

Curriculum Infusion Pedagogy (Wednesday, May 20, 2009, 9:00-10:15am)

Barbara Craig begins with a brief description of the Engelhard Project and curriculum infusion:

Engelhard started as part of a national project looking at the connection between wellness issues and engaged learning

The specific focus of the Georgetown incarnation of Engelhard is to utilize a pedagogical tool known as curriculum infusion in which wellness issues are integrated into the curriculum of the course. At Georgetown, we're trying to broaden the themes of curriculum infusion (that is, mental/physical health and wellness issues are what have been targeted in Engelhard, but we're trying to expand to include issues of diversity, etc.).

Curriculum infusion is a type of pedagogy, so it is not limited to mental/physical wellness issues; however, for the purpose of this session, we will frame curriculum infusion through the Engelhard Project (and accordingly mental health and wellness issues)

Curriculum infusion works best when students don't simply receive information, but when they make connections (ideally to their own lives); in this way, the material can effect positive behavioral changes in the students.

Recent research on engaged learning has shown that if we connect the topic of the course to something that is emotionally engaging to the students, they learn it better and retain it longer (combining intellectual and emotional engagement).

Jen Woolard: I've taught several Engelhard courses, and I've found that it does enable students to be more engaged at a deeper level; it helps them process more and relate the material to their own lives. It is also helpful for the students to be able to engage with another person (health professional) other than me.

Steven Singer: Engelhard has enabled this 'wall' to be broken down between me and my students (historically, I was known as one of the "scary" professors in the biology department). I shared with my class my personal experience with cancer; by opening up to my students, they in turn began to open up to me – they come to my office much more often now, talk to me more frequently, etc.

Most of the students are pre-med, so even if they haven't dealt personally with cancer, they will most likely deal with cancer patients as doctors, so learning empathy and coping techniques with these patients is monumentally important.

Heather Voke: The classes I teach deal with learning in a completely longitudinal sense (from birth to old age, how we learn to navigate the world). During the portion of the course in which we focus on the Engelhard component, the students read an article advocating a more holistic approach to teaching (i.e. the importance of including material that is especially relevant to their lives).

When I began Engelhard, I approached it in the traditional sense (with a separable module and a health presenter), but I've found it has been creeping into my pedagogy insofar as it's now becoming more fluidly integrated into all aspects of my teaching.

After introducing the story of the Jena 6 in her class during one semester, the course itself completely changed in that the students began discussing and reflecting on the race and diversity issues on campus (i.e. white students were able to hear what it was like to be black on campus). Essentially, Heather casually introduced a topic that she thought would be especially relevant and engaging for her students, and they took off with it, basing the course around these racial issues on campus. The students went so far as to form weekly focus groups to discuss these issues and even address the president of the university. Their emotional engagement with the material completely transformed the way that they intellectually approached the material. (This also happened this past semester with the April Fools edition of the Hoya – there were racially and sexually inappropriate ‘jokes’ in the paper that offended a lot of students).

In some way, the Engelhard project allows students to feel as though their professors and the university cares for them as people and not just as students.

I had a really moving experience in the class I taught last semester – a senior came to me and said that before coming to Georgetown, he had envisioned professors and students having engaging discussions about things that really mattered to them in the world, but that never happened for him until taking Heather’s Engelhard class.

Barbara: It’s important that people don’t feel as though there’s only one way to do Engelhard; it’s simply about making that connection between the material and the students’ lives.

Slavic professor: I teach Russian and Polish, and I often ask my students why they are in the course, to which they respond “because of my grandmother, grandfather” - she can tell that a lot of her students are struggling with issues of cultural identity, so she wants to find a way to incorporate these issues into her language classes.

Spanish professor: We’re required to have the students engage in several debates over the course of the semester, and I found that when the topic was emotionally engaging and relevant for them, the students spoke more freely and used more complex language.

Jen Woolard: In one class that I taught, I related the Safety Net on campus to other support networks that exist in the U.S.

Q: How do I connect issues from 700 years ago to my students’ lives?

Heather: Discuss the Human Condition.

Jen: Have them write a paper as if they were a person living in that time.

Q: How do you deal with people who only ask “how are you going to grade me on this?” “what part of this is going to be on the exam?”

Steven: I deal with med students, so I know exactly what you’re talking about. The nice thing about Engelhard is that the students get out of this mindset where they’re only worrying about what they’re going to be tested on. The students actually enjoy getting out of this mindset. In terms of grading, I say I’ll add 5 points to their exam grade as long

as they send me their reflection on time. Interestingly, even when students missed the deadline, they still sent in their reflections late, because they wanted to do them.

I also tell them that for getting into grad school, what's most important are the letters of recommendation – so there's motivation for students to engage with professors on a deeper level.

Q: To what extent can we bring in our own ideas for the topic of the Engelhard module? Should we always ask the students about what they're interested in?

Jen: I don't think there's any correct formula for how to choose the topic.

Steven: As part of being an Engelhard fellow, you go through a Safety Net training, so if you're talking about suicide in class and a student comes to you saying he/she is contemplating suicide, you know what your response should be (i.e. walk the student over to CAPS)

Barbara: The unspoken question here is 'are there any taboos; anything you cannot talk about in class?' and I think the answer is 'no.' The key is preparing the students beforehand with readings, then the health presenter can address the students' feelings or apprehensions about the issues.

Steven: Engelhard is about breaking those taboos – we don't want there to be anything that you can't discuss in class.