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Venturing into Interdisciplinary Tasks:

Common Challenges for Faculty and Students

by
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Abstract: This article offers a series of vignettes of a group of faculty working together to write a collection of essays on interdisciplinary teaching and learning, as these shed light on possibilities for transformative experiences for undergraduates in interdisciplinary courses. Sample issues explored: beginning with a plan or letting the plan emerge, finding a focus amidst a plethora of materials and methods, relating concrete and abstract. What can we learn from our own processes of interdisciplinary work to improve our processes of teaching?

We know how hard it is to generate transformation in teaching practices. Faculty too often attend workshops, conferences, or retreats, get inspired, take lots of notes, return home, get caught up in the busyness of everyday work demands, and revert to familiar routines. This article considers possibilities for improvement in interdisciplinary teaching and learning when faculty reflect on their own experiences as interdisciplinary scholars and writers. Widespread and lasting change from such an approach has been demonstrated in recent decades in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement (WAC). WAC workshops often ask faculty not only to reflect on the kinds of writing they themselves do and on their own experiences as writers, but actually to *write*: keep a journal, jot brief responses to in-workshop prompts, discuss what they have written with their peers. Such experiences have created major changes in faculty's approaches to student writing, for example increasing students' opportunities to write for varied purposes and audiences. The challenges and possibilities faced by today's

advocates of interdisciplinary studies resemble those faced by our colleagues in WAC:

- Faculty often do not see the connections between students' experiences and their own.
- These connections are greater than we may like to admit: integrative thinking and writing are not easy for us either.
- Seeing and *experiencing* the connections can transform.

This article focuses on a particular experience of faculty working together and learning by doing: What does the process itself reveal? What can our processes reveal about student processes? And how can focused reflection on our teaching and our own interdisciplinary work, plus *doing* interdisciplinary work together ourselves, help us toward transformative processes for our students?¹

Background: A Collaborative Project on Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning

Thirty-one faculty from my university—the University of Hartford, in West Hartford, Connecticut—have been collaborating for two years to create a collection of essays about interdisciplinary teaching and learning, based on more than a decade of shared experience in a general education curriculum bringing together faculty, students, and ideas from across our comprehensive university.² The book, titled *Interdisciplinary General Education: Questioning Outside the Lines*, is part of the College Board's new series on interdisciplinary studies (1998-99). We explore questions such as these: What differences do we make for students by bringing them into interdisciplinary courses early in their college careers? How in practice do these course work to develop integrative skills? What are the processes of interdisciplinary teaching and learning during a semester? And what do faculty learn over time about interdisciplinary general education: what works, what doesn't, what should be done differently? Authors address these questions from within the context of their particular interdisciplinary courses, on a wide range of topics including creativity in the arts, Romanticism, and urban/ethnic arts; ethics in the professions, schooling, gender, hunger, and power; epidemics and AIDS, symmetry, and scientific process; American studies, Caribbean studies, literature and film of other cultures, and cultures and transnational corporations. Our chapters eventually took shape within three groupings: "Asking Questions and

Crossing Boundaries” (classroom approaches to fundamental “what is” questions that lead students to become active explorers), “Framing Issues and Dealing with Problems” (problem-centered approaches that develop students’ thinking skills), and “Exploring Cultures and Understanding Ourselves” (culture-centered approaches that encourage students to explore values).

Thus a group of faculty accustomed to speaking within disciplines ranging from physics to poetry, from ethnomusicology to marketing, here attempted to work together to speak of shared interdisciplinary concerns. The project entailed two different levels of collaboration. First, seven cross-disciplinary course teams chose to co-author (five faculty wrote alone on behalf of their teams, while members of two teams wrote separate essays with different angles). The teams were broadly interdisciplinary, a philosopher with an engineer, an economist with a biologist, a medical technician with a literary scholar. These faculty had taught together but with one exception had not co-authored. Second, we all committed ourselves to carrying through not just the shared project but the shared focus on a common set of questions, which we designed together. We would all explore intersections among our course topics, issues of interdisciplinary studies, and issues of student learning.

As the volume’s general editor and also a contributor struggling with the challenges of composition, I was struck that our experiences as faculty venturing into this interdisciplinary project and facing a variety of unanticipated challenges often paralleled the experiences of students in our interdisciplinary general education courses. I will approach these challenges here through a series of narrative vignettes from the project, each followed by some brief commentary, including parallels to student challenges and perhaps some possibilities for addressing them.

Vignette #1: This Isn’t My Usual Territory

Faculty feel what we are doing with students in our courses is important and thus sign on to the book project with enthusiasm. But then comes a stage of considerable reticence. Having learned to speak where we have won some authority, we wonder about speaking in areas where we can lay no such claim.

Unlike working on a question within our disciplines, where the needed background research may be fairly clearly defined, if large, engaging in scholarship that crosses disciplines and also considering issues of teaching

and learning forces us to live with the ongoing awareness of something else we should read, should have read. Not a task for the timid—or the perfectionist. This challenge is of course an intensified version of the challenge of the interdisciplinary teaching itself, outside our department, outside our “comfort zone.” A scholarship of interdisciplinary pedagogy, like the teaching, demands that we be vulnerable. We need to allow ourselves to add our voices, share our stories, not as know-it-all-guides but as adventurers/venturers willing to take risks.

This venturing, risk-taking, is after all what we ask of our students. But we can forget just how much it is that we ask. Students have learned to live with discipline-bound learning: forty-three minute classes separated from each other by bells and hallways. We ask them to encounter multiple disciplines outside their chosen major in a single course. Adding a voice to an interdisciplinary conversation is risky. At least faculty are conversant in one of the contributing languages; students often feel they are entering a multilingual chat room, with some Esperanto thrown in for good measure. How can one course, one semester, allow them to find a voice? Airing and discussing the concerns students bring with them to our interdisciplinary courses instead of ignoring them may be a necessary first step, even as it was for us to get started with the book project. And we may need to do more than we have done to encourage/guide students into the risks: more on this shortly.

Vignette #2: Connections Planned vs. Connections Emergent

Faculty meet to discuss guidelines for the essays to appear in our book. Some want to agree on firm guidelines and definite text structure from the outset, then go and write accordingly. Others fervently want to write first and see what ideas, what connections with other essays, what groupings naturally emerge. The results: considerable consternation, considerable unwillingness on both sides to budge from the preferred approach, an attempt to allow for both via various compromises.

These approaches to the project are mirrored in approaches to the project of teaching an interdisciplinary course. Some want to map out the interdisciplinary connections to be emphasized; others want to “let it happen,” let creative, surprising connections emerge organically and inductively out of the works and ideas to be discussed. These preferences affect everything from the appearance of the syllabus to the planning of a particular course hour.

If faculty preferences differ this much, we can expect to find similar divergence among our students: some wanting highly structured assignments that tell them exactly how to proceed in unfamiliar territory; others, the freedom to explore first. Assuming students are not quite so set in their ways of writing as faculty after their many years of professional work, we would do well to let students experiment with various modes: sometimes highly structured assignments to encourage effective disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking—"Go to the museum, use these step-by-step guidelines to discuss one of the paintings on your list, and then draw a careful comparison with a work in a different medium by considering . . ."—and other times, journal assignments allowing students to pursue whatever connections come to them. For what Stephen Brookfield notes as true of critical thinking likewise characterizes interdisciplinary thinking: carefully designed exercises help students learn to explore different ways of seeing, but "dramatic insights, revelations, and understanding . . . will frequently come unexpectedly to individuals" (1987, pp. 232, 233, 244)

Vignette #3: What Should It Look Like?

Some faculty are not sure what is called for. After all, commentary on interdisciplinary teaching and learning is not what we usually publish. "Can we see some models?"

The request sounds simple enough, but action upon it becomes less so: while articles about particular interdisciplinary courses have appeared for decades in a variety of journals, relatively few of them have made reference to the emerging books and articles on interdisciplinarity. Locating appropriate examples is possible but not easy.

Interdisciplinary courses typically ask students to do writing that is different from what they have done before. If faculty themselves rely on models within their usual territory and even more so when outside, how much more so could students. Our faculty have known this, but models have not been easy to come by and we have too often left students without. In my own course (Romanticism in the Arts), it has been difficult to find a text even within a single discipline that shows the kind of thinking and writing students will be doing, much less an accessible text focusing on cross-disciplinary connections within the period. Not only is my teaching team staying on the lookout for professional models, but we are realizing we need to do better at saving student writing to be photocopied for upcoming semesters. Looking at such examples, long a staple of writing

courses, needs to become so in interdisciplinary courses.

Vignette #4: Do We Have To Read All This?

Some faculty read some theorists [note: not all faculty contributors, and not all theorists] and say it puts them to sleep. They argue that they care intensely about their subject matter, less so about all the theorizing within a new “field” of interdisciplinarity. They argue that the interdisciplinarity of their subject is self-evident, and they want to spend their limited time reading in the various relevant literatures, already overwhelming to try to keep up with, rather than in interdisciplinary theory or critical thinking theory.

Yet some of the same faculty and teams later note that reading the theorists of interdisciplinarity has made them see things in a new way, conceptualize their courses in ways that they had not done before. Says one contributor, “I was doing interdisciplinarity by accident.”

The challenge with students too is to find a careful balance that works. One teaching team writes that including a lot of readings on multicultural theory has not worked well for them with students. Yet they are firmly committed to providing students with new lenses through which to see others’ cultures and their own.

Vignette #5: Not Easy to Get a Handle on It

A couple of teams have an extremely hard time getting started: weeks, even months, of talking and talking but no writing. “We know what we want to say, but it is not easy to put it all together.” Frustration ensues: “We have really got to get going!”

One interdisciplinary team finally went to a team member in English who had not taught the course lately and urged, “Can you get us started? Just write us the opening and we’ll do the rest”—in other words, “Can you find the angle?” This problem of finding the angle is mirrored in the process of creating an interdisciplinary course. Some potential teams meet and meet and meet—for months. Where is the proposal? “It is coming once we get a handle on it.”

If faculty authors, with a clear focus that they themselves helped to determine, have a hard time zeroing in on an interdisciplinary challenge, how do we expect novices to do it easily, and within some of the con-

straints we set, such as timed midterm exams? My own team has finally and belatedly realized that we were causing students undue stress by giving them not only various short-answer questions but also a large interdisciplinary question on an hour exam and expecting them to focus in, select appropriate works, draw connections. Even the better students take time to do all that, with often some casting about and frustration before the direction becomes clear. Addressing this problem for us has meant, in one pretty basic way, providing integrative essay exam questions in advance, so students can think through their responses.

Vignette #6: Too Much to Deal With

As we write, the ideas proliferate. We know the length guidelines, but we all write way too much. Sometimes the digressions seem to be the best parts. But focus becomes an issue. It often seems there is more than one essay in there. Much feedback is needed. Most essays do not just “happen.”

This vignette is obviously related to the previous one, but moves on from planning to writing stage. Again it is mirrored in our teaching: there is a lot of material from each discipline to include. There is more than one course in there? We know well the limits of a fourteen-week semester; many of us have been teaching for over twenty-five years. Yet new teams recurrently include more material than will fit.

Amidst a barrage of data, concepts, methodologies from multiple disciplines, are we offering students ways and means to sort them out, to make choices as they produce their own work? Are we providing them the opportunity to go through what these faculty authors went through, to write their way to focus? Students may need to “go a long distance to come back a short distance correctly,” as Jerry puts it in Edward Albee’s play *The Zoo Story*. They may need to generate a lot of material—some for one paper, some for a later paper. For a particular project, a defined focus, while perhaps not naturally easy to maintain, may encourage integrative thinking. Opportunities for feedback will be essential along the way, to check whether the focus on integration is happening.

Vignette #7: Telling Stories

The authors agree to the central challenge of using our classroom experiences to probe issues of interdisciplinarity. But only some parts of

the first drafts achieve this kind of connection. A main temptation (or is it?): telling a good story. But some of our stories show interdisciplinary connections, such as discussion of an exciting class session on the tango, with poetry, music, film, and even a plunge into in-class dancing.

If we can become absorbed in the stories, so can students. Sometimes indeed both faculty and students need to step back to analyze what they are discussing, to explore assumptions. But sometimes it is all right to let stories do our telling. Story, image, metaphor, have power to get at us beyond the level of rationality—to integrate beyond our power to verbalize what it is that we have integrated. The Association for Integrative Studies acknowledged this power in the choice of theme for its 1997 conference, “Tales of Transformation,” inviting stories which illuminate transformations made possible through interdisciplinary work. One team of faculty authors for our project has talked about their realization that they needed to give students multiple modes of writing to demonstrate learning: expressive as well as analytical. We need to allow our students, too, to tell stories. One team of authors describes quilt squares their students create and exhibit, that individually and collectively tell tales of diverse cultures and intercultural connections.

Vignette #8: Debunking Syntheses

The focus of our volume, on developing students' integrative skills, suggests an emphasis on synthesis, which is often discussed as the goal of interdisciplinary studies. But in the essays that emerge, it turns out that we have written as much about debunking syntheses as building them.

Students bring to our interdisciplinary courses many easy generalizations about the subject, whether it is creativity, hunger, AIDS, or technology. Yes, we want to add complexity, explore assumptions, consider alternative ways of seeing, and help them construct new syntheses. But the process of testing syntheses should continue.

In my own course, counteracting students' tendency to write generalities about “here nature, there nature, everywhere nature”—as if artistic medium is irrelevant, all the Romantics are similar, and they are all completely different from artists in the period before—we have altered assignment wordings to ask students to critique syntheses as well as construct them. An exam question may ask students to work with concepts but not blur differences, tensions within them: “Your friend has not had this course.

Explain to her some of what she is missing in her notion that the Romantics" Or even, "Your friend *has* had this course and has concluded that . . . What may he be missing?"

Good interdisciplinary thinking involves working toward a holistic understanding. It also entails moving in the opposite direction. We need to help students continually test that perspective, reject syntheses and try out others, see of what value they might be for dealing with the more concrete.

Vignette #9: The High Point vs. The Bottom Line

Interdisciplinary courses help students to understand disciplines: their power, their limitations. But when faculty contributors talk about how they feel about what they have written, what they really like, what excites them about it? The same thing that motivates students: encounters with particular people, particular examples of creativity, particular issues of AIDS or hunger.

William Newell writes that "disciplines and not substantive facts are the raw materials of interdisciplinary courses"; there may be some "catchy," "topical" focus that will motivate students, but faculty are aware of the real subject (1994, pp. 43-44). But faculty, when talking about those courses, are often more absorbed in the raw materials of their subject matter than the more abstract issues of helping students confront the "perspectives of each discipline and some of its key underlying assumptions," as recommended in the excellent "Guide to Interdisciplinary Syllabus Preparation" (AIS and IIS, 1996).

This link between faculty and students can provide a useful caution for us as we work in interdisciplinary studies. Beethoven reportedly said, "There have been many princes and there will be thousands more. But there is only one Beethoven." For my own course, there will be many musicologists, music historians, interarts scholars; we want our students to *hear* Beethoven. But the integrative thinking can help in the hearing. Helen Vendler argued in her 1980 MLA presidential address that "a general interdisciplinary Poloniuslike religious-historical-philosophical-cultural overview will never reproduce that taste on the tongue . . . of an individual style"—to which Gerald Graff has aptly added, "but recent experience shows that bare, unmediated contact with the work does not necessarily inculcate that taste either" (1987, p. 254).

With students, we need to value both high points in terms of level of

abstraction—exploring disciplinary assumptions—and also the “bottom line” of enriched encounter with the concrete. It is the *motion* between abstract and concrete that creates active learning. Motion, after all, is what critical thinking entails. Listen to the action words: Richard Rorty discusses

“the hermeneutic circle”—the fact that we cannot understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language, or whatever, unless we know something about how the whole thing works, whereas we cannot get a grasp on how the whole works until we have some understanding of its parts. . . . *we play back and forth* between guesses about how to characterize particular statements or other events, and guesses about the point of the whole situation, until gradually we feel at ease with what was hitherto strange. (1969, p. 319, italics mine)

And Clifford Geertz, noting the importance of the hermeneutic circle across the disciplines as well as in everyday experience, speaks of “characteristic intellectual movement, the inward conceptual rhythm . . . a continuous dialectical tacking”; “one oscillates restlessly . . . hopping back and forth . . . [in] a sort of intellectual perpetual motion” among specifics and generalizations (1983, p. 69).

In an interdisciplinary course, then, as the previous vignette has already suggested, some of the important motion will be toward integration, synthesis. It will also be *away* from integration and synthesis toward specifics and toward the non-verbal level of event, object, and person (cf. Hayakawa, 1972, p. 162), bringing to them a greater understanding gained from the more abstract thought. Interdisciplinary study entails bringing together data, tools, methods, concepts, and theories from multiple disciplines, “drawing on different disciplinary perspectives and integrating their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective” (Klein and Newell, 1996, pp. 393-94). In the Romanticism course, interdisciplinary study yields interarts comparisons; but it *also* yields an enriched experience of particular works of Berlioz, Delacroix, and Mary Shelley. In the Epidemics and AIDS course, interdisciplinary studies can yield both understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of the epidemic of AIDS and a deepened encounter with a person with the disease, volunteer work in a shelter, and even changed behavior in the heat of passion. Much of the power of interdisciplinary study, for professionals and students alike, is not a particular point within the intellectual action it entails—not just the

high points of integration—but the enriched *action* among levels of abstraction and generalization.

Vignette(s) #10: Collaboration is Complicated

From beginning to end, faculty teams struggle with co-authorship. They comment that the process is difficult, that it would have been easier to write the chapter alone. Variations on a theme:

- “Our schedules are too different. It has been really hard to meet.”
- “Person x is not doing his part.” [Or “Person x talks wonderfully but doesn’t put it down on paper.” Or “Person x will write but doesn’t want to research.”]
- “We see things differently. Each of us wants to turn the draft into something different.”
- “We write differently.” [Authors from different disciplines have many meetings, draw up an outline, assign sections, write, come together, and find they have three pieces that do not mesh easily.]
- “We are really feeling our way along. I guess we are both sending out unintended signals.” [A pair of faculty, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural, nearly split up, bond, nearly split up again (not just for the co-authoring but for the teaching itself), bond again, struggle, struggle some more.]

Such problems can occur in any collaboration but may be accentuated in interdisciplinary work. In interdisciplinary team teaching, differences can yield a much enriched result, but differences in schedules, views of the subject, teaching styles, work habits, and personal characteristics can also make the process more complicated than faculty originally expect (as James Davis, 1995, also notes). Co-authoring presents still further challenges, as even our experienced teaching teams discovered. Of our seven co-authored chapters, two went relatively smoothly: it happened in each case that a single person produced most of the draft, with the co-author(s) reading and commenting. Of the other five, various kinds of complications and dissension ensued, some mild, some more major. Faculty in the sciences are more used to collaborating than faculty in the humanities, but they typically author with others who share disciplinary assumptions, research work, and an established form for presenting the results. For our scientists as well as those of us from other disciplines, co-authoring across disciplines was a new experience—as, indeed, it is for our

students.

Many of us know well the challenges and rewards of collaborative learning for students working within our disciplines. We have read and thought about the benefits of collaborative learning and the active engagement it fosters, thus of the worth of persevering through the difficulties, at least for a part of our course activities, and developing improved procedures. But still the particular challenges of such teamwork in interdisciplinary general education merit attention, with students working outside their majors and with fewer shared assumptions. The faculty experiences above remind us to have a bit of humility *and* a sense of humor when difficulties occur with cross-disciplinary student groups; to allow plenty of time; to be particularly alert to conflicts; to expect the unexpected. For faculty may not be much better than students in getting a cross-disciplinary group to function well—or even to get together at all. We are expecting of students what we cannot do easily ourselves: not only may students be expected to integrate what their faculty either can't or won't (Jonathan Smith, qtd. in Gaff 1980, pp. 54-55); they are also being asked to collaborate in ways that their faculty often can't or won't. The challenges of collaboration on interdisciplinary projects for both faculty and students are well worth further study, as more and more faculty co-author across disciplines and as we expect our students to work in groups with their peers from different majors and colleges.

Vignette(s) #11: Forced Into (Re)Vision

Faculty individuals and teams have been forced to “follow the assignment.” The shared focus, plus working toward groupings of essays within it, takes many of us in ways we would not otherwise have gone in our writing. Many of us see things in a new way as a result. A selection of unsolicited comments from various contributors:

- “*This was really a lot of work. Doing scholarship within my discipline is much easier.*”
- “*The writing has made me learn more and think about what we are doing in the classroom.*”
- “*If I were not doing the chapter, I would not have seen what I see now. It will change how we teach, for example in what we ask students to write and do.*”
- “*It made me rethink the course, even more so than our summer workshops.*”

- *"It made me pull together ideas and materials in ways I have not done before."*
- *"We are asking students to do more writing this semester."*

Note that these are faculty who had already been meeting with their teams regularly, sometimes weekly, and in summer workshops for review, assessment, shared readings, discussion, and planning, over a period of many years. The teamwork for teaching had already taken us out of comfortable ways of seeing, forced us into the discomfort of seeing new ways. But something new happened. The writing itself was a key. If it has these effects on us, it can have similar effects on students. Discussions are all well and good; they can be highly motivating, renewing, even enlightening. But a different kind of learning happens when one has to put things on paper, share them with others, re-see.

Writing takes time—for us and for our students. In an interdisciplinary course, despite all we know about learning through writing, the temptation is to say it is just too much. But it is absolutely essential if students are to put things together in new ways, develop integrative skills. And specific writing challenges can force reseeing instead of regurgitating. Some of us made a direct transfer from our own writing experience for the book to realizing that we should be assigning more writing in our courses, to help students make sense of the diverse materials of the course in different ways, different genres. We should be allowing students to write their way to (re)vision.

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We have survived our many months of collaborative interdisciplinary work. It has not been easy. We recommend it to others. The project may be writing about interdisciplinary teaching and learning and/or co-authoring with faculty from other disciplines. If scholarship and teaching can enrich each other within our disciplines, they can certainly do so as well in our interdisciplinary general education work, despite our hesitations. Or the project may be participating in a workshop that calls not just for discussion of interdisciplinary thinking but for *doing* it and reflecting on what we are doing. (A varied series of WAC-type “prompts” for writing could be adapted for IDS workshops: questions about faculty’s own work [“An example of useful interdisciplinary thinking I am working on is . . .”] and about students’ [“What kinds of integration do you expect from students?” “Students have problems in my interdisciplinary course when . . .”].) With interdisciplinary studies, as with WAC, faculty can read or be

told many helpful things about integrative thinking, in fairly short order, but that will not have the same effect as the more active approaches. In fact, if any of the supposed insights of this article, drawing on our book project, sound somewhat obvious to experienced readers of this journal, well, "you had to be there." Indeed. Students too can be told many helpful things about interdisciplinary connections, but they too need to be active players in the process of discovery and communication of their discoveries.

Endnotes:

¹ This article began as a presentation for the 1997 Association for Integrative Studies Conference in Boone, North Carolina. A few passages appear in different form in the book project it describes and are used by permission of the College Board. I subsequently became aware of Sverre Sjölander's description of ten stages of interdisciplinary work (1985, cited in Klein, 1990), drawing on his observations of experts working on project teams at the University of Bielefeld. These stages, at any one of which participants may get stuck, range from "singing the old songs" on to "getting to know the enemy" and "the real beginning." The vignettes in my article, of faculty engaging in scholarship on interdisciplinary teaching and learning as they resemble students in their general education courses, are both like and unlike the stages of expert work he outlines. Most obviously, these vignettes are not as sequential. And some of them describe issues yet more basic than those of experts at work, even down to "what are we doing here?" But the vignettes resemble his stages in highlighting recurring challenges of interdisciplinary work.

² Hartford's All-University Curriculum (AUC), introduced in 1987, offers a unique crosshatch of disciplines and skills. Its roughly twenty-five interdisciplinary courses are grouped in five categories: Living in a Cultural Context: Western Heritage; Living in a Cultural Context: Other Cultures; Living in a Social Context; Living Responsively with the Arts; and Living with Science and Technology. Each course designates at least two essential abilities it explicitly works to develop: written and/or oral communication, critical thinking and problem solving, social interaction, values identification and responsible decision making, and responsibility for civic life. In addition, each course features opportunities for active learning. Students take at least four AUC courses, one from each of the four categories farthest from their major. AUC courses are team developed and typically team taught: most use a "dispersed-team" model in which two or three faculty members, each with their twenty-five students, meet together for a joint session once a week and then in small sections the rest of the week; thus students join in interdisciplinary conversations with the entire faculty team but also have opportunities for small-group discussion.

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