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ABSTRACT

In 1987, a sophomore level interdisciplinary Ethics and Values (EV) core course was implemented at Utah Valley Community College in Orem, serving as the humanities core among the liberal education requirements, a requirement for business students, a vital force in the nursing program, and a means to enrich the trade and technology courses. The support of the dean, both administratively and through time allocations, was essential to implement the course. To prepare the EV course, a grant was obtained from the National Endowment for the Humanities to fund summer seminars for faculty, a community lecture series, quarterly visits from scholars, and library acquisitions. The EV course examines current topics in conjunction with readings in the areas of philosophy, literature, religion, and history and requires students to produce three papers and maintain a journal. In the classroom, self-confrontation and verbal discussion are emphasized, and critical thinking techniques are employed. Small group, collaborative learning techniques have helped to encourage the less involved students. The course begins with introductory books and essays on the nature of ethics, focusing on the five ethical traditions of duties, rights, utility, and virtue. The remainder of the course involves discussion of specific issues, such as sexual morality, abortion, euthanasia, nuclear war, and capital punishment, in an interdisciplinary fashion. Evaluations from the over 2000 students who take the course each year point to the overwhelming success of the course. (PAA)

Curriculum Diversity through a Core Approach to Ethics

by

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Paper presented at the International Conference for Community College Chairs, Deans, and Other Instructional Leaders (2nd, Phoenix, Arizona, February 17-20, 1993.

CURRICULUM DIVERSITY THROUGH A CORE APPROACH TO ETHICS

By Elaine Eliason Englehardt

Utah Valley Community College

Ethics became an educational catch-word in the late 80's and early '90's as discussion circulated nationally on ethics as a curricular reform project at colleges and universities. At Utah Valley Community College developing and adding a core of ethics to the curriculum has been one of the most uniting, strengthening and educationally rigorous moves we have made. Why? Because it fits--it fits as a humanities core in the liberal education requirements, as a requirement for business students, as a vital focus in the nursing program and as a necessary enrichment for trade and technology courses. This one course gives UVCC students and faculty understanding and confidence in analyzing and debating moral issues. These exciting debates can be heard through the halls, in study areas, even in the cafeteria. The ingredients built into this program make it an exciting course to teach, take and further strengthen.

A Supportive Dean

The role of the dean in developing a core program is essential. Faculty may have innovative, cutting edge approaches they would like to implement, but without the dean's input and support both administratively and in time allocations, the program will never get started.

Dean Veonne Howlett has now passed away, but her hand is seen in every facet of our nationally recognized program. Dean Howlett believed in the faculty. She believed in our recommendations for curricular reform and supported them. She took our ideas for a core ethics course and preparation for this course to the president and vice president and strongly argued in our behalf. The support from Academic Vice President Lucille Stoddard was positive, enriching and swift.

Ethics became a curriculum staple at UVCC in 1987. After two years of pondering, discussing and debating how the humanities curriculum could be enriched at Utah Valley Community College, the Humanities faculty with full input

and support from Dean Howlett determined that we would offer a core course. We knew this would negatively impact the enrollment in some of our humanities courses, yet we believed it was important that all students be thoroughly exposed to humanities through an interdisciplinary ethics and values course. Using the disciplines of philosophy, religion, literature and history, we designed a course that over 2,000 students per year would take.

Politics are interesting when adding a core course. The political players involved first the humanities committee, who decided to take this core offering before all liberal education faculty for approval. Dean Howlett spoke strongly for the core implementation before the vote of the entire liberal education faculty. After her eloquent presentation, there were only two dissenting votes by the entire liberal education faculty. It had been harder to get the course through the humanities committee than the entire Liberal Education school.

Curriculum committee was the next political move. Adding a core course to the Associate of Science and Associate of Arts degrees was controversial. But, by this time the Dean and myself had learned that people who oppose the implementation of a core ethics course are regarded suspiciously. The design of the course itself was able to take the impact of the scrutiny of the curriculum committee. It passed the committee unanimously the first time it went before the group.

We were now two years ahead of schedule! We had planned about two years of battles to get the course as a core in the curriculum. Now the course was officially listed in the catalogue. I firmly believe that the reason the course went through the entire curriculum process so smoothly was because of a dean who believed in her faculty members and believed in continual strengthening and evaluation of curricula.

Dean Veonne Howlett not only worked well with her own faculty, she also worked well with other deans, administrators and faculty. Dr. Howlett understood the give and take that happen between departments and schools. I'm not sure what political markers she traded with other deans and schools, or if she did make these trades; however, she was an individual who understood the fine art of compromise, of caring, of looking out for the long-term interests of an entire

institution, not just herself.

We had planned on two years of battles in getting ethics into the curriculum. We now had to produce this course much sooner than we had anticipated. We turned to National Endowment for the Humanities, (NEH) for help in teaching this class on a level of national rigor. Just as we were pilot teaching this course in 1987, we received a three-year NEH grant for approximately $115,000. The grant included faculty summer seminars with scholars of national reputation, community lecture series, quarterly visits from scholars both in-state and out-of-state quarterly, and library acquisitions. All of these activities took place during the three years of the grant, and continue today. Meanwhile, during this past six years our interdisciplinary humanities faculty have been teaching about 2,000 students per year the importance of critically thinking through tough ethical dilemmas.

Dean Howlett was supportive of the NEH grant in every way possible. She funded trips for me to go to Washington, D.C. to visit with NEH officials regarding funding guidelines and standards of national rigor. She also funded a consultant to work with the humanities faculty in finalizing the curriculum before submitting the grant to NEH.

The consultant, Donald Schmeltekopf who is now Academic Vice President at Baylor University, helped bring a consensus among faculty. As founding President of the Community College Humanities Association, Dr. Schmeltekopf conducted faculty workshops illustrating how the humanities work well in many interdisciplinary settings, particularly ethics. Dean Howlett attended all the workshops and meetings with Dr. Schmeltekopf. She didn't take over the meetings. She was interested in national interdisciplinary directions and asked questions from time to time. At no time did her presence offend or threaten faculty. We were pleased to have her support and talents as part of the project.

Nuts and Bolts of the Core Course

The faculty, college, students, community and NEH have deemed this class and program as exceptional. Yet, there were times when we wondered if we would offend the community, have courses filled with bored students, and find that our venture into curricular reform was a fiasco. The overwhelming success of the

program in the ensuing years has put those fears to rest.

The course was organized to help students understand the humanities as well as the specific realm of ethics. The purpose of the class was not to teach students a specific skill, but rather to help them be individuals of a distinctive kind--who think critically, who know how to evaluate problems, who discuss issues civilly, who communicate well orally and in writing, and who care about and strive to do what is morally right. These abilities and developed characteristics compose, we believe, much of the goal of teaching and learning in the humanities.

The Ethics and Values course has the focus of helping students evaluate the numerous complications inherent in the study of ethics. We do this through a selection of primary works, anthologized texts and supplemental interdisciplinary works. This combination is designed to provide an in-depth survey of ethics.

We designed this course keeping several national trends in focus. First, the discussion of ethics is timely. The complexities of various ethical situations are fervently discussed throughout the world. It is important students have a forum to learn of the foundations of ethics as well as others' morals, values and ideals. Well-educated students should know the seminal works in ethics and understand the various approaches to dilemmas. This could be called gaining an ethical literacy.

Second, we strongly encourage interdisciplinary study. Each of the issues we study is presented with readings in the areas of philosophy, literature, religion and history. A new perspective on the issue often unfolds with each discipline; sometimes these perspectives conflict with one another. An inquiry into a different dimension of a subject can be painful for a student, but we see studying and understanding differences as a healthy part of the learning process. These four disciplines are particularly helpful in the study of ethics. Philosophy helps us discern the complexities involved in moral ideas; religion reminds us that each ethical dilemma has inherent moral and value implications and conflicts; literature brings the dilemma to life with characters moving through "right and wrong" decisions and living with the consequences of their choices; history is helpful in that it infuses the values of a different time and

culture with our own. It can make students aware that an unquestionable assumption today was seen quite differently at another time.

The third national trend we use as a focus is the inclusion of a strong writing component. Students' understanding and appreciation of a subject increase as they put their thoughts into written form. My students and I often discuss desirable paper topics and how these are formulated into a strong paper. My best formula is that the students must use two foundational sources for their paper, and only two sources. They are to weave these sources into an argument that they develop either on theory or applied ethics. Out of the three, three-to-six page papers required, the students write one on theory, one on applied ethics, and one on a classic novel from a reading list. Also as a writing requirement, students must keep a journal. Every week they are to select an article from a newspaper or magazine. They are then to examine thoroughly the ethical implications of this article, concluding with what they believe their choice would be were they in this situation. I do not grade on grammar or spelling, only content. I want the students to analytically and critically develop journal entries. Sometimes this is a confusing and distressing exercise for the students, particularly when they learn that there are few simple answers to complex ethical dilemmas.

Fourth, self-confrontation and verbal discussion should be encouraged. Students can often see mistakes or truth in their own reasoning when expressing ideas aloud. We work from the theory that a thought or idea is not verifiable until it has been shared in verbal or written form. By confronting their personal moral reasoning, students should learn tolerance toward the validity of other's values and viewpoints. They should also develop and share ideas on important moral topics. Our teachers allow time inside and outside of class, for students to discuss ethical issues and perspectives.

Critical thinking is the fifth national perspective. Students should be encouraged to understand that the ethical approaches found in this class are legitimate parts of a cultural heritage, but each of them can and often do conflict with others in certain respects. Critical thinking should be applied as students work through the course. They should determine the perspectives of the

writers, for such understanding will shape the analysis of and recommended responses to ethical dilemmas. Students should also confront the question of why they are inclined to one ethical system over another. Why does one author or philosopher appeal to them over others? Are their choices explained merely by what their parents, their peers, or their religious communities believe? Or are their choices the result of independent judgments that respect the moral views of others--including their parents, peers and clergy--but are ultimately formed autonomously and with a full sense of personal accountability? In short, the students should examine critically the grounding of their ethical points of view. Are they really capable of publicly justifying their ethical positions, both those they might hold in an academic sense and those they live by? Critical thinking is an integral part of the writing and discussion process. It should help push students not only to think carefully about ethical matters, but also to live lives reflecting well-considered moral behavior.

Fear of Interdisciplinary Teaching

So, how does this course begin and end? I had that same question as I began teaching the pilot section of this class. I relaxed when I received the following comforting advice from a friend, Bill Newell who teaches in the interdisciplinary studies program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He said:

> Fear is a natural accompaniment to new interdisciplinary courses. I was afraid every time I walked into class for at least the first four years of this program! Students expect faculty to have mastered their subject, and that's simply impossible in new courses drawing on intellectual traditions outside their own. I preached the virtues of co-learning, of searching for insight instead of having faculty spoon-feed it; and I made the case that interesting questions do not have neat answers. Still the students expected me to have control over the situation if not over the subject, and I never really felt in command. The moral? Don't feel inadequate if you know you are inadequately prepared, and if you feel afraid as a consequence.

> Your first obligation to your students is to develop the kind of course that will present them with issues that expand their minds, their sensitivities and their intellectual horizons. Your second is to create a classroom environment that encourages intellectual and personal engagement with those issues. Teaching them content is strictly tertiary, and two out of three ain't bad...If that doesn't work, try telling yourself you only grow through taking risks, try telling yourself that you'll have much more control over the course next time around, try buying yourself a new dress after a particularly trying day. Anything but blame yourself for doing what you believe is right instead of what is safe, easy and familiar. Now get out on that field....

I have to smile as I reread Bill' advice. I had several concerns besides content before I went into the classroom. The first was how to contend with half the baseball team (I called them "the pack") who were all seated on the back row of the class and didn't think it was cool to participate. I solved that problem by dividing them among the rest of the class and focusing on some small group, collaborative learning. Another concern centered around the unity of belief in our area. Provo, Utah is situated in a community that is 85 per cent Mormon--Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I believe one of the reasons NEH funded this project was our argument that our students in particular needed exposure to diverse opinions, ideologies, philosophies, theories and tenants. I was worried students and parents may object to discussing numerous viewpoints on issues such as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, sexual morality, war and evolution. Now, six years later, I can proudly say that I have never had one student or parent object to the content of the course. We don't try to change our students' ethics; we want them to understand their moral reasoning and take responsibility for their choices. They must also understand the implications of their choices. As faculty we rarely confess our ethical stand. We don't want to be seen as standing on the pedestal of knowledge dishing out the "right" system of ethics. We want students to understand how complicated each ethical

dilemma is and understand that there are various factors influencing their decisions. On occasion I tease my students by saying, "Some of you act one way in Utah, but the minute you cross the state line into Nevada, you change into someone else." At first they laugh, but then we discuss taking responsibility for all our actions at all times, not just because someone may be watching. Actions and judgements should be an informed responsibility and the student should always be able to rationally and logically back up their behavior and attitudes. I must also admit that our students are much more diverse than I had expected. Almost every class period is filled with rousing debate and discussion.

Now back to the actual content of the course. It begins with introductory books and essays on the nature of ethics. The first weeks of the course are designed to acquaint the students with ethical theory through the works of selected philosophers and religious writings. We firmly believe that we must establish a strong foundation in ethics before we delve into applied issues. A major goals of the faculty is that this course will not be akin to a "'60's rap session," where students rely only on previous knowledge. To help facilitate this foundation, we primarily focus on five ethical traditions: duties, rights, utility, and virtue. We also discuss an emerging ethics based on care. The writings from the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and Immanuel Kant provide varying accounts of an ethic of duty. Thomas Hobbes's ethical approach is naturalistically based, but it also establishes the rudiments of an ethic of rights. The principle of utility is presented through writings from John Stuart Mill. Readings from Aristotle and Plato introduce the student to the notion of ethics as virtue. And, the ethic based on care, is developed through articles by Carol Gilligan and Allison Jaggar.

These can be heavy readings for Sophomore level students. I believe that collaborative learning can be used to facilitate these readings. On the second day of class, I divide the students into groups, each composed of six students. The students are required to meet once each week for at least an hour to discuss, explain and help each other with the readings and papers. They even get points

for attending these meetings. At first they complain about the groups. They say they don't have time to meet because of family, jobs, athletics, etc. However, after about two weeks they become bonded as a group. Many even adopt names or slogans, such as "Aristotle Rules in Group Two." The students like the groups because they have a chance to discuss more openly the issues we have been developing in class. A student of mine, Matt had the following to say about his group:

> I was playing baseball and I just didn't think I had time to get together with my group. I went anyway and found I didn't want to miss a session. Some days I had left class confused or frustrated. In groups we could discuss the confusing points and well as throw around controversial ideas. We could then bring these points back to class and feel more comfortable discussing them. The groups were an outstanding extension of the class. I think I have made some friends for life in my group.

Utah Valley Community College is a commuter campus. Many of our students drive on campus for one or two courses and leave. By meeting in groups, the students usually make friends and find themselves more adaptable to understanding the diverse viewpoints and feelings of other students.

The rest of the course involves discussing issues in an interdisciplinary fashion. We often begin with the topic of sexual morality, followed by abortion. Other popular issues among the teachers include war and nuclear war, the social responsibility of business, euthanasia, pornography and capital punishment. It is easy to find an anthology filled with the philosophical and sometimes religious perspectives on these issues. It is then important for the faculty to supplement these articles with books, or articles from the disciplines of literature and history.

Let me share a few of my favorite resources in literature and history. When discussing abortion, Ernest Hemingway's short story, "Hills Like White Elephants," is very effective, as is A.J. Cronin's story, "Doctor, I can't, I won't have a baby." Historical perspective is enhanced by readings from Linda

Gordon's book, A Social History of Birth Control. Michael J. Gorman's book, Abortion and the Early Church, is also helpful.

The issue of war can be discussed through essays such as Mark Twain's "War Prayer,", Lewis Thomas' "Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony," and Czeslaw Milosz's "American Ignorance of War." Historical supplements can include works by Marion Yass such as Hiroshima, or Ardth Osada's work, Children of Hiroshima.

Researching topics for interdisciplinarity is interesting and invigorating. Interdisciplinarity is also a necessary part of this class. When reforming our curriculum, the humanities faculty discussed that too often in our classes we throw out information to our students like brightly colored bits of confetti. We don't tell students how this information links to other disciplines or how all learning is interconnected. Too often we act as if disciplines were created by a supreme being, and that we can not cross lines between them. The Ethics and Values class proves this outdated notion false. The student evaluations on this course are exceptional. Many students say it is the most important and most enjoyable class they have taken in college. The majority of the students understand that the learning process was enhanced and eased by using more than one discipline for the teaching of ethics.

Even though our funding with NEH expired two years ago, UVCC's administration has actively supported the enrichment of this course. Dean Howlett has now passed away, but the President and Academic Vice President believe ethics as a core component of the curriculum is essential. For the past two and a half years, the President of our College, Dr. Kerry Romesburg has been co-teaching the honors section of the class. Romesburg relates that it is an outstanding personal and professional experience. His administrative responsibilities are massive, yet he is willing to give at least 10 hours each week to the ethics course and students. His teaching evaluations from the students are exceptionally high. The Vice President of the College, Dr. Lucille Stoddard believes it is essential to continue the faculty study and continues to fund the summer seminars. We still bring in a scholar of national

reputation to study with the faculty, who receive stipends for participation in the seminar. Summer of 1991 our topics centered around the themes of theism, atheism, existentialism and the philosophy of scientific thought. Our scholars were Dr. James Sterba and Dr. Janet Kourany from Notre Dame University. Summer of 1992 was an exceptional seminar on Hellenistic Ethics with Dr. Martha Nussbaum of Brown University. The scholarship, however, does not end with the summer seminar. All faculty teaching this course meet each Monday for an hour to further enrich their base of information. On a rotating basis individual faculty take responsibility for presenting a work or explaining an author. The college also sponsors an ethics debate or lecture every quarter for the students, community and college staff. These well-attended events cover a series of topics such as the environment, corporate responsibility, war, and even ethics surrounding earthquakes! It is essential that our current Dean Ann Miller has firmly supported these continued scholarly activities.

Core study in ethics has benefited the UVCC community for the past six years. Its spill-over effects can be seen in numerous classes and programs. This demanding course and accompanying program has enhanced the rigor of our curriculum. It fits well with our educational reform.

Our appreciation for Dean Howlett continues after her death. In appreciation for her many hours of dedication to this project and many other powerful advances in education, we have established a scholarship in her honor. Without the support and encouragement of a wise dean, the faculty are destined to stay trapped in their offices and classrooms, rarely moving into the realms of national rigor and reform.