

Final report: Review of the Integrative Seminar course in the context of Writing in the Disciplines

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We scrutinized the current state of the Social Science Integrative Seminar (IS) course through the lens of Writing in the Disciplines (WID) scholarship and Ministerial requirements. We were supported in this project by the Dawson WID program in the form of course release and consultations with Ian MacKenzie and Anne Thorpe, WID Co-directors. IS serves as the capstone course for Social Science students, culminating in a Comprehensive Exam, which is typically composed of a scholarly research paper. Very quickly two general issues arose that begged closer examination:

- The definition of *Integrative*
- More effective methods for producing a satisfying student research paper (for both students and teachers).

We conducted a very brief IS survey open to all potential IS teachers (see Appendix B for the *Brief Survey*), and the 58 teachers who responded confirmed our interest in these two concerns.

What follows is a summary of what we have learned and suggestions for how this knowledge can be used to help both the Integrative Seminar and the Program.

A. WHAT IS INTEGRATIVE?

The requirements from the Ministry regarding IS are, in fact, quite general, (please refer to Appendix A for Elements of the Competency and Performance criteria), and different CEGEPs have interpreted these competencies and performance criteria in vastly different ways.

The *Brief Survey* included an open-ended question asking fellow teachers how they defined “integrative.” Of the 58 respondents, 72% expressed the notion that integrative was solely based on researching an issue from the perspectives of two or three social science disciplines.¹ Also, most teachers reported using the 3-discipline paper approach.

This emphasis on disciplines raises two main questions: a) what are some of the problems encountered when integrating a 3-discipline paper approach? and b) what would a more complete interpretation of integration consist of?

What are some of the problems encountered when integrating a 3-discipline paper approach?

¹ The majority of IS classes require three disciplines; for commerce students who take IS3, only two disciplines are needed. For simplicity, we will speak only of 3-discipline papers throughout this report, though this report applies to IS3 as well.

The Ministry demands an integration of scholarship from at least two different Social Science disciplines in IS, though does not dictate how to accomplish this. At Dawson a strong inherited tradition has affirmed a false assumption that students *must* write three separate discipline sub-sections. These three sub-sections are then supposed to be revised to form a final integrated paper.

Some teachers find success with this 3-discipline paper approach, but many do not. Based on question five in our *Brief Survey* (“Do you have any concerns or suggestions for the IS course?”), we have found that 57% of teachers who wrote an answer mentioned that this approach yields significant problems for real integration. Some examples are:

“I don’t do the separate discipline papers because I don’t feel that it is an authentic way of approaching integration; I think it artificial to isolate the disciplinary elements of the Social Sciences.”

“I had reservations about students handing in separate discipline papers before combining them in a complete rough draft since they seem to have a lot of trouble producing a properly integrated paper. The end result often read as a series of three little papers barely connected to each other.”

“To ask students to research the question from 3 separate disciplines. This is a very dated approach to thinking about research. A transdisciplinary research approach should be the focus—whatever the question, go where you need to go.”

Teachers often note that the 3 separate discipline papers approach is often an artificial breakdown for thinking, writing and arriving at meaningful integration. Teachers also note that approaching a term paper through three disciplines is not an activity students would likely encounter again in university. It appears that many teachers continue to assign three discipline papers because they think it is not only standard practice but mandated. **The 3-discipline paper approach might be standard practice, but it is not mandated.**

What would a more complete interpretation of integration consist of?

Many teachers in this survey reflected an awareness that we need to rethink the meaning of integration. An excellent source developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2007-2008) might help open a useful dialogue on a fuller scope of what integration means (please refer to Appendix C). It is noteworthy that these criteria also seem to closely parallel our Ministerial requirements. The AACU defines integrative learning as: “an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.” Speaking more specifically to our concern with the disciplinary approach, the AACU concludes:

Fostering students’ ability to integrate learning—across courses, over time, and between campuses and community life—is one of the most important goals and challenges for higher education. Initially, students connect previous learning to

new classroom learning. Later, significant knowledge within individual disciplines serves as the foundation, but integrative learning goes beyond academic boundaries. Indeed, integrative experiences often occur as learning addresses real-world problems, unscripted and sufficiently broad, to require multiple areas of knowledge and multiple modes of inquiry, offering multiple solutions and benefitting from multiple perspectives. Integrative learning also involves internal changes to the learner.

The AACU offers five different ways of thinking about integration for a college and university population. Students can achieve benchmark, milestone or capstone levels. We think Capstone achievement might be more for university level, but certainly Milestone 3 criteria are attainable to most of our Social Science students. Let's review the 5 AACU Milestone 3 criteria for integration and provide a comment on how each criterion can be addressed in IS.

- i) **Connections to Experience:** Effectively selects and develops examples of life experiences, drawn from a variety of contexts (e.g. family life, artistic participation, civic involvement, work experience), to illuminate concepts/theories/frameworks of fields of study.

And

- ii) **Reflection and Assessment:** Evaluates changes in own learning over time, recognizing complex contextual factors (e.g., works with ambiguity and risk, deals with frustration, considers ethical frameworks).

These two criteria seem to parallel nicely the two reflection assignments required in IS, and as we learn more about the scholarship on integration, we suspect many teachers would appreciate help developing these assignments to better meet these criteria for integration.

The other three criteria seem to have the most application to the writing of the research paper. Let's look at each one separately.

- iii) **Connections to Disciplines:** Independently connects examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of study or perspective.

This criterion speaks directly to discipline-based integration, but the term discipline is broadened to include *perspectives*. So how does focusing on perspectives affect IS? Simple. If we start with a general topic and instruct our students to explore it using 3-disciplines, this is not always a meaningful challenge to the student and can lead to awkward and choppy final papers. Instead, if we start with a challenging problem, one the students can sink their teeth into, we will increase student engagement. And the problem and its various aspects drive the search for a variety of disciplinary perspectives in order to answer it effectively. The problem seeks the disciplines rather than the opposite. One teacher noted:

“...in my experience based on WID portfolios I've looked at, I think it would be nice to have a centralized list of IS projects that instructors use for IS, so we could be inspired. I've used both the classic research paper, and a more problem-based approach to the project, and I have to say I much prefer the

latter, and I think it's more useful as a life-skill for students to know how their work can be applicable and usable in real life. I just wished I had some more examples of these kinds of problem-based approach when I first started."

Shifting from TOPIC to PROBLEM may seem like a small step, but this approach typically yields better critical thinking and is highly recommended in the educational literature (e.g., Beaufort, 2007).

- iv) **Transfer:** Adapts and applies skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation to new situations to solve problems or explore issues.

There are many ways this criterion can be met in IS. Let's look at just one example. One respondent from the *Brief Survey* wrote: "*I would like more discussion about deeply reading an academic source versus using a sentence or two to meet a teacher's random academic source requirement.*"

This last quote touches on an issue that IS teachers might find revealing: Rather than simply concerning ourselves with the number of academic sources used, or if the source is considered a primary, secondary, or tertiary source, we could get more mileage if students better understood the differing functions of sources (viz., Background, Exhibits, Argument, and Method) and how to apply different sources into scholarly research based on purpose of source (Bizup, 2008). The development of this skill should begin in RM – certainly well before students arrive at IS, at which point they should be able to transfer this skill to their IS project.

- v) **Integrated Communication:** Fulfills the assignment(s) by choosing a format, language, or graph (or other visual representation) to explicitly connect content and form, demonstrating awareness of purpose and audience.

Below is an example of how, after taking a brief WID summer workshop last year, our colleague Marie-Pierre Gosselin redesigned her IS course in order to address audience and purpose. These are her instructions:

"How internet culture has changed our lives is certainly a hot topic right now. In this course, students must rigorously evaluate some of the implications of internet culture by writing a problem-based report on the following scenario: Your supervisor at Statistics Canada has mandated you to write a briefing report on a current problem related to internet culture. Your policy report must be written for one of the following audiences:

- a) *Ministry of Education*
- b) *Canadian Psychological Association*
- c) *Canadian Businesses*
- d) *Department of Justice Canada*

In this report, you must research empirical articles and answer the following questions:

1. *What forces have contributed to the emergence of this issue?*
2. *What effects does this issue have on current entities and individuals?*

Based on your examination of the scientific literature and your choice of audience, you will be asked to make your own empirically-based recommendations about the issue.

This approach echoes suggestions by Beaufort (2007). You can see how just giving students a purpose and an audience can be motivating. And isn't this more realistic in terms of the kinds of papers we, professionals in our fields, write?

There is a well-established body of scholarship that offers solutions on how to achieve integration when writing research papers. The examples we provided above only touch upon the possibilities that can be explored in making IS a more engaging, meaningful and integrative course. We can (and should!) maintain a connection to disciplines, but we believe the IS experience will be dramatically improved for students and teachers if a more comprehensive notion of integration is appreciated and woven into the design of the course.

B. MORE EFFECTIVE METHODS FOR PRODUCING A SATISFYING STUDENT PAPER

Our report would be incomplete if we didn't address an ongoing complaint made by many IS teachers: the heavy grading workload. Some quotes from the *Brief Survey*:

"I believe the demands of the course are beyond the average College student's capabilities—the task of understanding and preparing a multidisciplinary project based on scholarly material is quite advanced and only a small number of student's truly understand and achieve the goals."

"It is far too much work to correct three discipline papers and a final paper. The low level of the General Social Science students requires a different approach."

"... The way it is now, it is often too much work for the students AND too much for the teacher....and many of the students don't see it as an exciting challenge, rather, they get overwhelmed and just don't try very hard."

"Students seem to need quite a lot of help with very basic aspects of research: library resources, referencing, though structuring and writing. I think if they had to write three different five-paragraph papers on different themes or aspects it would be more useful to them (and easier to build on skills since there would be less backtracking and less rewriting.)"

"I must say, however, that the amount of work (i.e. grading) involved is daunting."

In conversations with teachers, they are clearly put off by what they feel is a lot of red-pen grading of drafts. They also feel students arrive at their course ill-prepared, not having been taught the skills required for conducting research, or not having applied themselves to learning these skills at the time, further adding to the teacher's load. It is no wonder that IS teachers feel at times overwhelmed at the task of successfully guiding 28 students through this course.

Underneath this workload complaint, however, we suspect the real problem isn't workload, per se, but a feeling that all their "red-pen" efforts are somehow not resulting in a proportionately satisfying student output. We suspect some further training on course design and how to provide effective feedback to students would go a long way to alleviating these concerns.

One resource we have found particularly useful is Bean's (2011) *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Bean (2011) has many ideas related to course design and providing feedback which result in less actual marking. Such ideas include scaffolding the assignment from the very beginning, encouraging exploratory writing, employing a RAFT (Role, Audience, Format and Task) approach, effective use of grading rubrics, providing effective feedback and having students provide comments to one another in a way that actually encourage rethinking, restructuring and re-reading for basic grammar and spelling errors. Clearly, there are ways to help teachers reduce red-pen time while helping students produce better papers.

C. SUGGESTIONS FOR 2015-2016 ACADEMIC YEAR

We propose offering a series of workshops that lead participants through research and writing practices based on sound educational scholarship. **During these workshops, teachers will learn the basics about the scholarship of WID and develop exercises which will be shared on an on-line platform such as Methods Central. This site will become a collection of "best-practices" for writing research papers.** Attendance certainly is not limited to the IS teacher, as parts of these workshops are designed for skills that should precede IS.

Three general workshop themes seem to have emerged:

1. Understanding Integration: Content might include: Considering the definition and application of "integrative" to ensure that not only disciplines but other aspects of integration are included. Discussion on how to write the integrative reflection pieces would also fall under this category.
2. Course Design: Content might include: Creating excellent problems for students to want to explore from many perspectives. Designing assignments with audience and purpose in mind. Incorporating scaffolding exercises that can be done individually or in groups (e.g., locating sources, evaluating sources for purpose, deep reading of sources, APA/MLA formatting style).
3. Providing Effective Feedback: Employing more effective and efficient feedback in person, on papers, and through rubrics.

Appendix A

Ministerial Requirements

Elements of the competency:

1. To recall significant learning achievements from the program.
2. To apply this learning in new situations.
3. To produce a final output.
4. To regularly evaluate your learning approach.
5. To evaluate your final output.

Performance Criteria:

1. Statement of the learning acquired.
2. Relevant application of learning in new situations.
3. Satisfactory application of learning in new situations.
4. Appropriate application of at least two Social Science disciplines.
5. Efficient use of appropriate information technologies.
6. Clear, correct oral and written communication in the language of instruction.
7. Recognition of the general meaning and essential ideas of a message conveyed in the second language.
8. Critical evaluation of their learning approach.

Appendix B
Brief Survey of Integrative Seminar

The following questions shouldn't take you more than a few minutes to complete.

As stated in the Rules and Templates there are different models to structure the IS course. The purpose of the following brief and anonymous survey is to find out how teachers approach IS. Your participation is very much appreciated.

1. Have you taught IS before? Yes No

2. Do you teach it regularly (eg., at least once every two years or so)? Yes No

3. Before the submission of the final paper do you require:
 - a. Separate discipline papers (for example: History, Sociology, Psychology, etc.)
 - b. Separate aspect papers (for example: themes from an International Law IS such as: "Who suffers?" "Who benefits?" "What are the roots of exploitation?" and "What are the factors behind the lack of implementation of International Laws?")
 - c. Complete rough drafts with no separate discipline or aspect papers beforehand
 - d. Other (please specify below if you use a combination of the above approaches, or a completely different approach)

If you selected 'other' from above or wish to comment more on the process you use, please feel free to do so:

4. What does "Integrative" mean to you?

5. Do you have any concerns about or suggestions for the IS course?

Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix C

INTEGRATIVE LEARNING VALUE RUBRIC AAC&U

for more information, please contact value@aacu.org

The VALUE rubrics were developed by teams of faculty experts representing colleges and universities across the United States through a process that examined many existing campus rubrics and related documents for each learning outcome and incorporated additional feedback from faculty. The rubrics articulate fundamental criteria for each learning outcome, with performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment. The rubrics are intended for institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing student learning, not for grading. The core expectations articulated in all 15 of the VALUE rubrics can and should be translated into the language of individual campuses, disciplines, and even courses. The utility of the VALUE rubrics is to position learning at all undergraduate levels within a basic framework of expectations such that evidence of learning can be shared nationally through a common dialog and understanding of student success.

Definition

Integrative learning is an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.

Framing Language

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 for higher education. Initially, students connect previous learning to new classroom learning. Later, significant knowledge within individual disciplines serves as the foundation, but integrative learning goes beyond academic boundaries. Indeed, integrative experiences often occur as learners address real-world problems, unscripted and sufficiently broad, to require multiple areas of knowledge and multiple modes of inquiry, offering multiple solutions and benefiting from multiple perspectives. Integrative learning also involves internal changes in the learner. These internal changes, which indicate growth as a confident, lifelong learner, include the ability to adapt one's intellectual skills, to contribute in a wide variety of situations, and to understand and develop individual purpose, values and ethics. Developing students' capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today's global society. Students face a rapidly changing and increasingly connected world where integrative learning becomes not just a benefit...but a necessity.

Because integrative learning is about making connections, this learning may not be as evident in traditional academic artifacts such as research papers and academic projects unless the student, for example, is prompted to draw implications for practice. These connections often surface, however, in reflective work, self assessment, or creative endeavors of all kinds. Integrative assignments foster learning between courses or by connecting courses to experientially-based work. Work samples or collections of work that include such artifacts give evidence of integrative learning. Faculty are encouraged to look for evidence that the student connects the learning gained in classroom study to learning gained in real life situations that are related to other learning experiences, extra-curricular activities, or work. Through integrative learning, students pull together their entire experience inside and outside of the formal classroom; thus, artificial barriers between formal study and informal or tacit learning become permeable. Integrative learning, whatever the context or source, builds upon connecting both theory and practice toward a deepened understanding.

Assignments to foster such connections and understanding could include, for example, composition papers that focus on topics from biology, economics, or history; mathematics assignments that apply mathematical tools to important issues and require written analysis to explain the implications and limitations of the mathematical treatment, or art history presentations that demonstrate aesthetic connections between selected paintings and novels. In this regard, some majors (e.g., interdisciplinary majors or problem-based field studies) seem to inherently evoke characteristics of integrative learning and result in work samples or collections of work that significantly demonstrate this outcome. However, fields of study that require accumulation of extensive and high-consensus content knowledge (such as

accounting, engineering, or chemistry) also involve the kinds of complex and integrative constructions (e.g., ethical dilemmas and social consciousness) that seem to be highlighted so extensively in self reflection in arts and humanities, but they may be embedded in individual performances and less evident. The key in the development of such work samples or collections of work will be in designing structures that include artifacts and reflective writing or feedback that support students' examination of their learning and give evidence that, as graduates, they will extend their integrative abilities into the challenges of personal, professional, and civic life.

Glossary

The definitions that follow were developed to clarify terms and concepts used in this rubric only.

- ⑩ Academic knowledge: Disciplinary learning; learning from academic study, texts, etc.
 - ⑩ Content: The information conveyed in the work samples or collections of work.
 - ⑩ Contexts: Actual or simulated situations in which a student demonstrates learning outcomes. New and challenging contexts encourage students to stretch beyond their current frames of reference.
 - ⑩ Co-curriculum: A parallel component of the academic curriculum that is in addition to formal classroom (student government, community service, residence hall activities, student organizations, etc.).
 - ⑩ Experience: Learning that takes place in a setting outside of the formal classroom, such as workplace, service learning site, internship site or another.
 - ⑩ Form: The external frameworks in which information and evidence are presented, ranging from choices for particular work sample or collection of works (such as a research paper, PowerPoint, video recording, etc.) to choices in make-up of the eportfolio.
 - ⑩ Performance: A dynamic and sustained act that brings together knowing and doing (creating a painting, solving an experimental design problem, developing a public relations strategy for a business, etc.); performance makes learning observable.
 - ⑩ Reflection: A meta-cognitive act of examining a performance in order to explore its significance and consequences.
- Self Assessment: Describing, interpreting, and judging a performance based on stated or implied expectations followed by planning for further learning.

Definition

Integrative learning is an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and cocurriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.

Evaluators are encouraged to assign a zero to any work sample or collection of work that does not meet benchmark (cell one) level performance.

	Capstone 4	Milestones		Benchmark 1
		3	2	
Connections to Experience <i>Connects relevant experience and academic knowledge</i>	Meaningfully synthesizes connections among experiences outside of the formal classroom (including life experiences and academic experiences such as internships and travel abroad) to deepen understanding of fields of study and to broaden own points of view.	Effectively selects and develops examples of life experiences, drawn from a variety of contexts (e.g., family life, artistic participation, civic involvement, work experience), to illuminate concepts/theories/frameworks of fields of study.	Compares life experiences and academic knowledge to infer differences, as well as similarities, and acknowledge perspectives other than own.	Identifies connections between life experiences and those academic texts and ideas perceived as similar and related to own interests.
Connections to Discipline <i>Sees (makes) connections across disciplines, perspectives</i>	Independently creates wholes out of multiple parts (synthesizes) or draws conclusions by combining examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of study or perspective.	Independently connects examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of study or perspective.	When prompted, connects examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of study or perspective.	When prompted, presents examples, facts, or theories from more than one field of study or perspective.
Transfer <i>Adapts and applies skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation to new situations</i>	Adapts and applies, independently, skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation to new situations to solve difficult problems or explore complex issues in original ways.	Adapts and applies skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation to new situations to solve problems or explore issues.	Uses skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation in a new situation to contribute to understanding of problems or issues.	Uses, in a basic way, skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation in a new situation.
Integrated Communication	Fulfills the assignment(s) by choosing a format, language, or graph (or other visual representation) in ways that enhance meaning , making clear the interdependence of language and meaning, thought, and expression.	Fulfills the assignment(s) by choosing a format, language, or graph (or other visual representation) to explicitly connect content and form , demonstrating awareness of purpose and audience.	Fulfills the assignment(s) by choosing a format, language, or graph (or other visual representation) that connects in a basic way what is being communicated (content) with how it is said (form).	Fulfills the assignment(s) (i.e. to produce an essay, a poster, a video, a PowerPoint presentation, etc.) in an appropriate form.
Reflection and Self-Assessment <i>Demonstrates a developing sense of self as a learner; building on prior experiences to respond to new and challenging contexts (may be evident in self-assessment, reflective, or creative work)</i>	Envisions a future self (and possibly makes plans that build on past experiences that have occurred across multiple and diverse contexts).	Evaluates changes in own learning over time, recognizing complex contextual factors (e.g., works with ambiguity and risk, deals with frustration, considers ethical frameworks).	Articulates strengths and challenges (within specific performances or events) to increase effectiveness in different contexts (through increased self-awareness).	Describes own performances with general descriptors of success and failure.

Appendix D
Selected Academic Sources that informed our Project

- AAC&U. (2007-2008). VALUE Rubric Development Project. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics>.
- Bazerman, Charles. (2009) *Genre and Cognitive Development: Beyond Writing to Learn*. Retrieved from <http://mina.education.ucsb.edu/bazerman/chapters/documents/Bazerman2009ChptrGenreandCognit.pdf>.
- Bean, John. (2011) *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Beaufort, Anne. (2007) *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Bizup, Joseph. (2008) "BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-based Writing." *Rhetoric Review*. 27(1). 72-86.
- Wineberg, Samuel. (1991). "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and Academy." *American Educational Research Journal*. 28(3), 495-519.