

Creating Significant Learning Experiences: A Case Study in the College Religion Classroom

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Abstract

In a domain historically dominated by student passivity, instruction that entices students to integrate and assimilate new content into their pre-existing cognitive schema is a new but necessary shift from the traditional teaching paradigm. No longer is college teaching primarily focused on quantity of information, but rather the quality of learning as measured by specific student learning outcomes. To facilitate this change, Fink (2003) identifies what he calls a “significant learning experience” and categorizes it according to a six-part taxonomy. This case study explores one of Fink’s categories, “integration,” in the context of a class in an undergraduate religious studies course. In this class, students explored the work of St. Augustine, a prominent early Christian theologian, and his notion of idolatry (confusion of the world with God). Discussion of St. Augustine was used both as a springboard for understanding the concept of idolatry as well as for critiquing contemporary notions of romantic love. This piece will present specific instructional decisions that exemplify this theory of integration as well as offer advice to other higher education faculty looking to create significant learning experiences in their own classrooms.

Keywords: Conceptual integration, religious education, significant learning experiences.

Creating learning experiences where college students can thoughtfully and intentionally make connections between their own lives and essential course content is one of the many responsibilities of today’s college professor (Fink, 2003). Though perhaps not historically true, in addition to teaching essential content knowledge, contemporary professors must also deliberately focus on the development of critical thinking skills, installation of core human values, and student awareness of and engagement with societal challenges (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2010; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Svinicki, 2004). Higher education is being called upon to change the college classroom experience from one in which students listen to lectures, take tests and memorize facts to one where they solve problems and prepared to lead meaningful lives (Bok, 2006; Weimer, 2002). It is not the responsibility of only teachers of one specific content area, but every professor an undergraduate student has from the first class freshman year to their final senior level class (Fink & Fink, 2009; Svinicki, 2004). Historically, there have been great deficiencies in

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addressing these needs (National Science Foundation, 1996). In his recent review of higher education, for example, Derek Bok (2006) wrote that colleges and Universities nationwide fail to “make any deliberate, collective effort to prepare their students to be active knowledgeable citizens”. However in recent years, more attention has been drawn to this topic and slowly the traditional means of college teaching are steadily being replaced with a new teaching paradigm—one with a more holistic, comprehensive vision of human conceptual growth.

To address this paradigm shift, Fink (2003) calls for a redefinition of teaching and a progression towards pedagogical approaches that are better aligned with how students learn. To this end, in his work *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrative Approach to Designing College Courses*, he introduces a six-part framework for creating meaningful learning experiences. In one of the facets of his framework, “integration” (the focus of this piece), Fink calls for instruction that entices students to connect and relate concepts together and that ultimately help students to transfer their knowledge to novel situations. As Fink puts it, integration is the process by which students are able to “make connections between specific ideas, between whole realms of ideas, between people or between different realms of life” (pg. 31). As intuitive as this may seem, Fink is quick to point out that this is not a typical focus in the traditional college classroom and requires a different approach to lesson-planning and delivery.

Though other frameworks for engaging undergraduate learners exist, Fink’s model is one that has been field-tested and the results published in many different content areas. The concept of significant learning experiences is not bound of curricular obligations or field of study but is a comprehensive, adaptable way of shifting towards a more student-centered learning environment. Case studies of Fink’s model in action have been published in the areas of undergraduate level economics (Miners & Nantz, 2009), spanish (Davis, 2009), biology (Mester, 2009), art history and philosophy (Rose & Torosyan, 2009), music (Kelley, 2009) and education (Nicoll-Sentf, 2009). Thus, this study attempted to examine its success in religious studies, an area of the undergraduate curriculum yet to be considered.

Methods

Given recent shifts in the field of education, this piece seeks to add to the existing research base on Fink’s model of conceptual integration in the context of an undergraduate religious studies classroom. The setting for this study was a religious studies course at Niagara University, a small, private university in Western New York. The course, entitled “Christian Visions of the Human Person,” was designed to help students understand religious concepts such as grace, sin, freedom, and conscience, both from a traditional Christian perspective and other contemporary points of view. The course, which served as one of the three religious studies requirements for undergraduate students, met three times a week for fifty-five minutes for sixteen weeks.

The lesson that was the focus of this study occurred four weeks into the semester, during students’ consideration of St. Augustine. St. Augustine was a Christian theologian from

the fourth and fifth centuries whose most famous piece, *The Confessions*, is widely considered a classic, spiritual autobiography. In this particular class, students explored excerpts from Book IV, in which Augustine reflects on the grief he experienced at the death of his childhood friend, though other sections of the text had been considered in previous classes.

This research was conducted using the participant observation protocols of qualitative research set forth by Spradley (1980) and Glesne (1999). Data was collected using both interview data from the teacher and students as well as field notes from classroom observations and course documents. Congruent with the Spradley's method of participant observation, the researcher systematically and intentionally recorded notes about the experience while concurrently participating (when appropriate) to classroom discussions and activities. Handwritten field notes that were recorded during the experience and then rewritten several hours later to ensure sufficient detail could be recalled and documented. During this process, descriptive notes were combined with analytic notes to create a holistic account of the events that transpired.

Creating Significant Learning Experiences through Integration

According to Fink (2003), one of the ways significant learning experiences can be categorized is in terms of the changes they cause in the learner. These changes are at the very root of what learning does (and intends to do), but can take diverse forms. As the category of integration seeks to capture, change occurs in the way the learner views a specific type of knowledge and its connections to other content matter. Fink (2003) states there are three main ways educators can empathize integration through lesson design. These means are not discipline specific and are designed to be applicable in every college class regardless of specific content matter. They are (1) through thematic-based, interdisciplinary learning, (2) the use of learning communities and student interaction, and (3) by connecting academic work with other areas of life. These avenues of integration will serve as the lens by which the learning experiences in this religious studies class will be considered and their effect on students' conceptual understanding.

Thematic, Interdisciplinary Learning

The field of education has long known that meaningful, transferable learning takes place when general concepts and essential questions are explored using critical thinking and reasoning skills students know and have experience using (Dewey, 1933; Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). In authentic, "real world" scenarios, problem-solving is not bound by discipline-specific modes of inquiry (as they are at the university setting), but is explored from multiple, diverse perspectives. Davis (1993) notes that institutions of higher education have a duty to focus on these broader perspectives, since it more closely resembles the sort of large-scale, meaningful decision-making that is realistic in the workplace. Thus, Fink (2003) recommends professors of all disciplines create learning experiences that transcend a single way of thinking and take a general conceptual approach.

In “Christian Visions of the Human Person,” such an approach was taken in examining Augustine’s classic spiritual autobiography, *The Confessions*. In Book IV of this text, Augustine reflects on the tremendous grief he felt following the death of his childhood friend. His ruminations become the occasion for a lesson on idolatry, or the dangers that arise when love, which should primarily be directed at God, becomes fixated on something (or in this case someone) else. Augustine ultimately chastises himself for having been overly invested in his friend, when his energy should have been focused on God, his heart’s true desire. In class, students were encouraged to use Augustine’s reflections as a starting point for reflecting on what it means to have a relationship with God, as opposed to relationships with fellow human beings, not only in Augustine’s time, but also today.

The class began with a reading of select passages from Book IV that exposed the text’s general themes, such as Augustine’s preoccupation with his friend and its consequences for his relationship with God. Next, there was a discussion to ensure that students properly understood Augustine’s meaning, especially his lesson on idolatry. After collectively settling on a satisfactory interpretation, the class then moved to apply the text to more distinctly contemporary concerns. Augustine’s views on idolatry were used to question present-day notions of romantic love. Specifically, Augustine’s over-investment in his friend was compared to what seemed to be an equivalent over-investment by many people today in romantic partners. Using an online discussion post as a springboard for discussion, students were asked to consider whether the modern language often used to describe love for another human (including “the One,” “soul mate,” and “destiny”, as provided on this discussion board) were in fact examples of idolatry analogous to those considered in the Augustine example. By focusing on parallels between Augustine’s examples of idolatry in his relationship with his friend and modern relationships between romantic partners, students were given opportunities to analyze critically and to begin questioning modern notions of romantic love. Students were required to use textual evidence combined with personal experience to share well-articulated hypotheses and observations.

In this class, Fink’s notion of thematic integration and a focus on broader thinking skills were critical components in the planning and delivery. Contrary to the traditional lecture on St. Augustine, which would undoubtedly be littered with minute facts and fragmented quotations, this class focused on the broader concept of idolatry and modern examples of it in action. By taking this holistic approach, students were required to take a critical look at their own cultural assumptions and personal beliefs. The set of skills used in this lesson were not specific to the study of St. Augustine or the study of religion, but were a way of critically analyzing and making meaning from personal experience and textual evidence. These are the skills Davis (1993) would agree are universal to advanced studies.

Learning Communities

Fink’s next suggestion for creating significant learning experiences through integration is through the intentional use of learning community and small-group interaction. Of increased interest since the 1990’s, cooperative learning has been shown to help students integrate diverse perspectives, while sharing their ideas with diverse people with varied

expertise (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1998; Vermette, 1998; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck & Bjoklund, 2001). By its very nature, cooperative learning places student questions, curiosities, and inquiries at the heart of the lesson by legitimizing the role of student discussion and questioning during instruction. As a result, not only is greater ownership on learning placed on the students, but instruction is naturally differentiated to better fit students' collective learning needs.

In this religious studies class, learning communities were used to help students negotiate their own conceptual understanding before whole group discussion took place. Using a traditional think-pair-share model (Lyman, 1981), students were given time in their student teams to consider questions such as, "Do these notions of romantic love make sense with what you have experienced?"; "Are these generalizations about romantic love fair representations of modern understanding?"; and "Is St. Augustine providing a reasonable example of idolatry?" These collaborative opportunities were intentionally infused at points of the lesson where student consolidation and codification of new ideas was essential, and were always followed by a period of whole-group sharing and debrief. Most often, debriefing cooperative work time also resulted in revisiting or reinterpreting St. Augustine's text, as students were encouraged not only to provide their opinions but also to point to textual evidence to substantiate their claims.

It is important to note that by infusing Fink's model of learning communities into classroom instruction, not only was greater conceptual meaning actualized but the interrelationships among the teacher, students, and subject matter changed. Inherent to working collectively with the instructor and fellow students is a sense of shared goals and joint ownership in learning. This process not only enabled students to overcome the isolation typical of traditional schooling, but also promoted interaction with the subject matter in a way that would be impossible without the input of diverse ideas.

Connecting Academic Work to Other Areas of Life

The final means of integration proposed by Fink (2003) is closely related to the first (thematic, interdisciplinary integration) but suggests a more explicit connection between student work to other, *non-academic* areas of students' lives. Unlike Fink's first suggestion, the focus here is not on the thematic, broad nature of student inquiry but its connection to students' personal and social lives. While this facet is seemingly the most complicated of the three means of integration, it stands to have the most significant impact on student understanding by making the content culturally and personally relevant. Decades of work on culturally relevant teaching suggests that especially with diverse student populations, this sort of integration helps provide meaning between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived realities (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Jones, Jones & Vermette, 2010). Fink also adds that with college students (and others engaged in higher-level academic pursuits) this is the facet of integration that is most likely to be neglected.

In this particular lesson, connections between students' academic work and other areas of life were made throughout the lesson, but especially so through the use of three contem-

porary music videos. After having considered the textual evidence for St. Augustine's notion of idolatry as well as an online discussion board and students' insights of modern views of romantic love, the instructor selected three music videos to illustrate how common idolatry is in contemporary society. As students watched the videos (made publically available on YouTube), they were encouraged to pay close attention to the language used by these artists and how St. Augustine's thesis was supported. Using the think-pair-share model mentioned above, students not only shared their personal reactions, but also gave informed commentary both on current perceptions of human love as well as St. Augustine's thesis of a misplaced love for God.

In what was described by one student as an "eye-opening experience," this activity not only enabled learners to consider evidence of the pervasive nature of idolatry, but also helped all make meaningful connections between the text and lives outside the world of academics. Students understood the thesis of St. Augustine at the conclusion of this lesson in large part because they had multiple, authentic opportunities to make connections and draw conclusions. Even as class ended on this particular day, the discussion among students continued as they thought up more examples in print sources, other online forums, and other musical outlets. This personal reflection, Fink would claim, is critical in the creating of significant learning experiences.

Implications

This qualitative case study was designed to explore the creation of significant learning experiences via conceptual integration as suggested by Fink (2003). Using the research methodologies of Spradley (1980) and Glesne (1999), this piece explored the instructional decisions that aligned with this model and the effects on student learning. Since Fink's framework is designed to be universal and applicable to all disciplines and at all universities, there are two implications of this research that stand as suggestions for other professors looking to create similar learning experiences for their students. They are: (1) there is promise in teaching *all* academic content in a way that is highly integrated and intentionally designed to foster student active engagement and inquiry, and (2) the dispositions required to make conceptual meaning of important course content must be intentionally taught and scaffolded for undergraduate learners.

Teaching academic content using conceptual integration

In this qualitative case study, conceptual integration was embedded into classroom instruction via three avenues:

- (1) through thematic-based, interdisciplinary learning,
- (2) the use of learning communities and student interaction, and
- (3) by connecting academic work with other areas of life.

One important implication of this work is the realization that conceptual integration should not be an "add on" to an existing curriculum or supplement to instruction, but an embedded, meaningful component in the daily classroom experience. Teaching in the

way proposed by Fink (2003) (and in the way previously considered) requires a new way of viewing student learning and a new perspective on the role of the teacher in facilitating student learning. This view of teaching and learning is not subject-specific or applicable only with certain topics or units of study, but is a new intentional focus on the learning process and the opportunities students are given in class to make conceptual meaning.

It is also important to note that in the previously described lesson, it was not the activities themselves that were critical for deepening students' understanding of the work of St. Augustine, but the nature of the thinking in which they engaged. Instead of using music videos, for example, this educator could have asked students to consider representations of human love in art works, rap songs, poetry or any other contemporary medium, as long as it forced the conceptual consolation and personal reflection necessary for cognitive and affective growth. For educators of other disciplines looking to use Fink's theory of integration in their own classes, increased attention should be placed on creating learning experiences that force learners to integrate actively new ideas into their existing, cognitive framework rather than sitting as passive vessels to be filled with knowledge.

Scaffolding the Dispositions Required to Promote Conceptual Understanding

According to Halpern (1989), critical thinking is "thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal directed. It is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions" (p. 5). Contrary to the widely held misconception that critical thinking is of a higher order or one that requires a different type of cognitive processing, decades of research have shown the critical thinking is the amalgamated use of a comprehensive set of intellective and affective abilities (Chaffee, 1988; Halpern, 1989; Norris & Ennis, 1989). As higher education faculty members, it is important to recognize that these skills are not inherently known by students and must be taught as part of the general curriculum. It is unwise to assume that students already know how to analyze critically a document, for example, or can successfully make inferences from a piece of text, but rather critical thinking (like all other skills) must be taught and assessed and feedback must be provided to the student.

In this study, critical thinking skills were taught and informally assessed in nearly every activity. This professor spent a great deal of time modeling, explicitly discussing, and providing students with feedback on the affective and cognitive components of critical thinking. While discussing the contents of the online board posts on "soul mates," for example, the process of supporting claims with evidence was not only intentionally modeled, but also continually prompted. Students were frequently sent back into the text to find evidence to support their generalizations and often asked probing question such as, "What evidence in the text makes you think that?" and "What in St. Augustine's writing verifies that notion?" Rather than simply assuming students have the critical thinking skills to make Fink's notion of integration successful, educators should prepare opportunities for student to learn and practice these techniques.

Conclusions

In this qualitative research study, Fink's model of creating significant learning experiences was explored via the application of conceptual integration in an undergraduate religion classroom. Through a participant-observer, data was collected using field notes, class documents, and teacher and student interviews and synthesized into a case study of Fink's theory in action. The results of this study imply that conceptual integration of knowledge is not discipline-specific, but a new way of thinking about instructional design. This piece adds to the body of existing case studies on the use of significant learning experiences at the Undergraduate level such as those which have already been published in the areas of economics (Miners & Nantz, 2009), Spanish (Davis, 2009), biology (Mester, 2009), art history and philosophy (Rose & Torosyan, 2009), music (Kelley, 2009) and education (Nicoll- Sentf, 2009).

In all, this study points to the fact that educators must consider how the learning experiences they implement in the classroom can foster student conceptual growth. Decades of research has shown that implementation of learner-centered, engaging instruction that forces the learner to negotiate actively their own meaning of important content causes student learning and ultimately academic achievement (Vermette, 2009; Perkins, 2009; Hattie, 2011). It is this personalization of meaning making that can happen in all college classrooms with every concept, given certain instructional components are in place, such as those described in Fink's model.

The results of this study also suggest that it must be assumed that students do not necessarily know how to think critically in the same sophisticated manner most faculty members would like or may expect. Thus, these skills must be identified, taught, and assessed in a way that scaffolds student understanding so it can be transferred to other avenues of scholarship. Though changing instructional paradigms takes time, attention, and energy, it stands to have enormous payoffs in the cognitive and affective advances of undergraduate learners.

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