

Interdisciplinary Teaching in Anthropology and History

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee

Introduction

“Learning without thinking is labor lost; thinking without learning is perilous.”
Confucius, *Analects*, II, 17

Confucius’ remark is as relevant to ancient Chinese scholars as to American educators in the twentieth-first century. Since learning and thinking are the two sides of the same coin, a good measure of a meaningful liberal arts education is the ability to connect learning and thinking from both disciplinary and practical perspectives. As an innovative pedagogy that integrates shared thematic and methodological issues across the curriculum, interdisciplinary teaching challenges students to apply knowledge, methodology and values to more than one academic discipline simultaneously. It creates a curriculum more responsive to new challenges facing teachers and students in the increasingly globalized environment of the twentieth-first century (Marzano, 1991; Perkins, 1991; Quay, 2003; Frank and Lee, 2005; Lee, 2005).

Drawing on the student feedbacks on a Learning Community in cultural anthropology and Asian history at Pace University in New York, this article argues that interdisciplinary teaching should be incorporated into general education courses with cross-cultural and comparative foci. This pedagogical framework combines academic foci on different anthropological and historical topics with experiential learning such as guided tours of Lower Manhattan’s multi-cultural neighborhoods and group research projects on social rituals in New York.

Beginning with an account of the origins of this interdisciplinary Learning Community, this article discusses the course objectives and structure. It shows that interdisciplinary teaching fosters a sense of cultural sensitivity and global interdependence among students, and facilitates a participatory intellectual environment between teachers and students.

Designing a Course in Anthropology and Asian History

At Pace University, a new core curriculum became effective in fall 2003, which required all undergraduate students to complete at least two team-taught interdisciplinary Learning Communities before graduation. Some of the learning communities focus on “World Traditions and Cultures outside America and Europe” and feature active experiential learning outside of the classroom (Scharff and Brown, 2004). It is against this background that a new interdisciplinary Learning Community entitled “Can East and West Meet?” was designed to integrate the introductory courses on cultural anthropology and Asian history for freshmen. An introduction to Cultural Anthropology as a part of the liberal arts education helps students to develop basic skills of ethnographic research such as fieldwork and participant-observation, and teaches them to compare cultures using ethnographic evidence. A regular course in Asian history survey introduces students to basic historical research skills and provides them with sufficient knowledge to understand a vast region that is largely unfamiliar to them.

Incorporating a specific social science discipline with an area survey is an integral part of this Learning Community. Traditional subject matters and innovative pedagogy are closely connected on two levels. First, the course structure enables students to develop inter-cultural perspectives in the study of societies and traditions in Asia. Rather than seeing anthropology and history as two separate disciplines, this course transcends academic boundaries by urging students to identify specific themes in both subjects, such as religions and rituals, nobility and civility, nations and states, revolutions and wars, violent and nonviolent means of conflict resolution,

gender relations, and globalization. Insights gained from this coherent intellectual framework allow students to test their knowledge against the anthropological and historical literature simultaneously and to appreciate the dynamics of change within the wider context of global contacts from the past to the present.

Second, it balances classroom instruction with field-based experiential learning. In addition to the fourteen weeks of classroom instruction, this course consists of a guided tour of Buddhist temples, business and residential neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan's Chinatown, an Off-Broadway show on Cambodian genocide, and group research projects on social rituals in New York. Cultural enrichment events and social interactions with people in fieldwork enable students to gain an in-depth knowledge of particular topics and develop a multicultural understanding of Asian history.

What is more important is the fact that this Learning Community places the dynamics of cultural interactions at the center of discussion, fostering an outlook of cultural sensitivity and global interdependence, as well as supporting a participatory and shared intellectual environment between teachers and students. It combines fourteen three-hour class sessions with a wide range of extracurricular activities. Each class session is conducted as a seminar and both professors act as resource persons, analyzing similar thematic topics from an interdisciplinary perspective and answering questions.

Experiential Learning

One way of helping students to understand the nature of fieldwork is to study the rich cultural resources in New York City. There are special guided tours of museums, temples, and Asian and Asian American neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan. The temple tour turned out to be the most unforgettable cross-cultural experience for many students. The Mahayana Pure Land Temple is the largest Buddhist temple in Lower Manhattan's Chinatown. It is covered in yellow façade and located north of the Manhattan Bridge. Inside the temple stands a huge golden Buddha surrounded by neon symbols and electric candles. A shrine to the dead is up front at the entrance. As evident of cultural integration into American society, students saw a big red bowl from which they could take a fortune paper after donating a dollar (Asia Society, 2000, 127-128). Fascinated by the tour, one student commented, "Temple tour was really fun because I had never been to a temple before. It was great to see something new and how Asian migrants worshipped [the Buddhist deities]. Then in the anthropology class, we focused on clothing and noticed the different ways people dress for religious ceremonies and in their everyday life."

This was followed by a guided tour of residential and business neighborhoods in Chinatown. The purpose was to identify different Asian cultural heritages at the heart of Lower Manhattan and to analyze the demographic change in Chinatown in relation to transnational flows of capital, goods and people throughout the late twentieth century. Through these activities, students realized that the study of cultural anthropology and Asian history was not just a scholastic exercise but could be related to a variety of material cultures and peoples that they encountered in Chinatown.

Besides exploring these Asia-related topics through temple and neighborhood tours, this course connects the past with the present by addressing some controversial issues such as nation and state, war and revolution, utopias and genocide. Controversies always challenge our received opinions and raise new questions about the human experience in other times and places. For example, to study the impact of war on civilians, we invited students to see "The Eyes of the Heart," an Off-Broadway show concerning the legacy of Cambodian Genocide. This play is written by Catherine Filloux and produced by the National Asian American Theatre Company. It revolves around a Cambodian refugee in Long Beach, California, who suffers from psychosomatic blindness, a medical condition affecting a segment of middle-aged female Cambodian refugees who witnessed and survived the Cambodian genocide (Eustice-Sakai, 2004).

In a Question and Answer session with Catherine Filloux, students learnt about the reasons for Pol Pot's rise to power during the Vietnam War and the legacy of genocide in contemporary Cambodia. Some students compared the tragic experience of Cambodian survivors with that of Chinese civilians in the Rape of Nanjing, Japanese survivors of atomic bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and victims of the Rwandan genocide. In search of an alternative to war, students referred to Gandhi's teaching on nonviolent activism and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of nonviolent means of conflict resolution in the late twentieth century.

Fieldwork on Social Rituals in New York

A good measure of students' learning progress is their ability to do ethnographic research in a cross-cultural setting. Students were divided into different groups to do fieldwork on any political, social, religious and cultural rituals in New York. They were asked to collect oral, visual and written materials on particular topics and to give presentations in class. While students collaborated with each other in fieldwork and group presentation, they were constantly reminded to relate their findings to broader anthropological and historical contexts. The preparation proved to be a daunting task, but the results exceeded our expectations.

Students studied the nature, meaning and change of rituals in contemporary American and Asian American communities. Topics addressing the dynamics of rituals in American mainstream society included the Pace University football team, the annual Halloween parade, and the history of Stonewall, a historic gay and lesbian club in Lower Manhattan. Topics concerning the study of the "Other" included the meaning of "Oriental" entertainment in some Middle Eastern restaurants, the Native American religious funerals, the Japanese Tea Ceremony, and the comparison of Indian and Chinese New Year celebrations. The fieldwork challenged students to explore the importance of ritualized behaviors in different social contexts, and to interpret the role and meaning of rituals from an interdisciplinary perspective.

To facilitate exchange of ideas among students, the Blackboard was used to create an electronic learning community that transcended time constraints and classroom barriers. In so doing, students could engage in ongoing dialogues with teachers and each other over different study topics.

Learning Outcomes

What distinguished this Learning Community from other stand-alone courses on cultural anthropology and Asian history are the interdisciplinary structure, the close interactions between teachers and students, the students' thorough understanding of particular texts and disciplines, as well as their enthusiasm in cultural activities and fieldwork. What follows is a critical analysis of the strengths of this innovative pedagogy.

Conceptually, it was an intellectual challenge for students to identify the connection between these two disciplines and to test their knowledge from anthropological and historical perspectives. As one student stated, "The obvious [disciplinary] connections would be learning about new cultures. The texts are straightforward and easy to read. The materials are challenging. One can easily relate the materials to the current situations and identify similar features between different cultures."

A key to the success of this Learning Community was the use of extracurricular activities. Incorporating cultural events and fieldwork into this Learning Community had a beneficial effect for it enabled students to relate their knowledge of Asian history and culture to their everyday lives. As one student remarked, "I could definitely identify connections between the two courses. The temple tour in Chinatown was really interesting in the way that it could connect the two different themes (religious rituals and migrant communities). I thought the cultural enrichment activities and fieldwork were a great 'break' from the traditional classroom instruction. It opened our eyes to the outside world, seeing beyond the textbooks." Underlying this interactive pedagogy is a shared learning experience between teachers and students. This cooperative and co-creative learning process successfully transforms students from passive recipients into active learners.

Conclusion

This Learning Community in cultural anthropology and Asian history at Pace University presents a successful model of interdisciplinary teaching at the undergraduate level in a private comprehensive university in the United States. Conceptually this interdisciplinary course places the dynamics of cultural contacts at the center of discussion. It challenges students to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the world as opposed to a simplistic division of the globe into mutually exclusive civilizations and cultures.

When interdisciplinary teaching is integrated into courses with international, cross-cultural and comparative foci, it will create a dynamic, stimulating and participatory learning environment between teachers and students. The combination of cultural tours, fieldwork, and in-class discussion transcends the boundaries between traditional classroom instruction and experiential learning. This innovative pedagogy provides students with a unique opportunity to conduct ethnographic research in a cross-cultural environment and to apply knowledge, research methodology and values to more than one academic discipline.

References

- Asia Society (2000). *Asia in New York City: A Cultural Travel Guide*. New York: Balliett and Fitzgerald Inc.
- Eustice-Sakai, Colleen (2004). "Review of the Show: A Message from the Heart." *Asia Media Watchdog*. Available at: <http://www.asianmediawatchdog.com/heart/heartreview.html>
- Frank, Ronald K. and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee (2005). "Service-Learning in Mongolia." *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9 (1), 145-149.
- Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei (2005). "Teaching Nonviolence in Times of War." *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 9 (2), 240-245.
- Marzano, R. J. (1991). "Fostering Thinking across the Curriculum through Knowledge Structuring." *Journal of Reading*, 34 (7), 518-525.
- Perkins, D. N. (1991). "Educating for Insight." *Educational Leadership*, 49 (2), 4-8.
- Quay, John (2003). "Experience and Participation: Relating Theories of Learning." *Journal of Experiential Education*, 26 (2), 105-116.
- Scharff, Christelle and Harold Brown (2004). "Thinking through Computing: The Power of Learning Communities." *Computer Science Education*, 14 (4), 297-320.

Address correspondance to:

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee
Associate Professor
Department of History
Pace University
New York, NY, 10038