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Putting Students in the Driver's Seat: Using Essential Questions to Foster Integrative Learning

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PUTTING STUDENTS IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT

Using Essential Questions to Foster Integrative Learning

Christine Blais
Beth Sheehan
REFLECTION

- Take a moment to think about why you came to the SoTL conference this week
- Then write that thought down in the form of question
TODAY’S AGENDA

- Introduction and purpose
- Case study: context, results and implications
- Activity/discussion
- Future considerations
INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

“Fostering students’ abilities to integrate learning – across courses, over time, and between campus and community life – is one of the most important goals and challenges of higher education” from A Statement on Integrative Learning

(see also Mapping the Terrain, Huber & Hutchings, 2004)
RESEARCH

- Case Study Approach
- Using Grounded Theory
- Grounded theory pays homage to Dewey
  - “knowledge is not neutral, nor are we separate from its production or the world” (Charmaz, 2006, p.185)
- Examined a 3-year, BA in Integrated Studies program
- 2 New England Universities, with the emphasis on one of those universities
- Participant Observations & Interviews with students and staff
3 YEAR BA INTEGRATED STUDIES PROGRAM

- Seminar
- ILP With Essential Question
- Internship
- Learning Community
**Essential Questions**

- “Big Question” that sparks curiosity
- Not answerable with finality in a single project or semester
- Aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry and to spark more questions
- Points toward important, **transferable ideas within and across disciplines**
- Provocative and generative
- Recurs over time; that is, the question can and should be revisited again and again

Source: *Essential Questions: Opening Doors to Student Understanding* by Jay McTighe & Grant Wiggins
When teachers ask the questions, sometimes students provide answers believed to be what teachers are looking for; mechanical rather than thoughtful (Dewey 1910, Singer and Donlan 1982, Gillespie 1990, Crapse 1995, Dunleavey, 2003)

Educators have 2 responsibilities (Dewey, 1938):
- Problem (organic)
- Thirst in Learners

Ability to make connections because they were seeking answers to their own questions. (Bain)
The application of skills (knowledge, strategies, approaches, habits) learned in one context to a novel context is referred to as transfer.

Transfer is said to be *near* if the learning context and transfer context are similar, and *far* when the contexts are dissimilar.

Far transfer is, arguably, the central goal of education: we want our students to be able to apply what they learn beyond the classroom.

CHALLENGES IN CONSTRUCTION

- When I first started out I was like “Oh, this is going to be “cake””, and “What does it take to design a successful motorcycle?” (became the essential question). I didn’t really understand all that encompassed, right off the bat, so I was kind of taken back by the essential question... because there are so many sub-questions that can go into the essential question, and mine was such a broad... it encompassed such a broad spectrum of things that kind of felt lost at first (Stephan, personal communication, May, 2013).
CHALLENGES IN MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Last semester we had a science course, and I was like “Alright, how am I going to fit this science into doing a culture audit on a company, and **how to maintain and run a successful business**” and I was just like... I was **trying to put this connection together and it wasn’t really fitting for me**, and then I was looking into different things that we were going to be talking about, and we did different parts of the brain, and I was like “Alright, well [snaps fingers] let’s do the body language of leaders, and how that can affect the workplace”, so it all just connected... it all just connects, everything just connects, if you look hard enough (Stephan, personal communication, May, 2013).
Making Connections

I don’t like science, so I was in class and I’m like, what am I doing right now? what am I really learning? Then one time, she (the professor) came into class and started talking about color awareness and she had us bring in magazines and had us make a connection between advertising and color awareness and that humans’ awareness of colors and reaction to colors, so then that made sense, because in my internship, one of my focuses was marketing and advertising and creating flyers, so then I’m like, Oh, wow, I can just use that and apply it to my internship or vice versa (Laura, personal communication, April, 2013).
When I think of the connections, I think of the fact that that whole sort of environment really comes into play throughout each semester no matter if it’s my essential question or not. When you think back to me and my internship working with the children and that child development phase, and then stepping from that into the next semester to work with probation, parolees, and the fact that they were adults, 30, 40 years old, that big jump, and then to come into this semester and really start to work with the youth kind of filling in that middle gap from children, adults, youth. It just connects as far as that whole thought of environment and really the effects that the environment has on people as a whole (Brianna, personal communication, April, 2013).
Defining “what is community” all semester

I don't remember what my specific definition was. I remember leaving that semester with a definition of community, but it was like the day after my exhibition, after I told everybody what my profound definition of community was, that I realized there was a gap in it, and I called the Academic Coordinator, and I said, there’s a gap in my definition of community, and I don't remember what specifically it was, but she said, it’s OK, it’s OK. She was just like, your definition is going to constantly evolve, and you just have to be able to move with it. And so I was just like, OK, but then after that, it just helped me to see, wow, I could try to define something in a semester but it is going to evolve. I feel like the meaning of something is going to continue to change. (Evan, personal communication, March 2013).
PERSONAL GROWTH

Most important, it (forming the essential question and learning plan) helped me become more in tune with myself, my values, and how they are different from my family’s values, and kind of getting away from the noise of what everybody expects of me and just kind of listen to me and what do I want for myself ....it made me definitely more self-aware. (Arianna, personal communication, March 5, 2013).
IMPlications & LESSons LEarned

- Impact of having an Essential Question – encouraging students to take the lead in their education - or be “in the driver’s seat”
- Coaching to meet challenges – caution: suggestive questioning
- Maturation of students
- Staff collaborated & implemented more intentional tools and activities around constructing essential questions
ACTIVITY

- Group work – brainstorm:
- How might essential questions be incorporated into your curriculum?
  - What strategies might be effective?
- What are the challenges?