



Integrative Learning: Setting the Stage for a Pedagogy of the Contemporary

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Underlying the significant social and technical changes of our increasingly global society is a profound transformation in the very nature of learning. Twenty-first-century learners view themselves as dynamic agents in multimedia and global environments. These learners create complex social networks and operate comfortably in them. They learn experientially in real and virtual worlds alike. They express their views and make their lives public with ease. Many of these learners show greater interest in the global environment and human rights than their immediate predecessors. As the recent elections suggest, many are increasingly willing to organize around public matters online and from the grassroots up. New learning presents important challenges as well. As the world “flattens,” global proximity can yield discomfort and sharp retreat to local values. Virtual spaces are misused, information misinterpreted, virtual identities misconstrued, social networks misguided. This generation experiences pressure to perform, to succeed, to move at a fast and efficient pace, with little time for self-reflection or developing deep understanding of the changing world in which we live.

Contemporary societies’ demands on learners invite a paradigmatic shift in our characterization of learning and teaching for the future. Taking the lead in the early 1990s, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development advanced a series of competencies that learners must develop to have successful lives and contribute to a well-functioning society. Competencies range from

interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, to acting autonomously in large contexts, and using tools and knowledge interactively and well. The Association of American Colleges and Universities too has recognized the need for *greater expectations* for a growing student population. Learners of the present and the future must be agents in their own learning, critical inquirers, able to collaborate, able to apply higher order thinking skills to real-life problems, to manage cultural complexity and to make meaningful connections across disciplines. What role does integrative learning play in our efforts to prepare young people for today’s and tomorrow’s societies?

Seeking to overcome the last century’s knowledge fragmentation to provide an education that is relevant to contemporary life, higher education and funding institutions have increased their support of interdisciplinary initiatives on campuses. A 2006 *U.S. News and World Report* college and university ranking found that 62 percent of liberal arts institutions offer interdisciplinary studies majors. A Teagle Foundation study of liberal arts colleges and universities found 99 percent of institutions reporting being *somewhat* or *very* oriented toward interdisciplinarity. While few empirical studies have measured the benefits of integrative learning systematically, learning theorists associate it with higher-order epistemological beliefs (beliefs about knowledge and inquiry); high levels of mental complexity; critical and analogical thinking as well complex and collaborative problem solving—all key competencies in today’s knowledge society.

In my view, when rigorously conducted, integrative learning embodies a more profound opportunity to prepare the young for today and tomorrow’s societies. When well-conceived, integrative learning enables students to focus on multidimensional issues in their full complexity. It invites them to weigh, apply, and combine disciplinary insights to move beyond naive views. Most important, it enables them to bring the very forces changing the planet—from climate change to globalization, from the digitalization of everyday life to the ethics of global health and medical technologies—into the classroom for detained interdisciplinary exploration. Clearly disciplinary learning too can focus on topics of present and future relevance and do so with effective precision, but because integrative learning expands the nature of the questions that we can legitimately ask in class it expands the epistemic jurisdiction of our courses. In so doing it gives room for a novel point of departure for curriculum development: where our world of today and tomorrow becomes the source of problems for study and helping students make productive sense of such problems becomes our goal. Framed in the context of the future of learning, integrative learning sets the stage for a pedagogy of the contemporary. That is a pedagogy in which systematically, students are rigorously tooled to reflect upon and address the questions of environmental and cultural survival of our times; and gain practice for the work that they will need to do as members of their generation. ■