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# In Deed: Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning: An Experiment in the Core Curriculum at Xavier

William Madges

Carol Winkelmann

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IN DEED

PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES RELATED TO IDENTITY AND MISSION

INTERDISCIPLINARY  
TEACHING AND  
LEARNING

*An Experiment in the  
Core Curriculum  
at Xavier*

WILLIAM MADGES  
AND  
CAROL WINKELMANN

Jesuit education at Xavier University seeks to develop among students “a world view that is oriented to responsible action” and “an understanding and communication of moral and religious values” through personal concern, lived witness, and instruction. In this way the Xavier community shares in the worldwide Jesuit commitment to a creative and intelligent engagement with questions of peace and justice.

The most significant means for achieving this objective is through the core curriculum. Since 1992, the university has been using a new core, which allows and encourages increased interdisciplinary study. The new Ethics/Religion and Society (E/RS) Focus plays a crucial role in this new curriculum. The Focus is comprised of four courses, drawn from the disciplines of theology, philosophy, literature, and from an elective area. Although the courses are distinct and are taught by faculty in each of the respective disciplines, all the courses focus attention upon the foundations of moral and religious choices of social significance.

In an attempt to promote the integrative possibilities of Focus courses, we—Dr. William Madges and Dr. Carol Winkelmann—paired together for the Spring, 1996 semester our respective E/RS courses—Theological Foundations and Literature and the Moral Imagination. Our hope was to create links not only between theology and English, but also between theory and practice and between the university and the local community. We wanted our block of courses to integrate academic learning and service learning. The block of courses required students to register for both the theology course and the literature course, which were taught back-to-back for fifty minutes each on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We each attended the other’s course and regularly participated in the discussions generated in both courses. At regular intervals, the entire two-hour period was devoted to intensive group discussions of the connections between theology and English studies.

The major thread holding the courses together was the topic of

violence, particularly violence against and by women. And the fundamental component in integrating academic and service learning was the requirement of a minimum of ten hours of work at a local shelter for battered women. Students and faculty went together in small groups to the Alice Paul House. There they spoke with the women residents and learned first-hand about the pervasiveness and destructiveness of domestic violence. Students and faculty also provided different services to the women and their families, including child care and basic literacy instruction. In addition, community workers, including shelter staff, visited the classroom to teach students about societal responses to domestic violence.

A unique feature of the block experience was the use of technology. Through the Internet, students accessed a newsgroup, or virtual classroom, to reflect on reading assignments in the courses and to continue conversations begun during class time. Communications technology was also used to initiate conversations

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between students at the university and women in the shelter. The women in the shelter logged onto a computer and accessed the newsgroup. There they shared their stories, beliefs, and hopes for personal and cultural change. The students responded to them. In effect the shelter women became teachers for all participants, including the professors. Their life stories, news, and views made the classroom readings and films come alive, rendering theory in both English studies and theology sometimes more accessible, sometimes problematic. That is, the newsgroup participants were invited to rethink theological and literary-linguistic scholarship in the light of local knowledge and the reality of violence in the lives of ordinary women.

Through the use of technology, we hoped to expand on the possibilities of experiential education. We believe that service learning provides a rigorous, holistic, and potentially transformative approach to the traditional scholarly inquiry of our disciplines. In the educational process, service learning demands more of students, not less, as some critics of service learning charge. It

demands more time and more willingness to expand one's moral and intellectual imagination in the face of the complex problems of real people and the ambiguities of their everyday lives.

We expected at the outset that the service experience not only would enable students to better understand the Ignatian ideal of becoming persons for others, but also would encourage them to make a personal decision about the relation of their Jesuit education to the life and well-being of the local community. The service experience in the shelter and the electronic conversations on the Internet did in fact create empathy and solidarity between two very different communities: the classroom and the shelter. Reflecting on her time spent with women residents at the shelter, student Rebekah Sanford noted, "After listening to the women tell their stories, I realized two things. First, there is hope for the situation [of violence and discrimination against women]. The women themselves told me that. Second, I learned that it is my responsibility as a member of the human race to try, in some small way, to help stop this violence." Chris McLaughlin, another

student, agreed. "The women, besides making this problem a reality for me instead of just a series of statistics, helped me to further understand the depths of the effects of violence against women in our culture. They showed me that, in the face of what seems a desperate situation, hope can prove to be the difference between living and



dying.... An option we have is to take charge of our world and change it for the better."

After reading final student essays and course evaluations and from talking with our students, we now know that the block of courses succeeded in realizing the primary goal of the Ethics/Religion and Society Focus and in facilitating Jesuit education of the whole student in his or her intellectual, spiri-

*Seated (left to right): Dr. William Madges, Ms. Rose Marie Pryor (Director of the YWCA Alice Paul House) and Dr. Carol Winkelman. Standing (left to right): Students Brendon Cull, Heather Stultz, Chris McLaughlin and Jennifer Naegele.*

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tual, and affective dimensions. At the end of the semester one student, Jennifer Korzen, said, "When I look back on the class, I realized I learned more about myself, literature, society, my peers, and religion than in any of my previous educational experiences. I learned that talking and sharing experiences with other people is the only way I can begin to discover who I am and what my 'true self' is." Student Brian Vineyard agreed. "Overall," he said, "I think I was really on the receiving end from the experience at the Alice Paul House."

The first-hand experience at the Alice Paul House and the interdisciplinary approach of the block made the course for many not only academically rigorous and intellectually stimulating, but also personally transformative. Professor Joseph Wessling, one of our colleagues, noticed this transformation when he came to one of our two-hour discussion periods. "What I witnessed," he said, "was a transformation of consciousness that I have not witnessed in any other classes including my own. These students, through their direct contact with abused women

and children, have had their eyes and their minds opened. Especially, their sympathetic imagination has been activated. They could identify feelingly with people whose experiences were very different from their own. Yet they were able to recognize the complexity of the problems."

*William Madges is professor of theology and Carol Winkelmann is assistant professor of English at Xavier University.*



A CONVERSATION  
ON FACULTY  
SPIRITUALITY

COMPILED BY  
JOHN C.  
HAUGHEY, S.J.

Fifteen men and women from nine Jesuit Universities met on April 13 at Loyola University, Chicago, and engaged in a broad conversation on issues of faculty spirituality. The following selective transcript is an attempt to catch the substance and spirit of one part of that conversation.

Offering the Spiritual Exercises at Jesuit colleges and universities raises some rather complicated

issues. Perhaps the central question is whose interest is to be served by encouraging non-Jesuit faculty and staff to make the Exercises? Is this intended as a gift to the person or as an attempt to maintain the Jesuit identity of the institution? Also, does the quality of institutional life inspire the trust requisite to spiritual accompaniment? Perhaps the most fruitful way to ask the question would be, "Do our institutions manifest

and encourage the connection of mind and spirit implied in the term 'contemplation?'"

We invite your responses: your reflections on the issues raised here and experiences at your university.

*Note: Each open quotation mark denotes a change in speaker. Words, phrases, and sentences not contained within quotation marks are inserted to help with transitions and to provide summaries of key points.*