constructed understandings and/or problem solving strategies to new situations, and
3. articulate a rationale for decision-making based on an informed knowledge-base and experiential learning

A rubric follows which is designed to assess student work in relation to these concepts (based on the AAC&U/Carnegie Foundation Rubric on Integrative Learning, 2010).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Fails to Meet Expectations</th>
<th>Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student articulates the role beyond-the-classroom experiences play in contributing to their overall learning.</td>
<td>Student cannot provide examples of BTC experiences and give an example of how a BTC experience can contribute to understanding</td>
<td>Student can provide examples of BTC experiences and give at least one example of how a BTC experience can contribute to his/her own learning.</td>
<td>Student can provide examples of a variety of BTC experiences and give multiple examples of how BTC experiences contribute to his/her own learning and that of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student connects relevant experiences and academic knowledge.</td>
<td>Student cannot not give a specific example of a BTC experience that reflects or demonstrates a concept/theory/framework from his/her coursework.</td>
<td>Student can articulate examples of BTC experiences that illuminate concepts/theories/frameworks presented in their coursework including a clear description of elements of the BTC experience that are consistent with or contradictory to the identified concept.</td>
<td>Student can articulate examples of BTC experiences that illuminate concepts/theories/frameworks presented in their coursework in ways that reflect a deep understanding of the concept as informed by the BTC experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student thoughtfully connects examples, facts, and/or theories from more than one experience, field of study, and/or perspective.</td>
<td>Student cannot thoughtfully connect examples, facts, and/or theories from more than one experience, field of study, and/or perspective.</td>
<td>Student can thoughtfully connect examples, facts, and/or theories from more than one experience, field of study, and/or perspective such as describing the similarities and differences across experiences, fields of study, or perspectives.</td>
<td>Student can thoughtfully connect examples, facts, and/or theories from multiple experiences, fields, or perspectives in complex ways. (e.g., student can describe how a BTC experience adds a new perspective or raises questions for further consideration regarding a particular framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student appropriately applies experiences to solve real life problems.</td>
<td>Student cannot articulate the relevance of his/her BTC and/or WTC experiences to problem solving. Student cannot pose or implement solutions to problems that incorporate learning from BTC and WTC experiences.</td>
<td>Student can pose solutions (e.g., recommendation for actions) to problems that incorporate learning from both BTC and WTC experiences, and implements those solutions, as appropriate.</td>
<td>Student poses creative and innovative solutions to problems that incorporate learning from both BTC and WTC experiences, and implements those solutions, as appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student articulates how his/her experience and content preparation provide a rationale for decisions/actions.</td>
<td>Student cannot articulate how his/her experience and content preparation relate to current or future decisions or actions.</td>
<td>Student articulates how his/her experience and content preparation provide a rationale for decisions and/or actions.</td>
<td>Student can provide an in-depth analysis of how his/her experience and content preparation provide a rationale for recommended decisions/actions.</td>
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</tbody>
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What is USC Connect?

Purpose of USC Connect

USC Connect is a long term initiative at USC Columbia, Lancaster, Salkehatchie, Sumter, and Union to enhance student learning. The ultimate goals of USC Connect are for students to be thoroughly and deeply prepared with core knowledge, developed skills, and the disposition to contribute and lead in home, community, and work settings. In order to meet these goals, students must know how to evaluate, integrate, and act on information from many sources over time and across contexts. USC Connect strives to help students become lifelong learners by understanding how a vast array of experiences can help one gain perspective, build skills in collaboration and problem-solving, and inform decisions about careers, personal lives and interests, and contributions to communities (local, state, national and/or global). We want students to be excited about their possibilities and know how to make decisions for the future.

In order to achieve these goals and provide a cohesive educational experience, USC Connect is focused on transforming the culture of the University in ways that bridge the gap between academic and student affairs and establish a shared focus on students’ integrative learning across within- and beyond-the-classroom experiences.

The USC Connect Message to Students

USC Connect describes how students should be involved in three steps:

• **Participate:** Students are encouraged to actively engage in both their work in the classroom and in intentionally selected, purposeful beyond the classroom experiences (e.g., community service, international experiences, internships, peer leadership, research, student organizations). Students can
  o explore options by visiting the USC Connect website,
  o be alert to learning about opportunities from others,
  o seek guidance from academic advisors, resident mentors, ACE coaches, and others
  o get started by trying out some experiences (everything does not have to be a long term commitment),
  o make a plan for longer term involvement (e.g., create a personal USC Connect poster or complete an Engagement Plan), and
  o follow through on plans by getting actively involved (and continually modify, as needed).

• **Create:** Students integrate their learning by synthesizing and sharing what they have learned through such activities as
  o small group discussions
  o blogs
  o creative works (e.g., essays, skits, art)
  o poster sessions
  o class presentations
  o e-portfolios.

  Creations can be shared as part of a class, in residential or other groups or at special events (e.g., Discovery Day).

• **Lead:** Students can apply what they have learned to lead by
  o taking initiative in coordinating the efforts of others in class projects
  o writing articles or letters to the editor to advocate for a cause or explain a point of view
  o taking leadership roles in student organizations
  o becoming peer leaders
- collaboratively developing new programs or special events
- taking initiative in work settings to solve problems, manage activities, or create materials
- making a plan to lead in the future by having clear goals and the knowledge and skills needed to achieve those goals

**USC Connect for All Students**

**USC Connect** is for all students at USC. While some students will seek extensive opportunities independently, others may not (for a wide variety of reasons). Our goal is to make **USC Connect** a reality for all students.

Students can make choices and take advantage of the opportunities that fit their particular needs, interests, and circumstances. Integrative learning can encompass traditional student activities and work experiences. It can occur through a selection of long term, high impact experiences (e.g., study abroad, research, leadership) related to a student's area of study or a carefully, selected series of one-time events, or a combination of the two. For example, a student might choose to attend a series of guest lectures and musical performances combined with a one-time community service experience to explore a particular culture. S/he can think through ideas from these experiences by using them as examples in class projects or assignments, relating one experience with another, and making connections within a specific area of study. New insights might lead the student to seek a new work opportunity or request a connection with a faculty member to work in a particular area of research for a more in-depth experience.

Students will approach **USC Connect** differently depending on such factors as their past experiences and year in college. Typically, first-year undergraduates are exploring options for experiences. However, some will come to USC with extensive experience from high school and be clearer about what types of activities they want to choose while others may not have had these same opportunities and are in an earlier stage of exploration. Many students are working or juggling other life obligations and might have less opportunity for engagements that are long term or require extensive time or travel. We need to help students consider how their naturally-occurring work and life experiences relate to their studies (which is also integrative learning) and what beyond-the-classroom experiences might fit their particular circumstances.

Seniors would typically be more focused on summarizing their learning across experiences and articulating to potential employers, graduate schools, and/or fellowship sponsors how they have integrated learning within-and beyond-the-classroom and are fully prepared to contribute in a new setting. Students nearing the end of their programs might have increased interest in ways to demonstrate their accomplishments through e-portfolios or other venues. However, it is important for students at all levels to be challenged to make meaning across experiences and over time.

**USC Connect** is also relevant to graduate students. Relating within-and beyond-the-classroom experiences deepens learning at all levels. In addition, graduate students who are involved in providing courses or services to undergraduates also play an important role in communicating **USC Connect** to others.

**USC Connect Faculty and Staff Role**

While most students are very capable of seeking out and selecting activities, faculty and staff can make a tremendous difference in the quality of a student’s experience. First, they can offer information and guidance as to which experiences might best meet students’ needs and interests. They can point to resources such as planning documents, the USC Connect searchable database, and sources of information in their own departments.
Secondly, as could clearly be seen in the story of Marissa that began this article, faculty and staff support is critical in helping students draw connections between beyond the classroom experiences and academic course work and in applying what they have learned to new settings. The fishbowl technique that was used in the workshop that Marissa participated in is just one strategy that can help students re-think their experiences. Faculty and staff can develop experiences for students that are most appropriate within the context of their programs and departments. Some possibilities include:

- Considering possibilities for beyond the classroom experiences or integrative learning when creating or redesigning a course, experience, or program
- Providing opportunities for students to discuss experiences with peers
- Clarifying the relationship between experiences and key academic concepts during class or group meetings
- Including reflective components in as many assignments or activities as possible
- Providing students with detailed feedback on reflections (e.g., asking probing questions and challenging them to communicate specifics and make connections)
- Encouraging students to present their findings at Discovery Day or in other venues
- Designing opportunities for students to reflect across experiences such as developing an e-portfolio as a program component

Resources on integrative learning and support such as grants for course/program development can help, but ultimately, it is the experts in each area that can best decide how to enhance learning and opportunities for their students. It is through a shared focus on how students’ experiences intersect and how we all (faculty, staff, and students) contribute to a comprehensive educational experience that we will realize the potential of integrative learning and USC Connect.

References


