

# Note for AIS website readers

## 1) THE HISTORY OF THE COURSE

The idea for this kind of course arose from my philosophical education, as an undergraduate and then graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill, where I studied intensely with Professor E. Maynard Adams. His synoptic grasp of philosophy and of modern Western culture inspired me to think of a course that would apply high-level philosophical ideas to the broad integration of culture/knowledge.

When I taught at North Carolina's Governor's School, a summer program for gifted high school students, the theory behind its AREA II course was fully consistent with (indeed, tailor-made for) an integration course. I particularly would like to thank another NCGS teacher with whom I worked, Steve Sorkin, for insight on how to create an integration course within AREA II. Over several summers I honed such a course, first at NCGS and then at Arkansas Governor's School. I judged that this kind of course could work in principle on a high school level.

At Catawba College, I brought the idea of an advanced integration course to the attention of the Director of Honors, who approved what I called "Philosophy & the Integration of Knowledge" (PIK, for short). I taught the course as an advanced Honors course for two iterations starting in 2000. Then the Honors Director needed the course taught on an introductory level, so I scaled back the course some to form "Connecting Knowledge Across Disciplines", which I taught only once in 2006. Since then the course has again been an advanced Honors course.

## 2) THE ROLE OF THIS COURSE IN THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM

In the Catawba College curriculum, PIK serves as an elective only for students in the College Honors Program. Freshmen Honors students are not allowed to take it; usually, juniors and seniors comprise the class. There are no formal prerequisites for this course, and no knowledge or coursework is assumed. PIK also counts for Humanities General Education credit, so Honors students have two reasons for enrolling.

Non-Honors students are not allowed to take Honors courses, so PIK cannot help with my department's major or minor. My plan had been to introduce PIK into the curriculum of the Religion & Philosophy Department as an upper-level elective for my department's majors and minors, where it would also be available to any interested student. But, due to Honors Program policies, it could not then serve as an Honors course. So, for now, I keep it as an Honors course only. Typically, it enrolls between 3-8 students, with all the advantages that accrue to a course that small. Due to several limiting factors, I have taught it only every three or four years.

Several factors drive down enrollment in the course: it is a particularly difficult course both intellectually and in terms of workload; also, most other Honors courses have a travel component, whereas PIK does not. The course, then, is offered infrequently and reaches very few students. Nevertheless, I am told that it has something of a following, with former students often insisting that their younger peers take the course when it is next offered.

A course of this kind has an obvious and profound role to play in any liberal education curriculum. With the documented fragmentation of knowledge, of learning, and of curriculum, an integration course speaks directly to this problem. The course could be taught as a freshman seminar for all

incoming students, particularly if it were enlarged into a two-semester sequence. Indeed, in that kind of format, it would be amenable to interesting team-teaching opportunities. Or the course could be taught as a Capstone course, of the kind that used to be required (widely in days of yore) of all students in their Junior or Senior year. Unfortunately, many forces at work in higher education tend to block these possibilities.

### 3) IDENTIFYING STUDENT SUCCESS AT INTEGRATIVE THINKING

I am quite concerned not only to introduce students to integrative thinking but also (and crucially) to help them begin to think that way. I do not expect that they will become comfortable or proficient at it, only that they repeatedly try it in order to become more comfortable and more proficient.

First, I discuss the nature of integrative thinking, both in the abstract and using specific cases. I distinguish it from other kinds of thinking, such as the standard analytical thinking they are typically more accustomed to. I defend its intellectual, educational, and cultural importance, especially in relation to forces that would diminish or deny its importance.

Second, quite a few of the assignments in the course ask students to try their hand at integrative thinking. You can find examples of such questions on the midterm and final, which I included in the supporting materials for the syllabus. Toward the end of the syllabus, in the detailed Schedule of Readings, you will see that some of the short essays listed there ask students to think in an integrative manner. In the final paper, I ask that students apply integrative thinking to a topic of their choice. Although the description of the paper in the syllabus refers to it as analytical, I mean only to distinguish the paper from a standard summary or research or opinion paper. The paper should be rationally organized, rationally defended, and a working out of their own ideas. Perhaps I should call it an “analytical” integrative paper.

Third, fairly early in the semester we tackle a limited range of material, typically about natural science and visual art, and then use the surrealist short film “An Andalusian Dog” as a point of departure for the class to begin to think in an integrative manner. Students find that they are able to apply, for example, ideas from physics to the film. This exercise foreshadows another group effort at integration later in the course. Towards the end of the semester, we watch a longer film out of class (I often use “Koyaanisqatsi”) as a point of departure for, first, a discussion in which we use integrative thought to apply a wide range of course ideas to the film, and second, a short paper in which each student uses integrative thought to apply a wide range of course ideas to the film.

It is only some exaggeration to say that I hold my breath through the course, fearing that students will find the goal of integration (much less the amount and content of ideas from contemporary culture) overwhelming, disheartening, bizarre, and frightening. Almost always my fears dissolve as I read their essay and tests and papers, as I hear their growing illumination in class, and as I read their end-of-semester course evaluations. To give you a rough sense of their degree of learning, I have included in the supporting materials for the syllabus an example of one student’s midterm, a second student’s film essay, and a third student’s final paper. I have also included some selected comments from several years’ worth of student course evaluations.