

CONTRIBUTIONS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES TO CIVIC LEARNING: *An Addendum to A Crucible Moment*

by

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Abstract: Though overlooked or at best implicit in *A Crucible Moment*, interdisciplinary studies has much to contribute to civic learning for democratic engagement. The article organizes those contributions into the report's categories of knowledge, values, and skills. It concludes with an example of how techniques used in interdisciplinary studies to create common ground can contribute to fruitful democratic discourse on even the thorniest of societal issues, namely abortion.

Keywords: civic learning, democratic, perspective, critical thinking, common ground, abortion.

Introduction

In October of 2011 the Global Perspectives Institute and the Association of American Colleges and Universities submitted to the U.S. Department of Education a "Report to the Nation" entitled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (National Task Force 2011). Responding to widespread concerns about political stalemate and an increasingly corrosive democratic process, this landmark report sought to encourage American colleges and universities to place a higher priority on educating students for effective citizenship. In preparation for the report, 134 participants representing civic organizations, colleges and universities, higher education associations (including myself as the AIS representative), disciplinary associations, and public and private funding agencies

participated in a series of five one-day national roundtables. The entire report can be downloaded for free as a PDF document at http://www.aacu.org/civic_learning/crucible/index.cfm.

Surprisingly, at least to interdisciplinarians teaching courses on complex societal issues confronting citizens, the report makes almost no explicit reference to interdisciplinary studies. This brief article addresses that lacuna, identifying the range of ways in which interdisciplinary studies, including both interdisciplinary courses and interdisciplinary research projects, promotes civic learning. It seeks to be of use to educational and civic leaders interested in promoting effective democracy as well as to interdisciplinarians wishing to (a) make a case for including interdisciplinary studies in efforts on their campus to nurture civic learning or (b) modify their interdisciplinary courses to better promote civic learning.

The article is organized into sections on three¹ of the four components of civic learning in the 21st century that are identified in the report—knowledge, values, and skills (p. 12). Next it discusses a key civic learning skill not included in the report, namely creating common ground. It concludes with an example of how one technique for creating common ground could be applied to civic discourse on the highly controversial issue of abortion.

Knowledge

The knowledge identified in the report as essential to civic learning turns out to be knowledge of texts and principles, democratic movements, sources of identity, forces shaping our society, religions, and political systems (p. 12). It makes no mention of knowledge of societal issues themselves. Indeed, the entire report is so focused on democratic process that it ignores the content of the policy issues decided through that process. Not surprisingly, then, it overlooks a key contribution of interdisciplinary studies to the knowledge component of civic learning, namely an understanding of the major issues faced by society.

It has become commonplace among interdisciplinarians to point out that issues such as global warming, deficit reduction, clashes between Islamists and the West, immigration reform, globalization, and even the obesity epidemic are economic and political and cultural and social and ethical and often scientific and technological as well, and that they require interdisciplinary (not merely multidisciplinary) study to be understood in their full

¹ The fourth component, collective action, is nurtured by transdisciplinary studies, (which deals with collective action among academics, stakeholders, and implementers), and not so much by interdisciplinary studies.

complexity. Less often recognized is that the problem-based approach of interdisciplinary studies brings out the relevance and applicability of the insights of each discipline.

As far as I know, there is no alternative to interdisciplinary studies for developing an understanding of individual complex problems. Systems thinking, especially complex systems theory, is useful in understanding complexity in general and can serve as a helpful complement to interdisciplinarity, but interdisciplinary studies is required for understanding any *particular* complex phenomenon, problem, or issue. Computer simulation and modeling also have promise as complements to interdisciplinary studies, especially in depicting and utilizing a more comprehensive understanding, but the underlying programming still needs to be informed by interdisciplinary studies. And GIS (Geographic Information Systems) overlays are another handy tool for visualizing patterns of behavior and forming hypotheses, but interdisciplinary studies is required to figure out what interrelationships are responsible for producing the patterns, i.e., for understanding them. In short, I remain convinced that interdisciplinary studies is “the only game in town” for understanding and addressing the complex issues facing citizens in the 21st century (Newell, January 2007, p. 1).

Interdisciplinary studies also contributes knowledge of expertise itself that is critical to civic learning. In interdisciplinary courses students gain experience in evaluating the contributions of experts from diverse disciplines to the issue under study. They learn to appreciate the strengths as well the limitations of each discipline, and how its perspective makes experts in that discipline keenly aware of some aspects of a complex issue but oblivious to or dismissive of other aspects. They learn that experts make different assumptions, depending on the perspective of their discipline, that are more appropriate to some issues than to others. And they learn that each perspective offers at least some useful insights but that no one perspective is sufficient by itself to understand a complex issue adequately. In civic arenas, where some citizens reject expertise itself as suspect while others uncritically accept the insights of experts from one field and dismiss out of hand the insights of those from other fields on the assumption that there is one right perspective, an interdisciplinary approach seems essential to civic learning.

Finally, interdisciplinary courses are increasingly likely to include explicit discussion of interdisciplinarity. In textbooks such as Allen Repko’s *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* (2012) or Repko with Szostak and Buchberger, *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies* (2013), students learn to employ an interdisciplinary process for understanding complex issues. This knowledge of interdisciplinary process itself is valuable both as a complement to democratic process when it is functional and as a corrective

to democratic process when it is dysfunctional.

It is important to note, however, that interdisciplinary process is used to understand an issue, not to decide what constitutes a satisfactory resolution of that issue. Only the democratic process can make that determination. On the other hand, democratic process alone is inadequate to understand issues in their full complexity: Majority vote is not an effective strategy for determining truth.

Values

A Crucible Moment offers a standard list of values such as empathy, open-mindedness, and tolerance that promote democratic engagement, and later it identifies service learning as the “dominant curricular vehicle” (p. 72)—along with “collective civic problem-solving” and “intergroup deliberative dialogue”—for inculcating democratic values. Absent is any mention of interdisciplinary studies as a curricular vehicle for nurturing civic values.

Like those pedagogies, interdisciplinary studies engages diverse perspectives, but the perspectives are those of disciplines, not the students’ personal perspectives (though they may well find one discipline’s perspective more appealing than the others’). In order to get a feel for the insights of an uncongenial disciplinary perspective, students have to empathize with that perspective. They are less likely to resist internalizing democratic values in interdisciplinary courses than they would be, for example, in intergroup deliberative dialogue. After all, their own beliefs are not being challenged directly in interdisciplinary courses, and they can see the payoff of those values in a more comprehensive understanding. Thus, interdisciplinary studies courses provide a non-threatening environment in which to learn civic values.

And by learning that insights from several disciplines (even those with perspectives a student dislikes) are required to construct the fullest possible understanding of an issue, students become more open-minded and tolerant. Indeed, students who have taken several interdisciplinary courses are likely to move beyond tolerance of other perspectives to actively seeking them out, because they come to realize that they need the insights those perspectives can provide in order to understand a complex issue more completely (Newell & Davis, 1990). Other perspectives are valued not just tolerated, as students become impatient with single-cause analyses and simplistic solutions to complex problems.

Most importantly, promotion of these democratic values is a natural by-product of interdisciplinary studies courses. It does not rely on buy-in to a civic learning agenda by faculty members teaching those interdisciplinary

courses, nor need it require that they change the substantive focus of their course. Thus, interdisciplinary studies deserves recognition as a significant source of civic learning about democratic values.

Skills

The civic learning skills listed in the report are critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, “gathering and evaluating multiple sources of evidence,” “seeking, engaging, and being informed by multiple perspectives,” communication, “deliberation and bridge building across difference,” collaborative decision-making, and foreign language (p. 12).

Critical thinking is the skill best documented by empirical studies as an educational impact of interdisciplinary studies courses. Indeed, it turns out that the *kind* of critical thinking promoted by interdisciplinary studies is especially pertinent for civic learning. What I have in mind here is the fundamental distinction made by Richard Paul (1987) between weak-sense and strong-sense critical thinking: The former is essentially informal logic, focused on whether conclusions follow from premises; the latter turns the critical gaze inward, probing why one starts from those premises, makes certain assumptions, or holds certain beliefs. Interdisciplinary studies encourages strong-sense critical thinking by teaching students to play one discipline off against another, using the insights of each to reveal implicit assumptions of the others, and by demonstrating the inadequacies of disciplinary perspectives that students like as well as the strengths of those they dislike. Thus, interdisciplinary courses tacitly challenge any unexamined belief system—political, economic, and even religious ideologies, dogma, fundamentalism, and –isms of any sort. Yet they do so without any direct assault on students’ beliefs, assumptions, values, or biases. The focus is on a complex issue and the challenges are aimed at disciplines, so students do not feel attacked. Surely strong-sense critical thinking is ideal preparation for “deliberation and bridge-building across difference” in particular, and democratic engagement in general.

Interdisciplinary studies directly hones the skills of drawing on multiple sources of evidence and on multiple perspectives, not just when they are complementary but, more importantly for democratic engagement, when they are conflicting as well. And students develop skill in collaborative decision-making through an interdisciplinary course when student teams are asked to carry out joint research on a complex issue, or when the class as a whole works together on it. Again, the kind of collaborative decision-making they experience is well tailored to civic learning in that they draw on

insights and perspectives that clash as well as ones that mesh.

Overall, then, interdisciplinary studies not only promotes many of the general skills the report identifies as essential for civic learning, but also nurtures forms of those skills that are particularly useful for democratic engagement.

The Skill of Creating Common Ground

The report makes no explicit reference to the creation of common ground. One might be tempted to say that the skills it does list, especially “deliberation and bridge-building across difference” and “seeking, engaging, and being informed by multiple perspectives,” should be sufficient to create common ground among conflicting perspectives. Yet, without knowledge of strategies or techniques for creating common ground, mere discussion between people with fundamentally conflicting values, beliefs, or ideas, even when the participants are reasonable and well-intentioned, normally leads not to the creation of new common ground but to agreeing to disagree, compromise, or settling for the lowest common denominator (i.e., what little they started out agreeing on).

Failure to address conflicts through the creation of common ground, I submit, lies at the heart of current political deadlock. Common ground is essential to constructive civic dialogue, not to mention social cohesion. Inability to see, even in principle, how conflict can be resolved underlies the growing incivility of our democratic discourse. Without techniques or strategies for creating common ground, resolution of civic disagreements seems hopeless, so people see no point in trying. The result is polarization, increased partisanship, and incivility. Bipartisanship, on those occasions when it can be achieved, consists of brokering political deals based on compromise rather than win-win solutions. Yet interdisciplinary studies can provide nonpartisan strategies for adjudicating conflict in understanding complex policy issues in the civic as well as the educational arena

The techniques for creating common ground in interdisciplinary studies have been grouped into categories labeled redefinition, extension, organization, and transformation (Newell 2007; see also Repko 2012, pp. 321-354). Stated simply, redefinition involves modifying concepts or assumptions or combining ones from different disciplines to bring out latent commonalities between those disciplines. Extension refers to expanding a concept from one discipline into the domain of another discipline. Organization involves various ways of reframing, re-contextualizing, or finding complementarities in difference. And transformation refers to re-conceiving a duality as a spec-

trum or continuum. When one thinks of disciplines as academic perspectives and generalizes these techniques to perspectives of any sort, they become powerful mental tools for creating common ground in the civic arena.

All of these techniques require both/and thinking, which does not come naturally to us because we have been educated to think primarily in either/or terms. Both/and thinking, however, becomes second nature to students who have taken enough interdisciplinary courses. When those students enter the civic arena, their capacity for both/and thinking in general, and familiarity with techniques for creating common ground in particular, should give them reason to believe that satisfactory resolution of disputes is possible, making civic discourse worthwhile.

The goal of arriving at win-win solutions to complex societal problems based on a shared, more comprehensive understanding may seem like pie in the sky to cynical political observers. Yet that is precisely what happens through the process of integration of perspectives practiced in well-designed interdisciplinary courses. Because politics involves self-interest (and too often even baser motives) as well as the desire to figure out solutions to complex problems that are best for society as a whole—in other words, because politics is no dispassionate search for the truth—interdisciplinary techniques for creating common ground are not a panacea for dysfunctional civic discourse. But they can help, especially among those who have some concern for the commonweal.

The following example of how the common ground technique of transformation can be used to address the on-going debate in American society over abortion should be sufficient here to suggest the potential of interdisciplinary techniques for resolving civic disagreements.

Abortion as the Acid Test

At the center of the current acrimonious debate over abortion is a disagreement about life, namely whether or not it starts at conception. In the absence of any way to resolve this dispute, the only nonpartisan option has been to agree to disagree, essentially to give up and cede the issue to partisans. The interdisciplinary studies common ground technique of transformation, however, can be used whenever conflict is grounded in such opposing dichotomous assumptions. Transformation can turn either/or assumptions into a continuous variable that can then be examined in the light of empirical evidence. The debate over when life starts can be transformed from a debate over *whether* life begins at conception into a discussion of *how much* a fetus is alive at conception (and at various stages between conception and birth). In other words, the discussion shifts to degrees of life, to degrees of being alive.

The available empirical information becomes relevant in a way it was not before, and additional empirical information can be sought to resolve remaining disagreements that stand in the way of creating common ground.

Such a transformation of the abortion debate would be unlikely to create common ground between rabid partisans on the extremes of the debate—those minds are closed. But it could give citizens in between those extremes some ground on which to participate in the discussion. Many nonpartisans (aka independents, swing voters, undecided) see some validity in both positions and would like to see a resolution that respects the concerns of those at both extremes. The interdisciplinary approach to creating common ground is no cure for rabid partisanship, strident debate, or closed minds. However, it empowers nonpartisanship and offers a viable alternative to less intransigent partisans.

Note that one could apply the same techniques to the debates over euthanasia and other end-of-life issues by thinking of life as a continuous variable instead of a dichotomy. Indeed, one could conceivably also illuminate social issues regarding the quality of life between birth and death using the technique of transformation by thinking in terms of degrees of being alive rather than the presence or absence of life.

Conclusion

My objective here is not to persuade but to provide encouragement and ammunition to the already-persuaded. The response from interdisciplinarians to this article is likely to be that it belabors the obvious (or, more politely, that it doesn't break new ground), whereas it is likely to generate no response at all from non-interdisciplinarians. Certainly that was what happened when I made some of these points at the National Civic Roundtable that I attended on behalf of AIS. A few participants were excited, but for most it just didn't compute. I suspect that's partly because interdisciplinary education is so far removed from their personal experience that they cannot imagine it. In part, though, it's probably because the presentation is too abstract. Non-interdisciplinarians need concrete examples, the more fleshed out and detailed the better, of specific interdisciplinary courses that are designed to promote civic learning. It would also help for them to hear testimonials (e.g., personal narratives) from students who have taken such courses. Even better might be an opportunity to observe those trained in interdisciplinary studies engage in actual civic discourse.

So I encourage interdisciplinarians to play an active role in efforts on their campus to promote civic learning. Design and teach interdisciplinary civic learning courses, and document the impact of their courses on the educational outcomes claimed in this article. Make sure that interdisciplinary studies is

prominent in any documents produced on civic learning at your institution. And feel free to make use of the arguments set out here.

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