

Intro for Non-Majors: Embracing the Outer-Core as Integrative Opportunity

Abstract: Like many other new arrivals without departmental seniority, I was assigned the School's outer-core intro course, with the assurance that eventually, having paid my dues, I would in turn pass it on to some future low-seniority newby. Over the years, I have found, however, that it can be very stimulating to introduce one's field to those outside the disciplinary major, and I chose to hang onto this course rather than pass it along. I now think specifically in terms of interdisciplinary possibilities and contact points as I contour the course each semester, and pay particular attention to utilizing the Service Learning component of the course for this purpose. Now in my 7th year of teaching this course, without question some of the most creative, integrative and unanticipated mutual learning experiences of my teaching career are attached to this course. In sharing some of these experiences, I hope to stimulate collegial discussion on how we might view the outer-core "Intro for Non-Majors" courses as positive, integrative educational opportunities rather than as initiatory exercises in frustration.

Course: SWK 125 – Building Healthier Communities

Nota bene: Because this is a 100 level course, my original assumption was that it would be mostly underclassmen. As it turns out, however, it is equally as likely to attract the upperclassman who needs the credits for graduation.

Most common majors for this course:

- El Ed
- Psychology
- Criminal Justice
- Business/Accounting
- Political Science
- Sociology
- Marketing
- Management

The course as it has evolved consists of **3 major learning components** – each of which is greatly enhanced by the interdisciplinary makeup of the student group

- *Introduction to Social Work* (What do social workers do? How might you use a social worker in your professional or personal life?)
- *General history of social welfare thought in America* (You already have major assumptions about social welfare – what goes through your head when someone on the street asks you for money? From where did those assumptions come?)
- *General introduction to the volunteer/nonprofit sector of society* (This includes an active Service Learning Project)

Gatekeeping function – service to the profession. In professional social work, the ‘gatekeeping’ function of the schools is mainly thought of as a place to weed out those who would be emotionally or psychologically unfit for the profession. In this course, however, I find that the gate often swings the other way, and I can encourage specially gifted students to consider graduate training and a career in social work as even better suited to their professional goals than is reflected in their current major – for example, the Criminal Justice major who wants to work with teens caught up in ‘The System’ may find graduate-level social work more suited to those goals than, for example, Parole Officer or such profession within the CJ system itself. Yet that student may not have considered this possibility before contract with me through this course.

Goals for the Service Learning Project – I strongly encourage students think of this as a real career-building opportunity, and not just a task to be completed for a grade.

- *Try out your professional interests* (it is much better to find out you hate working with children now than after more years of school!)
- *Begin building an active resume* – suggest specific projects that put your growing knowledge and professional interests to work (even a used clothing project can benefit from a marketing person, a fashion display person, a good accountant, a person with business and management skills; don't be passive in your assignments, take the initiative to suggest projects in which you can put your skills and interests to work and that will become part of your professional portfolio)
- *Begin building professional contacts* – seek out those people in your agency that could one day write you a letter of recommendation, put you on to job possibilities, etc.
- *Experience the importance* of the volunteer/nonprofit sector of society and the place of your discipline within it
- *Let off steam* and do something completely different (those with a clear career focus in a discipline that keeps them constantly in the labs and libraries may well want to just get out on some Saturdays and swing a hammer for Habitat, and that is also great!)

The Learning is Mutual

Two examples from among the many I could list:

- One student whose goal was Vet School chose to volunteer in an animal abuse shelter, and in her reflection/analysis paper tapped into an area of research demonstrating the correlation between animal abuse and child abuse – an area of research about which I was totally unaware until her paper brought it to my attention
- Another student, a Varsity cheerleader, asked if she could volunteer in an after-school cheerleading program for High School age girls. Reflecting my own prejudices, I agreed reluctantly but saw it as far off of what I considered to be the focus of the Service Learning project. My low expectations were more than overwhelmed when, in reading her reflection/analysis paper, I came to see clearly that an after-school cheerleading program such as this was a haven for teenage girls from very troubled home situations, who were hungry for positive role models such as my student provided, and I came to see her work in this program, if not quite at the level of professional counseling, certainly at least as impacting on the lives of young teens as participation in 'Big Sisters' or other such of the more traditional social programs. This was a considerable eye-opener for me.

Conclusion: If we remain open and aware, the opportunities for integrative teaching and learning may be found in the most unexpected places.

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