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Juggling and the Art of the Integrative Assignment

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Abstract

When faculty study samples of student work, assignment prompts typically become part of the review. Two experienced learning community faculty from Skagit Valley College examined their students' work with three questions in mind: whether the work was grounded in disciplinary insights; whether the work leveraged disciplinary knowledge to develop new understanding; and, whether the work was purposefully and critically aware. The analysis that emerged reaffirmed the complex nature of integration: disciplinary knowledge needs to be used, not possessed, and students need to first learn the fundamentals of integration followed by lots and lots of practice. These insights led the teaching team to make simple shifts in emphasis in assignment design and classroom practices that are described in the article. The original integrative assignment for their Philosophy of Religion and Introduction to Film learning community, *Sacred Space/Sacred Time/Silver Screen*, is included, along with the newly tweaked assignment and students' self-reflections on the intellectual challenges associated with integrating two disciplines.

Juggling and the Art of the Integrative Assignment

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This paper describes how explicit assignment criteria for interdisciplinary integration and ample practice helped students improve their mastery and integration of individual disciplines.

It is truly a challenge to stay on the edge of discomfort where your awareness is required to keep the pattern flowing or to successfully complete the difficult move. . . . With a beginner's mind you feel every catch with every finger because nothing is familiar (Finnigan, 1993).

Introduction

L earning has much in common with juggling. Both are dynamic activities grounded in the present and require the simultaneous manipulation and integration of multiple objects (or concepts and processes) into a purposeful pattern. The juggling analogy seems even more applicable when we talk about learning interdisciplinary integration. In our learning communities, which combine introductory courses, many students have been able to learn about a single field of study and apply their insights to real-world situations. However, when using two fields of study in an analysis, many students seem like novice jugglers, able to control only one discipline at a time. They will focus on one field, referring only briefly to the second. A few begin to "juggle" both disciplines at once, but as they attempt what we think of as the third "ball"—integrating both into a meaningful "product"—often the analysis collapses. Many seem unable to take the leap of faith that jugglers must take to keep not one, not two, but three objects in the air at the same time.

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To understand how to help our students, we studied samples of their work during our participation in the Washington Center's National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities. Using an assessment framework proposed by Boix-Mansilla and Dawes (2004), we asked three questions: whether students' work was grounded in disciplinary insights, whether it "leveraged" that disciplinary knowledge to develop new understanding, and whether it was purposeful and critically aware. Our analysis reaffirmed for us the complex nature of integration. As Boix-Mansilla and Dawes note, to integrate requires not just possessing disciplinary knowledge but deploying it, "moving flexibly among theories, examples, concepts, and findings" (p. 3). We also realized that our students were learning to juggle the content, methods, and forms of two new disciplines at the same time they were learning to juggle the two together. Like any juggler, to become adept, they needed to learn the fundamentals, and they needed lots and lots of practice.

As a result, we made several simple—and, in retrospect, rather obvious—shifts in emphasis in assignment design and classroom practices. The following sections describe what we learned from our students' work, the modifications we made, and the results we saw as students began to acquire and apply the skills of juggling to the art of producing a truly integrative analysis.

Early Iterations

As faculty at Skagit Valley College, a small two-year college in the state of Washington, we began teaching learning communities in 1987. Since 1993, when the college started to require at least three learning communities as part of the general education requirements for transfer degrees, we have each taught at least two a year. Our learning communities, like most at the college, pair two introductory-level courses and enroll a cohort of up to 54 students; we use a single syllabus, fully integrate subject matter and major assignments, and collaborate on evaluating student work.

Because the college offers a wide range of learning community combinations, from which students select any three in any sequence at any point in their progression toward the degree, our class composition is mixed. Students may be just starting college or in their final term; they may have placed in precollege composition or have completed two college-level composition courses. In addition, because most of the courses we teach have no prerequisites, students have seldom previously taken a college course in our disciplines.

We initially combined political science and film studies with two basic notions in mind. First, we felt the combination would reinforce disciplinary subject matter and skills. We reasoned that films would provide case studies for understanding political philosophy while knowledge of political theories would provide a thematic lens for understanding how films construct meaning—or rather, multiple meanings. We also theorized that the combination would facilitate exploration of difficult and complex issues. Experience had taught us that directly confronting contentious issues often resulted in defensiveness or retrenchment for many students. Using films as texts for testing out ideas would allow us to "traverse obliquely" toward our goals.

In addition to microthemes and essay exams, we required that students participate in fishbowl panels. (See Baloche, Mauger, Willis, Filinuk, & Michalsky (1993) for a brief description of fishbowl panels.) This centerpiece assignment fulfilled several functions. It reinforced the premise that politics is a social behavior and that understanding films is a cultural process. Also, because panels provided the first "public" discussion of films in the second half of the quarter, they reinforced the course's core values of student autonomy and collaboration and served as students' entry into the academic discourse with its diverse perspectives, respectful dialogue, and well-reasoned arguments. Not insignificantly, the panels also gave us an opportunity to learn how well students were managing disciplinary vocabulary and analytical frameworks.

In fishbowl panels, four to six students discuss a film with each other while the rest of the class observes and takes notes. (See Bean, Drenk, & Lee (1982) for an explanation of these short, focused writing exercises.) Because panels "jump-start" the class's examination of the issues raised by the film, discussions are expected to be exploratory, informal, and brief— only 15 minutes—but coherent and well informed. Students are expected to analyze the film in terms of the current unit of study and to support their analyses with cinematic evidence, not just narrative details. The discussions should also demonstrate their ability to work with others—both in preparation for the panel and during the discussion itself—to explore diverse perspectives.

Following the panel, two volunteers facilitate a question and answer session for the remainder of the hour. Facilitators ask for questions of clarification prior to opening the discussion and then ensure that ideas are fully explored before new ones are posed. The direction of large group discussions varies. Sometimes class members request clarification or additional evidence from panelists. Sometimes they propose alternative readings. To maintain student autonomy, faculty refrain from participating;

if we do have questions or contributions, we request acknowledgement by the student facilitators.

Panelists receive a group grade. Each member also completes a separate self-assessment of his or her preparation, participation, and analysis. For the past two years, DVD copies of the presentations were placed on reserve in the library for students to review.

In general, this learning community produced much of what we hoped in terms of student learning. Students' panels and writing suggested that pairing our courses helped reinforce disciplinary concepts and the ability to develop arguments. The fishbowl panels have been particularly successful. Students were energized by the experience of collaborating with each other and taking responsibility for the film discussions, which were, for the most part, focused and relevant. They applied political concepts and described, sometimes in sophisticated detail, how cinematic strategies are deployed in each film. They frequently offered sensitive interpretations. Equally important, they were willing to consider alternative perspectives on films they found challenging, like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992). For example, after a particularly intense struggle with whether to refer to Dil, the transgender character in Jordan's film, as male or female, the class reviewed its understanding of political philosophy and cinema and determined that whatever their personal beliefs, members should—and would—honor Dil's self-identification as a woman.

Despite these successes, the discussions sporadically achieved what we considered effective interdisciplinary integration. Most panels provided only rudimentary integration. For instance, they could identify a relevant political perspective and describe how cinematic strategies conveyed it, but might neglect to define and explain that perspective. Or they might offer an interesting analysis of the political dynamics evident in a film, but then not provide sufficient convincing cinematic support. Often groups seemed hesitant—or unable—to venture much beyond the concepts and vocabulary from the earliest units. In feedback, we frequently noted to panelists that their interpretations were defensible but were not sufficiently defended.

Realizing that our assignment could more carefully delineate criteria for interdisciplinary integration, in winter 2007 we piloted a tentative revision with encouraging results. More panels than before cited a range of cinematic strategies, defined the political thinking underlying their analyses, and identified the individual political thinkers whose ideas they applied. Some panelists tested multiple perspectives for a single film and articulated their awareness of the difficulty inherent in determining a

"correct" position. For example, one panel provided both a Lockean and a Machiavellian analysis of the rule of the Taliban as portrayed in Barmak's *Osama* (2003). They also pointed out that while they were haunted by the film and personally rejected the Taliban's actions, their use of the two disciplines at least provided reasoning that could explain the Taliban's position and also helped them recognize the distinctions the film makes between the perspectives of Muslim men in general, as opposed to those of the Taliban.

These panels persuaded us that with clear and precise criteria students in introductory courses could manage thoughtful interdisciplinary analyses of challenging concepts. We realized that students' reliance on concepts from early units probably reflected their greater confidence in the material they had been practicing the longest. As we prepared for a new learning community, we agreed that in addition to making our panel criteria even more precise we would be more explicit about *how* experts use disciplinary expertise to develop meaningful analyses and would provide more opportunities for practice. The next sections describe these changes and the results.

Breakthrough Design

When first approaching these two subjects it seemed to be relatively impossible to integrate them. That is what intrigued me to take this learning community.
(Note: All student comments are from reflective essays, cited with permission and without corrections.)

Our new learning community, *Sacred Space/Sacred Time/Silver Screen,* uses *Philosophy of Religion* and *Introduction to Film* to explore ways of understanding the nature and portrayal of spiritual experiences in different religions and cultures. As with past combinations, our expectation was that learning disciplinary vocabulary and analytical frameworks was not an end but a means to address a larger question: How can we understand diverse religious perspectives and complex film portrayals that seem "alien" or even what we might consider hostile?

This learning community integrates the essential design of both courses. Overall, it is organized into units for exploring four philosophical issues: Peter Berger's typology for the difference between interior and confrontational religious practices, Mircea Eliade's explanations of sacred space and sacred time, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's and Oren Lyons' explanations of the characteristics of spirituality for primordial people, and William James's definitions of types of religious transformations. These are

combined with an examination of the diversity of spiritual practices among and within religious traditions, including primordial religious experience, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. In addition to the usual required text, Huston Smith's *Religions of the World,* we included excerpts from Berger, Eliade, and James, an interview with Lyons, and some optional readings like the *Tao Teh Ching.* (Note: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's concepts are explained in Smith's (1991) text. Publication information for the other philosophers is cited in References.)

The film studies course focuses on how meaning is constructed through cinematic strategies as they are employed in a variety of traditions—silent and sound, mainstream and independent or experimental. As in stand-alone versions of the course, we watch 10 feature-length films, beginning with silents so students can focus on learning the basic visual rhetoric of mise-en-scène and camera placement. Subsequent units introduce composition, editing, sound, and narrative conventions. In addition to a film textbook, we provide background notes for the films. The films, which form the core texts, are paired in terms of religious traditions.

Defining the Performance Standards

The fishbowl panels were also a great way of proving to myself and my instructors that I knew how to integrate what I had been learning about film and philosophy successfully. . . . After watching the film I knew it was going to be a lot of work for me to try and understand what was happening in the film, not only for myself but for presenting it to my fellow classmates as well. That's when I began working harder than I ever have when it comes to understanding something.

As before, the fishbowl panel remains a central feature of the course, but three revisions now make explicit for students the disciplinary and interdisciplinary evaluation criteria.

The first revision shifts the emphasis from group dynamics to analysis (see Table 1). In the earliest iterations, 12 criteria were divided into three categories, two for communication and one for analysis. The revision compresses the first two categories into one (effectiveness of presentation) with three instead of seven criteria. Although group process is still important, the burden of evaluating group dynamics rests with students who, instead of completing a form, now write two reflective essays.

The second change is in the greater specificity of the criteria for analysis, now called "analysis and integration." This slightly expanded category now represents the majority—literally two thirds—of the evaluation criteria. The revision elaborates separate expectations for each

discipline: for example, for philosophy, that vocabulary is used accurately and effectively and philosophers are identified and their ideas applied. It distinguishes between integrating the two disciplines and integrating relevant ideas throughout the course.

These changes emphasize the importance of articulating precise concepts rather than general notions. Students now know that they should apply one of the four analytical frameworks as presented by the philosophers and explain which aspects are relevant. Thus, for Dupeyron's *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003), if a panel chooses to explore whether Momo's conversion to Islam is evidence of a religious transformation—as one did—they must decide which kind, such as "healthy-mindedness" or "unification," and use James's definitions to justify their choice. Their discussion should incorporate specifics about relevant tenets and practices of Islam (particularly Sufism) portrayed in the film, as well as how visual and sound techniques and narrative organization in key scenes support not just that Momo is transformed but that the transformation is religious, that it conforms to one of four different kinds, and that it results, as James would argue, in movement to actions with positive outcomes.

The third change is how criteria are evaluated. Instead of assigning points, we adapted a rubric from Boix-Mansilla, Duraisingh, Woolf, and Haynes (2007). Because the presentations are short and collaborative, we kept our scheme simple: whether the behavior or skill is absent, present but in need of strengthening, present and purposeful, or sophisticated and nuanced.

Table 1. *Comparison of Fishbowl Panel Evaluation Criteria*

VERSION USED IN EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITY	VERSION USED IN NEW LEARNING COMMUNITY
Organization of Time and Materials • The members and topics were introduced; members presented their observations clearly, audibly, and fully. • Discussion was orderly and integrated; contributions were clearly related without confusing overlap. • Participation was balanced. • The group used the time well. **Clarity of Presentation** • The discussion remained focused on the established themes, with observations about the film clear, coherent, and relevant to themes and/or concepts about the film.	**Effectiveness of Presentation** • Group members, topics, and themes were introduced; members presented their observations clearly, audibly, and fully. Participation was balanced. • Development of ideas was coherent and orderly, focusing on one point at a time and developing it fully before introducing a new one; each members's contributions were clearly related without confusing overlap. (cont'd)

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Clarity of Presentation (cont'd)

- Development of ideas was coherent and orderly, focusing on one point at a time and developing it fully before introducing a new one.
- If members presented diverse viewpoints, other members were respectful, exploring the diverse ideas.

Strength of Presentation

- The themes and/or concepts were clearly and effectively identified, relevant to those we had studied in the course, and sufficiently explained and explored.
- The group identified ample and accurate cinematic techniques throughout the discussion, clearly signaling both the specific uses of those techniques and how they were used in the scenes.
- The cinematic techniques cited clearly and logically supported the readings and interpretations advanced in the discussion.
- The presentation pulled together related ideas from the course and helped to explain both the film and the meaning more fully.
- The presentation pushed beyond superficial observations to more rigorous and meaningful analysis that would help further everyone's understanding.

- When members presented diverse viewpoints, other members were respectful, posing questions and exploring the diverse ideas.

Strength of Analysis and Integration

- The discussion was focused: Themes and concepts were clearly identified, appropriate to the current unit of study, relevant to the film, and discussed in detail.
- The discussion was clear and analytical: Relevant terms were defined; observations and interpretations were supported with clearly identified and specific detail and reasoning.
- The discussion was grounded in concepts from philosophy: Philosophical vocabulary was used accurately and effectively; specific authors were accurately identified and their ideas applied; ample and compelling cinematic evidence was proposed for philosophical meanings proposed in the discussion.
- The discussion was grounded in specifics from film studies: Cinematic vocabulary was used accurately and effectively; ample cinematic techniques – both from specific scenes and overall in the film – were cited as compelling evidence for interpretations of the film as proposed in the discussion.
- The discussion was integrated: It effectively integrated the two disciplines into a meaningful analysis of both the film and the concepts in a way that deepened understanding of each.
- The discussion was integrative in terms of the entire course: Additional related ideas from the course were included as part of a rigorous and meaningful analysis.

Finally, because the limited time for fishbowl panels does not allow for detailed reflection on the integration, we incorporated reflection into the two reflective essays. In the first, due shortly after the panel, students explain how their participation illustrates their progress toward meeting their learning goals. In the second, a more comprehensive end-of-quarter essay, they explain how working in groups and integrating the disciplines helped them extract meaning from the films, using, at minimum, one of the two final films to illustrate their discussion. They may also elect to explain learning that was meaningful to them personally. These essays are graded for control of focus, organization, and supported discussion.

Learning and Practicing the Fundamentals

While greater clarity and precision in evaluation criteria is critical, it is, in itself, not sufficient if students are to become skilled in integration. We therefore used activities and assignments to create "scaffolding" for their learning or, to stay with our juggling metaphor, opportunities to practice, to falter, and to learn from "the drops." Some modifications reflected a strategic shift in emphasis to integration. Others introduced students sooner to sequenced practice in testing their disciplinary knowledge and exploring how to apply it.

Defining Integration

> *In the first class it became apparent how this class would work, both teachers would combine their knowledge reserves and skills into a cohesive class.*

> *Initially I didn't understand just how philosophy and film would work together, but after the first week of class it became very clear.*

On the first day of the term and at regular intervals throughout, we defined interdisciplinary integration and explained its value in academics and employment. We pointed out that while people naturally integrate experiences, perspectives, and information from different arenas, formal education splits out fields of study. Therefore, we would not assume that students were already expert at integrating different disciplines; instead, we would provide constant practice.

Our revised handouts reinforce this emphasis. Film notes embed an interdisciplinary focus in the background information and study questions. Vocabulary study sheets, on which students jot down examples of new techniques as they watch films, now include a question that asks them to

identify in the film a religious concept from the current unit and to list film techniques that suggested it. This simple activity prepares students for group work on the day following the film.

Practicing Integration

> *Group work [was] a place where I could express my ideas.*
>
> *We would discuss, usually in excruciating detail, the ideas we were going over.*
>
> *Hearing the other girls' extrapolations and interpretations caused me to think more in depth about the aspects of the film.*
>
> *Each exercise was a quick taste of the micro-theme.*

During the first hour of class after every film, groups brainstorm answers to questions about the film. They post their results on the board as single sentences supported by lists of relevant cinematic evidence. From the students' perspective, this is one of the most powerful strategies for "authorizing" their thinking. As one of our first students wrote, "When I saw my words written on the board, I realized I do have something important to contribute to analyzation." To help students refine their "analyzation," we fishbowl our observations about those results. While students watch and listen, we annotate the work on the board, praising the strengths and suggesting what changes or additions might be needed to convert these into claims and evidence. Students find this exercise extremely helpful for future group work as well as their formal written analyses.

To make the process of integration more explicit, we sequenced these brainstorm sessions. In the first week, groups wrote a single sentence identifying the film and director and relevant concept from Berger (including his name) and listed cinematic evidence. In the next class, the same groups practiced paraphrasing Berger's definition of that concept and listed—with page references—all the supporting citations they had found in his text. By the third week, groups were identifying precise disciplinary support, for instance, whether and how in Eliade's terms, Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) portrays time as homogenous and thus "normal" or as heterogeneous and thus possibly "sacred." Groups might choose, as one did, to argue that the acting troupe and audiences within the film could be seen as experiencing sacred time. The work posted on the board identified the relevant aspects of Eliade's definition—that sacred time is discontinuous and reversible—and then listed filmic support: how the staged Passion Play ritually reenacts the central cosmogony of the death

and resurrection of Jesus and which details of editing, mise-en-scène, and sound in critical scenes suggest that the actors and their diegetic audience have been transported to the first century.

These exercises were the proving grounds for microthemes and, ultimately, the fishbowl panels. Once students were accustomed to citing specific evidence from both disciplines to support their claims, we could concentrate on coaching them as they learned to juggle the pieces of their analysis into a coherent, integrated whole.

Microthemes provided individual practice at more formal integration. In this class, we required five rather than three of these brief writing exercises and dropped the essay exams. This gave us biweekly checks on each student and gave students a chance to "get it right." In addition to providing a template and examples, we used class sessions and our brief written feedback to direct students to ways they could improve disciplinary grounding and more carefully connect their reasoning and evidence.

Modeling Integration

The turning point for the course was watching the mock-fishbowl panel. . . . It was during the question and answer session, the switch flipped. . . . It was this moment that I truly saw the possibility and scope of this class.

Finally, we slightly modified the fishbowl discussion that we present at mid-quarter. Like student panelists, we sit in front as we discuss the film with each other and take questions with the help of student facilitators. This term, after discussing Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002), we asked the class to grade our discussion using the evaluation criteria. Not surprisingly, their comments were cautiously generous. We then offered our own assessment. We felt we had explained Lévy-Bruhl's definition of "the mythic world" and shown how non-diegetic sound and unusual camera angles, shifts in focus, and editing in the opening sequences suggest the presence of this world at Pai's birth. However, we suspected that as we became engrossed in our exploration, we neglected to cite filmic evidence—an observation that the students confirmed.

The simple step of modeling an attempt to integrate—and discussing the problems that arise—helped enormously. Students appreciated seeing how we developed the analysis by proposing ideas, elaborating on them, countering arguments, and testing evidence. And by inviting them into the evaluation process, we confirmed their expertise in recognizing disciplinary grounding and interdisciplinary leveraging.

Student Learning

What We Saw

> *Most of my understanding of this film came from watching the fishbowl panel groups.*

> *I could not come to these conclusions without the help of my classmates through group discussions, fishbowl panels, and the typical Q&A with the instructors.*

As we observed the nine student panels for *Sacred Space/Sacred Time/Silver Screen*, we were pleased that the revisions to the criteria and scoring had clarified our assessment task. The real excitement came in the dramatic improvements in student performance.

All the panels demonstrated a far greater disciplinary grounding and articulated more purposeful and connected integration than in previous learning communities. Most provided credible interpretations in terms of specific religions and frameworks of analysis from both disciplines; their supporting evidence ranged from sufficient to impressive. Most accurately defined philosophical terms and applied and cited the appropriate philosophical texts. Two of four groups discussing *Monsieur Ibrahim* and *Malcolm X* accurately identified specific Islamic principles like *salat, shahada, shirk*, and *zakat* and referred to the community of believers as the *ummah*, even though none of these was identified by name in either film. Also, groups began to identify subtle cues to bolster their arguments. One group argued that in permitting Momo to shoplift, Ibrahim was practicing *zakat*, or charity. Another, on the basis of their analysis of composition and editing in *Malcolm X*, argued that Malcolm's second religious transformation stemmed from his recognition of *shirk*, or putting his mentor Elijah Muhammad on the level of Allah. Similarly, the three panels responsible for Jianqi's *Postmen in the Mountains* (1999) and Yong-Kyun's *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989), discussed by name specific Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist principles—*ren, li, Tao, wuwei*, and *satori*. One group used verses from *Tao Teh Ching*, an optional reading, to support its analysis.

All groups more consistently cited a range of cinematic evidence to support their readings, and two drew on their understanding of how films adhere to or violate narrative conventions. Of nine groups, only two did not identify sufficient cinematic vocabulary, a fact they ruefully noted in their self-reflections. Nevertheless, even these groups offered sensitive readings of films and supported those with evidence that went well beyond plot and narrative.

The panels also offered multiple perspectives on the films. Although the two panels for *Postmen in the Mountains* each focused on different traditions—Confucian and Taoist—both pointed out that their reading was merely one and not the only way to understand the film. One panel, having explained that the different subtitled translations in the two DVDs they had watched had significant implications for interpreting Taoism in the film, referenced the specifics of each translation in their discussion.

The question and answer sessions were equally productive. In a few instances, when panelists did not clearly or fully connect their essentially good evidence to their claims, questions from other students allowed them to elaborate. When panelists—and the rest of the class—acknowledged that the discussion had made them realize that they were unsure about some aspects of the James's "sick soul" transformation, we used the class session to clear up confusion. As the quarter progressed, each panel became increasingly careful to connect claims and evidence.

The students' postpanel reflective essays provided us with further insights. In addition to discussing the impact of working in groups, a majority of students explained how discussions—both prior to and during the panels—helped them to understand the film and the two disciplines. Although they had dreaded the panels, the students were invariably surprised to discover that they had much more to say than could be said in the time allotted. Several who discussed their disappointment at not having provided sufficient evidence or at not having remembered to cite their sources stated that they were confident that "next time" they would be better prepared.

What They Wrote

> I will conclude in saying that Bodhi-Dharma is the most accurate portrayal of the human condition I have ever seen. Nothing is glamorized or romanticized; no-one is perfect; life is confusing; there is so much we cannot see or know; and through it all, the world is a beautiful place. There is no way I could have deciphered anything in this film without the skills acquired in this class.

In their final self-reflections, all students discussed the intellectual challenges in integrating two disciplines. As one observed, applying knowledge to a specific text is far more difficult than merely possessing that knowledge:

> I could understand [the disciplines] on their own, but when trying to connect them I would get very confused. I could understand the film techniques prior to watching the film, but it was hard for me to see

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them in and know how they brought meaning to the film. In the same
sense I understood the philosophy concepts, but it was hard for me
to incorporate them in the film. However, after the first few films the
ideas and concepts started to become easier and I began to learn a
lot from both courses.

Despite their concerns, students responded positively to the challenges. As one wrote: "The seemingly impossible task made me very curious to make it work for myself."

Many students explained how group discussions and microthemes, while intellectually and personally challenging, resulted in the ambition to work harder. One observed that initially "this way of learning bothered me, but I quickly came to realize that it was very effective. The constant reinforcement helped surprisingly when it came to coming up with ideas." Others echoed this theme of constant reinforcement. By participating in groups throughout the quarter, one student wrote, "I was forced to discuss what I saw and analyze it philosophically. I also had to defend and explain my stance, and be ready to question others to clarify how they interpreted certain scenes." Another described this as a process of testing her knowledge through explanation, feedback, and clarification; her group notes "became [her] most coveted tool when it came time to write a microtheme." And microthemes, specifically, or as one student wrote, "the constant repetition of writing, each time with the same general format, but focusing on different aspects of different religions," helped sharpen their grasp of concepts.

In addition, most students explained that preparing for and presenting fishbowl panels was transformative. It deepened their understanding of films, helped them gain confidence, and taught them about preparation, analysis, and working with others. One woman, a self-described weak "group worker," explained it this way:

This quarter I became much more comfortable with working in groups
of people I don't know, and I found myself able to open up to them
and actually learn from them. An example of this was when I got
together with "K" [not a member of her panel] to have her explain
Malcolm X to me. I was really struggling with film concepts and the
philosophy, and that's where reaching out to others was helpful. I
couldn't have asked her without the prior fishbowl experience.

The final reflective essays also allowed us to gauge students' sense of the purpose and value of the integrations they had undertaken. Many students discussed how studying two disciplines together helped strengthen their understanding of each one. Despite their surprise at the "odd" disciplinary combination, they found they could, as one stated, "use

the two courses together as a tool to extract further meaning from each course by using the other." Some recognized how this pedagogy differed from traditional modes, like the student who wrote: "I found myself lost and confused until the movies became my way of finding a better connection to religion than just being lectured about it." Although the combination seemed "weird," he continued, "if I didn't have one or the other I would have been in trouble. Both religion and film worked off one another and helped me learn more about each topic in every exercise."

Students also commented on the power of using both disciplines to understand films and new perspectives. One explained that, despite initial difficulties, "as the quarter went on it was easy to see that integrating them would teach me something that I could not otherwise learn." Another wrote that "without the combination of the two disciplines it would be very difficult to perceive any meaning in quite a few of the films we watched." And a third, utterly bewildered by *Bodhi-Dharma* explained how, finally, the course had provided "at least a few keys to unlocking the mystery of this film," specifically some "training in Buddhist philosophy" and an understanding of how "jump cuts enable the viewer to lose track of time in terms of its linearity."

A few students wrote of applying their new skills in different contexts. One described discussing with a roommate whether the TV show *Battlestar Galactica* (2004) was an attack on all organized religion. The student argued, instead, that because the "enemy robots have a religion that is thinly veiled as Islam" and the "virtuous and devout" good guys have "a religion very similar to the religion of ancient Greece," the show can be read as "a portrayal about Westerns [*sic*] fear surrounding Islam in space."

Perhaps the most striking quality we found was students' intense satisfaction with their ability to analyze the most challenging films of the quarter. While in our view the films were carefully sequenced to build toward the most difficult, we learned that from their perspective, all of the films provided challenges. Two were silent, five were fully or partially subtitled, and one did not provide translations of its characters' Gullah dialect. No one had seen silent films before, and most were like the student who admitted he could "probably count on one finger" the number of times he had seen a foreign film. Students also struggled with watching films with nontraditional visual or narrative organization, whether silent, like Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), or with sound, like Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). For some, the portrayals of Buddhism and Islam created barriers; for others, issues like the exploration of racism in *Malcolm X* were troubling. Many films proved daunting on several counts.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, students were exhilarated by their breakthroughs, like the panelist for *Bodhi-Dharma* who slyly incorporated his new understanding of *zazen* in his explanation of its challenges: "The first time our group watched this film we were all uniquely stunned and unable to grasp even small portions. The film was like being beaten with a stick and then asked to describe the stick over the telephone." Writing of how she used the disciplines to understand the same film, another student described her "little *satori* insight" as she realized how an unusual use of camera focus on a turbulent river instead of the monk meditating beside it "illustrated the Buddhist's calm connection so beautifully and candidly."

Final Thoughts

This quarter I realized the importance of connection between all things. I mean this not only in the philosophical sense, but also in the sense that a variety of skills creates a harmony of knowledge as opposed to a series of single notes of wit.

As veteran teachers, we will continue to refine our assignments; however, we are persuaded that in our student's words, we have located "at least a few keys to unlocking the mystery" of interdisciplinary integration: explicit criteria, constant practice, and intentional design. One student, new to learning communities, described the result this way: "I was worried the connection would be forced upon us, but very delicately the two disciplines were woven together in a mesh that became this class." Another noted that his prior learning community experiences had "not been quite like this. It was almost as if another step had been taken in the process. Everything fit in more, and more meaningfully."

As we reflect on the work of these students, we too feel that another step has been taken in the process. True, their microthemes are not polished: The prose is marred by inconsistent control of mechanics and syntax. The panel discussions are, as we would expect, at times hesitant or not fully clear, but we feel that we are now observing and reading the work of apprentices who possess the potential for mastery. The thinking is focused, and, with few exceptions, the disciplinary grounds are explicated and leveraged to produce sophisticated insights. Students managed multiple strands of thought, teasing out meaning and supporting their reasoning. Before, in our feedback we urged students to provide more specific and varied evidence from each discipline; this time we focused primarily on how they might better connect some of the pieces.

We are also reminded again of the extent to which students integrate more than disciplines. Like most community college students, they are, as

one wrote, learning to "juggle life": school, employment, families, health, and more. They are also struggling to understand the world in which they live, an effort that requires integrating both cognitive and affective understanding. Over a 10-week term, we saw subtle and sometimes dramatic shifts in students' academic abilities as well as their attitudes toward religions and films, toward philosophical perspectives and academic discourse, and toward working with and understanding others.

Finally, as we think about the purposefulness of interdisciplinary integration, we think of what it provides beyond new theories and nuanced interpretations. As we noted earlier, one of our goals was to provide students the skills to approach complex, difficult material. Although most students were challenged by at least one of the religions we studied, their discussions in writing, in panels, and in class were informed, thoughtful, and respectful. In their reflections, students often described their experience of a personal milestone: integrating new knowledge and insights into a reconsideration of others' belief systems and their own. Many began the course suspicious of Islam and puzzled by Eastern religions, but, as one wrote: "By taking this class, I feel like I have challenged the paradigms in my head about how different and odd the other religions were. This class has changed that paradigm and led me to believe that the other religions are just as valid in their own way." For others, Christianity presented the greatest challenge. One student had always considered herself open-minded, except for her aversion to Christianity. "I know," she wrote, "that here was a barrier." The films, discussions, and philosophical frameworks all led her to find "beauty in every religion covered in this class," including the "beauty and subtlety of the teachings of Christianity." Some who thought they had no religion were, like one student, "thrilled to find that there were other people who believe many of the same things. . . . I am not alone and finally have a kinship to which I belong."

It is perhaps not surprising that students were often most eloquent when describing this other dimension of purposeful interdisciplinary integration. This was particularly the case with those for whom studying other religions posed a profound challenge, the metaphoric equivalent of juggling knives. We would like to close with an extended passage written by a student, who—like others—feared that studying other faiths would endanger his own. In it he explains how he integrated course concepts, specifically Berger's typology of exterior and interior (or mystical) religious practices, into a deeply meaningful pattern for his own life:

> So I decided to take a completely objective view on both films and religions when I came to class. I left my Christian life at home, and at school, for [the] time I was in class; I tried to look at all the religious

ideas as an agnostic person, and I tried to look at all the film concepts and terms as a film student. . . . *Monsieur Ibrahim* was the toughest film for me. . . . I challenged my faith against Ibrahim's. I came to the conclusion that the internality of Ibrahim's Muslim faith is very similar to externality of my Christian faith. We both believe in worship with all that you are and have. This conclusion was something I would have never come to if I had not challenged myself to be the best philosophy of religions student I could be. The aspect of my own learning I found to be the most meaningful is my new ability to be objective when looking at other religions, and how they are portrayed in films. I am more respectful and looking to learn, rather than judge. This is a part of myself that I found while taking this class, and a part I hope never to lose.

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