

CUR Focus on the Web

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Taking Advantage of Opportunity: Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Abroad

In January of 2010, two faculty members at Linfield College will embark on a trip to Scandinavia with ten students to study the education systems of Sweden and Norway. The course, titled "How Children Learn: Scandinavian Schools, Society & Culture," is an interdisciplinary endeavor that will allow students to examine Scandinavian culture, society, and education policy in relation to schooling practices and how children learn in the two countries.

During their three weeks abroad, students will be asked to complete an interdisciplinary research project based on original data collection, which promises to offer both a unique opportunity and numerous challenges. Besides describing the course, I will discuss the benefits and challenges of cross-disciplinary, course-embedded research abroad, the ways in which challenges will be addressed, and the types of institutional support that help to make such an endeavor possible.

The Course

In general, this course is designed to provide students with a better awareness of sociological and educational principles that relate to education in Sweden and Norway. It is also designed to examine the current state of education and the role of schools as agents of selection and socialization. By the end of the course, students are expected to be able to:

- Understand theories and concepts in the fields of sociology and education;
- Understand the various social functions of education in Scandinavia;
- Understand issues of educational stratification (class, race/ethnicity, gender, and religion), and their influences on teaching and learning in the classroom;
- Assess culturally proficient structures and approaches to teaching and learning, with a focus on the development of the individual, group, culture, and community; and
- Know a variety of issues and debates surrounding education and educational reform in Scandinavia.

Site visits will include Stockholm, Sweden, and Oslo, Byrknesoy, and Bergen in Norway. Students will visit pre-schools, kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools, as well as museums, churches, parks, gardens, and art galleries. In general, the course will allow students direct observations of a wide range of Scandinavian educational environments, and will provide them with an opportunity to discuss education with teachers, administrators, parents, students, and policy makers. Course topics include overviews of the education systems of both countries, early childhood education, primary and secondary education, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, religion, teacher training and professional development, and educational reform. Mindy Legard Larson, an assistant professor of education, and I will be the instructors for the course.

Facilitating and Promoting Undergraduate Research

A student's final course grade will be based on three primary components: a student analysis in journal form (40%), participation in the class (30%), and a research project (30%). The research project is to be based on collection of original data, as noted above.

Project information. Students will be asked to conduct research on a subject of their choice, and they are required to take an interdisciplinary approach. As a first step in the research process, students will complete an annotated bibliography that incorporates at least five reputable sources of information about their topic. Students will approach the project in an inductive manner (developing theories after making empirical observations), rather than deductively (testing hypotheses). Multiple methods will be used to collect data, such as observations, interviews, and content analysis. The annotated bibliography and the final project will be assessed using pre-established rubrics.

Benefits of the project. Conducting interdisciplinary research abroad promises to enhance students' learning outcomes. Students have an opportunity to immerse themselves in a different culture and can connect at a new level with the communities and institutions that they will visit. Rather than

being passive participants in the learning process, they will be actively engaged. In addition, students will be producers of knowledge rather than being simply consumers. While the general course will cover the breadth of educational issues in Sweden and Norway, the project will help students to develop depth with regard to an area of interest. Overall, the project will allow students to be more engaged with regard to both acquisition of knowledge and cultural understanding.

The interdisciplinary nature of the project allows students to integrate and synthesize two very diverse academic perspectives, which is likely to increase their understanding of the complexities of the educational system. Students will be allowed an opportunity to move beyond the boundaries of their disciplines and to develop an awareness of disciplinary bias. Because the disciplines involved, sociology and education, represent respectively a social science and a professional field, students will be exposed to a wide range of macro- and micro-level theories, as well as issues surrounding theory versus practice.

Challenges of the project. While interdisciplinary research abroad has many potential benefits with regard to students' learning outcomes, the challenges involved are numerous. In preparing for the course and the project, for example, faculty members had to address differences in disciplinary perspectives, departmental goals, and approaches to research, as well as academically diverse student backgrounds and numerous logistical issues.

One of the primary impediments to interdisciplinary research is the organization of colleges and universities "around traditional disciplinary structures, usually in the form of academic departments or faculties" (Adams et al., 2008: 154). Linfield College is not an exception. The Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the Department of Education are in many ways isolated from one another, and operate with different goals and expectations. The differences are somewhat magnified due to the fact that, though both are situated in a liberal-arts curriculum, sociology is a social science while education is a professional program. The relative isolation of the fields not only runs the risk of creating different worldviews, but also rather distinct approaches to research (see Matthiason, 1968, for further discussion of these issues).

The goals of both departments are presented in Table 1. While both departments focus on the development of general academic skills and personal characteristics, the disciplin-

ary differences are clear. The Department of Sociology and Anthropology emphasizes theory, research methods, and the production of disciplinary knowledge; the Department of Education focuses heavily on the skills needed to become a successful teacher and obtain a teaching license. The challenge was to create a course and a project that would bridge the goals of the two departments. Without clear integration, the instructors would run the risk of teaching a course and encouraging projects that were either "disciplinary" or "multi-disciplinary," rather than "interdisciplinary."

Due to diverse departmental goals, expectations and opportunities for research also vary. In the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, for example, students are required to take a research methods course and are also required to collect original data as a part of their senior-level capstone course. Numerous other departmental courses require students to conduct original research or develop a research proposal. Research is also incorporated into the education curriculum, but in a rather different manner. Students must complete two work samples during their senior year (action research), and, in preparation for teaching, have several opportunities to make observations. While education students are not required to take a research methods course, they take a number of courses that focus on assessment. In general, educational research tends to be applied, while sociological research tends to be pure. The challenge was to bridge these different approaches, experiences, and expectations in a coherent manner.

Another challenge was diversity with regard to student backgrounds. According to information gathered through course applications and a student survey conducted in the spring of 2009, students were bringing with them various levels of knowledge and skills. Seven of the students selected for the course were education majors (primary and secondary education), and only three of these students had taken a course in sociology. Two students were sociology majors who had never taken a course in education. One student had not completed coursework in either department. The academic level of the students varied as well (from sophomore to fifth-year senior). Over half of the students reported having research experience, most of which was discipline-specific. However, only two students had taken a research methods course. Due to these variations, the faculty members were faced with the challenge of ensuring that each student would have the content knowl-

Table 1: Stated Goals of Each Department

Department of Sociology and Anthropology	Department of Education
<p>In successfully completing a major in the Sociology and Anthropology Department, a student will possess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the sociological and anthropological imagination to see the connections between individual lives and the social and cultural forces which impact them, as well as the forces which promote both wide variation and patterns of convergence; • a fundamental understanding of the distinctive history, scope, and theoretical contours of their major academic discipline, developing an awareness of the major issues, problems, and questions that have provoked the emergence of the human sciences over the past two centuries; • oral and written skills for effective communication of anthropological and sociological knowledge to others, both inside and outside academic contexts; • the ability to work both independently and cooperatively in application of sociological and anthropological ideas, ranging from data gathering to service opportunities; • the ability to access, organize, scrutinize, analyze, and produce knowledge about humans as social beings, examining the social groups to which humans belong and from which they derive their social identities. This process includes sufficient mastery of contemporary technology to facilitate movement from the consumption of information to the production of knowledge. 	<p>As a result of experiences in the Teacher Education Program, students majoring in elementary education and those seeking a middle-level or high-school teaching license will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan for instruction, including selecting goals and objectives, developing long-term plans, organizing teaching materials, and designing activities; • establish a classroom climate conducive to learning, including communicating rules and expectations, providing for individual differences, encouraging appropriate behavior, using time effectively, and arranging teaching materials; • implement instruction plans, including organizing students for instruction, using a variety of instructional approaches, monitoring learning activities, and promoting problem solving; • evaluate student achievement, including incorporating a variety of assessment means, reporting student progress, and documenting teaching effectiveness; and • exhibit professional characteristics, including having regular and punctual attendance, displaying tact and courtesy to others, demonstrating knowledge of subjects taught, and adhering to district, state, and federal regulations.

Source: *Linfield College Catalog 2008-2009*

edge and research skills needed to successfully complete the research project.

Finally, interdisciplinary research abroad poses several logistical challenges, including limited time, limited access to resources and technology, and language differences. Excluding travel time, students will be in Scandinavia for approximately three weeks. This creates challenges with regard to both the acquisition of interdisciplinary knowledge, and the time available for data collection and the writing of a research report. Traveling abroad also limits access to technology, which could impair the ability of the students to find outside sources and, in the end, write their reports. Site visits depend on the ability and willingness of school administrators and policy makers to make accommodations during the specified time period in which the students will travel.

Language creates obstacles as well, as students will conduct research in two countries in which English is not the native language. While the majority of the populations in Sweden and Norway speak English, two key issues still emerge. First, English does not always translate clearly or directly into other languages. Second, many young children have not yet acquired English-speaking skills. Thus, it may be difficult to conduct research in early childhood and primary contexts, where most instruction is conducted in Norwegian or Swedish.

Addressing the Challenges

Three key elements appear to be essential in addressing the challenges noted above—an interdisciplinary ethic, preparation, and flexibility. Holding an interdisciplinary ethic has helped the instructors to address issues of disciplinary diversity, while preparation and flexibility are important in addressing diverse student backgrounds and logistical issues.

Interdisciplinary ethic. According to Scott and Hofmeyer (2007), an interdisciplinary ethic includes “inclusive rather than exclusionary thinking; broad, contextually oriented theorizing and research; methodological pluralism; optimism and stamina; a welcoming orientation to new perspectives and colleagues from other disciplines; and cultivation of good will and cross-disciplinary tolerance through the development of trust and demonstration of respect” (p. 497). Without this ethic, interdisciplinary collaboration is difficult. Because both instructors approached the course with the dispositions noted above, bridging differences in disciplinary perspectives, departmental

goals, and approaches to research was possible. For example, both instructors worked collaboratively in the development of the syllabus and course goals, and neither made decisions in isolation.

With regard to the project, the instructors worked together to develop a plan that would connect both disciplines in a coherent, interdisciplinary manner. This required methodological pluralism and a willingness to think outside of disciplinary boundaries. For example, deductive research methods are often emphasized in sociology, and research in the sociology of education often involves the use of large data sets and quantitative data analysis (Brint, 2009). However, this type of approach would not work within the context of the course. Through collaboration and openness to new perspectives, the instructors concluded that an inductive project based on observations, interviews, and content analysis would be the best approach.

Preparation. Differences in student backgrounds and logistical issues were discovered and addressed through advanced preparation. One of the key elements in this process involved a scouting trip that took place in January of 2009. The scouting trip was funded by the college’s international-programs office and faculty development grants. It proved to be invaluable with regard to understanding and addressing logistical concerns.

The two instructors, in addition to an acquaintance who has given professional tours of Scandinavia, spent eleven days visiting Bergen, Byrknesoy, Oslo, and Stockholm. Several connections with policy makers, school administrators, teachers, and college professors were made prior to the scouting trip through various social networks at the college. A significant amount of time during the scouting trip was spent meeting with these individuals, visiting proposed sites, and generally learning more about the cultures of both countries. The trip provided a sense of what could feasibly be accomplished during the course, and helped the instructors to better understand the resources that would be available for research projects.

Most importantly, however, the trip provided an awareness of the limitations of what could be accomplished in three weeks, as well as a better understanding of how the students could best obtain an interdisciplinary perspective in such a limited time. For example, the scouting trip made it apparent that students would need to prepare for many aspects of the course *prior to leaving* for Scandinavia, as three weeks would not be

enough time for students to learn an interdisciplinary perspective, collect data, and explore the cultures.

Course preparation for the students, therefore, began in May of 2009 with an introductory meeting, and it continued into the fall. During the spring, students were given a list of readings that they were encouraged to complete over the summer. These included books and Web sites with general information about the countries and their educational systems, as well as a list of popular children's books. By providing this information early, the hope was that students would begin the fall with at least some understanding of the countries that they would visit. Four mandatory orientation meetings were scheduled for fall 2009, as was a required class meeting set the day before the trip.

While one of the purposes of the meetings was to prepare the students for travel in general, the primary goals were to (1) help them to better understand the cultures and languages of the two countries, (2) assist them in developing an interdisciplinary approach to studying education, and (3) provide them with basic training in research methods. Students were also asked to complete required course readings during this time. Overall, the objective for the fall semester was to address the diverse disciplinary and research backgrounds of the students, and to ensure that students would be able to spend their time abroad learning about the cultures and collecting their data.

Finally, two additional steps were taken with regard to student preparation involving the annotated bibliography and the development of research templates. Rather than waiting to find sources while abroad, students were strongly encouraged to complete the annotated bibliography before leaving for Scandinavia. The intention was to ensure that they had given some forethought to their project and that they would have adequate access to sources. In addition, the instructors constructed a standard set of interview questions, as well as observation templates, that students will use as part of their data-collection efforts. Both templates are interdisciplinary in nature. Space has been left on each form for specific topic-related questions and observations. Should students have difficulty gathering information about their selected topic, the standardized template will ensure that they have gathered at least some data. In addition, this will provide common ground for group discussions.

Flexibility. While all research requires adaptability and a willingness to remain flexible, the demands of this type of project are such that these attributes become increasingly important. Students are conducting research in a foreign context through a newly acquired interdisciplinary perspective, and the availability of resources is highly dependent upon contacts in the other countries. Therefore, glitches are to be expected. Because the instructors are aware of the challenges involved, they are able to approach the course and the project with open minds and a willingness to make changes if and when necessary.

Institutional Support: Building and Sustaining Interdisciplinary Courses Abroad

Interdisciplinary courses abroad require a rather significant institutional commitment. Traveling abroad requires both time and money, and interdisciplinary courses have implications for already heavy faculty workloads. At Linfield, however, curricular priorities, strong international programs, and faculty support help to make these types of courses possible. For example, two of Linfield's three "Foundational Education Principles" are integrated learning and global/multicultural awareness. Linfield is also strongly committed to study abroad, evidenced by the fact that over half of Linfield students study abroad at some point during their undergraduate careers. The college's January term provides an excellent opportunity for faculty to teach courses overseas; in fact, approximately two-thirds of the students who studied abroad in 2008-2009 did so during an international January-term course. Finally, to encourage co-taught courses abroad, Linfield College offers each faculty member full load credit the first two times a course is taught. Priority is given to those courses taught by faculty members from different academic disciplines.

Conclusion

Overall, interdisciplinary, course-embedded research abroad has the potential to significantly enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes. While many of the potential benefits and challenges have been discussed here, others are likely to emerge once the faculty members and students are in Scandinavia. It is hoped that the information provided here will inspire others to take advantage of unique opportunities for undergraduate research.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Mindy Larson for developing the idea for the course and for her valuable feedback on this article. The author would also like to thank Shaik Ismail, Marie Schmidt, and Michele Tomseth for providing helpful information regarding international programs at Linfield College.

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