

THE LINKED COURSE: A VIABLE OPTION FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING HISTORY

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All history instructors are familiar with stand-alone classes, where we teach a specific course devoted to a clear-cut subject over the course of a term to a particular group of students. As instructors, we determine the direction of the course, assign readings and other work, and assess the students' learning at the end of the term. These courses usually follow a lecture format, or a seminar format, and depending on the instructor, the course might or might not have discussion groups, group projects, service learning components, and computer instruction built in. Most of these courses are delivered in classrooms; some are delivered on line, via correspondence, television, or video.

More and more history teachers, particularly those in community colleges, are becoming familiar with coordinated studies programs (CSPs). In fact, many community colleges and some universities are now making coordinated studies programs requirements for graduation. Generally speaking, these learning communities focus on a theme or particular topic. For example, on our campus, this past year, one team dealt with "Millennial Madness" (philosophy and history), another with "Beginnings" (composition and history), a third with "The Brain" (psychology and literature), and a fourth with the 1960s (ethics and women's studies). Coordinated studies are team-taught by faculty from discrete disciplines (history, biology, literature, etc.) or from interdisciplinary studies programs (ethnic studies, women's studies, environmental studies, etc.). Students and faculty in these groups meet anywhere from ten to eighteen hours a week, discuss books on the topic (preferably not from a specific discipline), conduct seminars, host experts, watch films, take trips, and engage each other in other learning and community-building activities.

While CSPs work very well for interactive and non-linear learners, and for those who prefer group projects, they cause problems for other students. Some are uncomfortable with coordinated studies' strong emphasis on collaborative learning, team assignments, and in some cases, shared grades. Others do not like the two or three-hour long class sessions, or taking all their classes with the same peer group. Others have major difficulties fitting coordinated studies schedules with the schedules for the other courses they need to meet their graduation requirements.

There is a third teaching model, another viable interdisciplinary model—the linked course. While it gets very little attention, it, in fact, formalizes practices adopted by astute students on campuses all over the country for decades—students who have been signing up for the courses that have something to do with each other. Taking Latin American history with a Spanish language course that focuses on Latin American culture makes a whole lot of sense. So does taking a course in American

government along with a course in American political history or an introduction to ethnic studies with a course in American ethnic and immigration history.

It is also no secret that history faculty have shared this wisdom with their students for generations, and they have maintained longstanding practices of comparing notes with colleagues in other fields on how they approach the same topic, period, or literary work. Some faculty have collaborated to make informal connections between their courses and to identify disciplinary intersections of particular courses for students they advise. Others go further and advertise these connections. And a few design reading, writing, and other learning activities that link their courses formally, and then offer these courses as an alternate means of meeting interdisciplinary course requirements.

In these linked courses, we do not alter our courses significantly. We modify them to give more emphasis to logical connections between the disciplines. Students can take only one of the courses, or take both courses without linking them, or take both courses as a link. In fact, students read the same material, take the same examinations, and do practically all of the same assignments, whether they are taking one of the two courses, or linking the two. But linkers must pay particular attention to the learning activities that link the courses. These activities might range from seminars to field studies to group projects. And linkers must provide clear interdisciplinary connections in their writing assignments and seminars.

In the last several years, I have linked courses in United States history, American women's history, and Pacific Northwest history with courses taught by colleagues in anthropology, literature, economics, sociology, and film studies. Next year, I will link my Latin American history course with a Spanish course in Latin American culture. While the disciplines, teaching and learning styles, and delivery modes have differed for each of these classes—and have clearly reflected the personalities, interests and strengths of participating instructors—each link made connections for the students who took them, and each conveyed at least two clear messages to students. First, historians do not think about a subject, nor do they research it or teach it, the same way as scholars in other disciplines do. Second, historical and anthropological documentation is different from documentation for writing in other disciplines (psychology, political science, language and literature, law, etc.) do. As we say, "MLA is not the only way." Third, the more approaches one takes to a subject, the better one understands its complexities and its connections to other subjects in other places and times.

Recently, I have linked several courses in United States history from 1865 to the present with courses in economics. In the most recent, my colleague, Thomas Cook, who was teaching a class on public economics and government, and I agreed to focus on the presidency. All of the students in his economics class would study the candidates running for office during primary season and focus on their political agendas for structuring government and dealing with foreign and domestic economic policies. By doing this, they would get a sense of how candidates articulated economic

policy and how policy evolved in contemporary practices. For economics, students used a basic textbook, journal, newspaper, and magazine articles, campaign literature, and candidates' websites to gather information. My history students, who used a history textbook and book of primary source materials, were required to select any president who served from 1865 to the present and then become an expert on that president. They were required to use a range of resources, including monographs, biographies, autobiographies, edited writings, articles in refereed journals, encyclopedias, and websites, to develop this expertise. After completing their research, they were to write eight-page papers and prepare one-page briefing papers for their classmates, which they would distribute at the time they made fifteen-minute oral presentations. Their goal was to give classmates a clear idea of the personality and background of their president, the policies he promoted and changes he implemented, the barriers and failures he confronted, and the ways in which he transformed his office and American society, in general.

On the first week of the quarter, the linkers met with both instructors to learn about the link focus, the resources, the resources we had compiled for them, the linked websites we had set up for them, and the requirements for completing the link successfully. Since both instructors maintain extensive websites for courses, we had linked our sites, and then had developed hotlinks to all the major presidential websites and campaign websites. In addition, we had established on-line discussion forums, where students were required to post weekly abstracts from their ongoing research on past presidents and current candidates. We would respond to these individual postings, using our responses to fortify the link. From then until the end of the course, both instructors also conferred regularly with each other on what they were doing in their classes, and would then in class make connections between their course materials.

Midway through the course, the group met to compare notes on what the candidates were saying, what issues they were raising, and whether or not and how these issues were connected to past presidencies. As we listened to our students make more and more connections, we worked to weave these connections together.

By the time we got to the end of the quarter, virtually all of the students had learned a great deal about one president and something about the rest who held that office in the last 130 years. But the linkers had learned to connect present presidential campaign issues with past office holders, to connect history and economics, and to bring a certain vitality and imminence to what we were learning in the classroom. They did all of that, and as one student commented in class, "Everyone seems to be getting pretty protective of his or her president!"

One student evaluator remarked that "the connection between history and economics in American history was amazing." And another noted that "the classes complemented each other Discussion of government decision-making in ECO 102 led into historical discussions as well." A third noted that "economics gave you a

foundation of knowledge that made you think about historical policies and events.”¹ Students also learned that economists and historians have different approaches to presidential studies, use different constructs and language in presenting their findings, and document differently. They also had seen their instructors actively learning about another discipline and comparing notes about the two. Some weren’t satisfied. One student wished the economist had “spoken more about controversial topics,” and another suggested that “not much was done.”²

I learned a new vocabulary (command economics, government efficiencies, etc.) and found my partner first complaining about “reading all this history” and then confessing that he had “actually liked the history books” he had read. We both noted that all of the eligible linkers voted in the Washington presidential primary, and that the results clearly mattered to them.

I have linked the second half of the United States survey twice before with the same economics instructor. The first time, we used Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Depression*³ with *The Downsizing of America*⁴ from the *New York Times*, and “The Downsizing of the Aviation Industry in the Western States,” an unpublished paper by NASA chief historian, Roger Launius,⁵ to focus on economic downturns, labor shifts, migrations, and social changes in the United States during the twentieth century. When a student in that first link told us it was “more interesting to incorporate the ideas and information we learned in modern economics and apply them to real situations in our past” and recommended that we have a seminar in the middle of the quarter “to help us get a sense of what each other is thinking at that time ... and maybe start working on the final project as well,” we added a third seminar session the next time we offered the link. He was right—the midway seminar definitely helped. In that second link, we read *Down the Asphalt Path* and other works that investigated

¹Tommy Stephenson, e-mail to Maureen Nutting, December 3, 1997. With the exception of three other comments whose authors are identified, student remarks came from anonymous course evaluations made by students in March 1998, March 1999, and March 2000.

²Anonymous student evaluations, submitted to North Seattle Community College Social Science Division, March 17, 2000.

³Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Depression* (New York: Random House), 1986.

⁴*The New York Times, Special Report: The Downsizing of America* (New York: Times Books), 1997.

⁵Roger Launius, “The Downsizing of the Aviation Industry in the West after the Second World War,” unpublished paper delivered at the nineteenth annual meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, Portland, OR, August 1997.

how transportation developments affected and were affected by the industrial, social, and cultural change in modern United States history.⁶

Women's history also links easily with other subjects. When Nada Oakley, an English instructor at Seattle Central Community College, and I linked American women's history with American women's literature, we explored American women's lives, status, and issues. In our investigations we used a narrative history, journal articles, census data, items of material culture, journals, biographies, autobiographies, poems, and plays, many written by these women in their own times, to reconstruct and understand their lives and times. As students read Mary Rowlandson's accounts of her captivity in my class and Anne Broadstreet's poetry in their literature class, they learned about Indian-Puritan encounters, migrations, and everyday life in New England. They discussed *The Crucible* as they read journal articles on the Salem witch trials.⁷ As they read Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, they learned about the slave trade, the institutionalization of American slavery, and its intersection with issues of gender in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America.⁸ And as they analyzed *The Yellow Wallpaper*,⁹ they learned about women's health and domestic issues in post-Civil War America, as well as more about the life and campaigns of its author, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and the proposals in her other controversial publication, *Women and Economics*.¹⁰ Women's history resonated with women's voices, reflections, and recommendations—and the intricacies and other complexities of gender issues made even more complex the study of American women's past and their literary legacies. One man who completed this link, and later transferred to the University of Chicago, wrote to tell us that he had successfully challenged Chicago to grant him transfer credit—by oral examination—for both courses. He also told us that the link was “one of the most intellectually stimulating experiences in my undergraduate career.”¹¹

In a course linking United States history with an introduction to film course, humanities instructor Robert Gluckson and I used *Past Imperfect: History According*

⁶Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1995.

⁷Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York: Penguin Plays), 1999.

⁸Harriet Jacobs, Jean Yellin Fagin, and Lydia Maria Childs, editors, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Boston: Harvard University Press), 1987.

⁹Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: Dover [thrift edition]), 1997.

¹⁰Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York: Dover [thrift edition]), 1998.

¹¹Jimmy Cho, e-mail message to Maureen Nutting, May 4, 1998.

to the Movies, to bridge our disciplines.¹² Clearly, Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times" (1936) brought a fresh perspective to our discussion of late nineteenth-century industrialization, as did John Ford's "The Grapes of Wrath" (1940) to the Depression and the plight of Okies and Arkies in the West. And Richard Pearce's "The Long Walk Home" (1989) brought personal dimensions of the intersections of race and gender into our discussions of the civil rights movement. More importantly, these and other films helped us deal with how the media, and particularly film, often manipulate, even reconstruct the historic past, and cloud historical data with fiction, lies, fantasies, and fabrications—and to be wary of substituting entertainment for education.

This particular class gave us the opportunity to forge another link between a history course delivered on campus—with enough computer instruction, exercises, and communication to actually classify it as a hybrid course—and a humanities distance learning course. The linked courses offered unexpected challenges, as distance learning students relied increasingly on the campus-based history instructor for technical support and assistance when they "hit the wall" with their computer-based assignments or peppered the warm body present with questions and concerns more properly directed towards the instructor from afar. The unexpected outcome was that all but one of the eight linkers in the distance learning class (87%) completed their course requirements, while fewer than 40% of the 42 enrolled in the film course, but not the link, completed the course. While many other variables clearly enter into student success, one cannot help but think that anecdotal information from students, suggesting the importance of critical and available instructional support for the linkers, had some merit.

While this link had merit, the inequitable course load outweighed the benefits of continuing the link. In addition, a link connecting a course in Pacific Northwest history and one in literature withered on the vine, as it were, as little communication transpired between the participating faculty.

However, there is one link that a colleague in anthropology and I have offered for the last two years, and will repeat again, with very little change. We connect Pacific Northwest history with an introductory archeology course, and link them through outside activities, including museum tours, an urban archeological project, a coastal gathering hosted by our campus, and a neighborhood inventory of historic buildings in Seattle neighborhoods (done with Historic Seattle Preservation and Trust). While some of the projects vary over the years, the Hoko trip to the Pacific coast, our capstone for the link, does not.

Every May our linkers converge on a sand strip, on the northern coast of Washington's Olympic Peninsula, where the Hoko River empties into the Straits of

¹²Mark Carnes et al., editors, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt), 1995.

Juan de Fuca. We camp there for the weekend, and spend our time learning about the land, the sea, and the first people, their lives, concerns, stories, and material culture. On the first day, we tour the area, investigating the evidences of changes over geologic time, visiting a vision quest site, harvesting snails, khytons, and other edibles from tidepools, and sprouts and stems of marionberries and other edibles. These and fresh-caught, hand-trolled salmon, cooked on sticks alongside the fire in the traditional Makah way, become part of our evening meal. We also dig for spruce roots and learn to strip and weave them, and we break smooth quartz stones into stone blades for hand-tied knives sharp enough to fillet the salmon. As night falls, we gather around a fire stoked with the driftwood we have gathered, and hear stories of Coyote, the Whales, Bear, Eagle, and the others. After a night in tents or under the stars, we head to Neah Bay. There we first visit the Makah Museum, with holdings excavated from a nearby village covered by a mudslide over 500 years ago. Our host for the weekend, archeologist Dale Croes, knows these pieces well, for he has been working at the Ozette site from which these artifacts have come for over thirty years. We then visit with Isabelle Ides, the oldest of the Makah, before heading home.

The Hoko River trip brings the archeology and the history, the past and the present, and the diverse members of our group together in a way that transcends the courses we teach and the learning communities we attempt to form on campus. Here community college students and their teachers—joined by other faculty and administrators—take time away from their usually complicated lives to spend time as the first people did, in one of the most beautiful settings imaginable.

Here on the Pacific coast, they make connections with a past previously rendered in words, and make connections with each other and their Makah hosts, in ways not available in a classroom. Here, last year, two weeks after the first whale hunt in generations, the whalers and our students spoke on the beach beyond Isabelle's home, as the young men prepared to launch their canoe across the breakers again. These young people talked about the boat, the hunt, the training, and the significance of the hunt. No reporters were there to interfere in the exchanges about dreams, expectations, and accomplishments, about fears and reservations. And when the young men cleared the breakers, we headed back to the community from which we had come.

The link lingers. Rob Robbins, a Hoko veteran, who will join us in making a presentation to the Society for Anthropology in the Community Colleges, recently wrote that he plans to "synthesize something new out of my original impressions and add subsequent experiences—this class did stay with me."¹³ Other Hoko linkers return to talk about their experiences, to join us on subsequent visits, and to take more courses from us. For some, the friendships made at Hoko are the ones that continue after they graduate, transfer, or move on. Deanna Parrott, a student in the first Hoko link, told us

¹³Rob Robbins, e-mail to Maureen Nutting, March 26, 2000.

that the friends she treasured from North Seattle Community College were those she got to know at Hoko.¹⁴

Not all post-secondary institutions have the possibilities offered by Hoko's proximity and our history/archeology link. But all colleges have faculty with solid grounding in their disciplines, imagination, and the connections and other skills they need to link courses in ways that exceed the sum of their parts and to help students learn more than they hoped to learn from taking individual classes. Links can work very well. They familiarize students with different disciplinary approaches and methodologies, they allow students other options for meeting interdisciplinary studies requirements for graduation, and they meet the learning needs of linear and individual learners. Linked courses fit into regular course schedules as well, and allow students to meet graduation requirements within two years at community colleges and four years in upper-division schools.

Linked courses also work well for faculty. They provide instructors the time they require to present courses in their own disciplines in the way they want to teach them. The links promote collegial exchanges and cooperative efforts among faculty from different areas of concentration, promote better understandings of and respect for other disciplines, and generate productive conversations about teaching and learning across disciplines. They allow faculty to connect websites, to construct imaginative and resourceful Internet research exercises, and to teach and to learn from each other.

In many ways, links recall the good old college days when common sense prevailed, when ongoing conversations were valued, and when respect and civility among colleagues were cultivated. In many other ways, links offer possibilities for creating new matrices of learning, constructing new intersections for classroom and distance learners, for making excellent use of technological innovations, particularly the internet, and for challenging students to exceed their learning expectations. At a time when we are encouraged to foster learning communities, discrete(ly) linked courses that investigate sensible connections and utilize traditional and innovative tools for learning may be the best means for both protecting individual students' interests and rights and promoting dynamic, productive, and interactive learning. Maybe it's time to give links the "good old college try."

APPENDIX

SOME THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT LINKED COURSES

Part One

What are linked courses?

¹⁴Maureen Nutting, interview with Deanna Parrott, NSCC student, Seattle, WA, November 20, 1999.

What's the rationale behind them?

Design:

- Determine a general theme
- Address common aspects of the general theme
- Agree on learning resources (books, articles, films, listservs, and homepages that deal with the common theme)
- Design learning activities (lectures, discussions, seminars, synthesis papers, field trips, etc.—some in single classes, some joint activities)
- Formulate mutual learning objectives and outcomes (some joint, some individual)
- Present syllabi and course outlines that explain and support the links
- Establish equitable course loads for linking and non-linking students

Teaching the link:

- Present some common themes
- Make connections between the classes
- Visit back and forth between the classes, sometimes to observe and other times to participate
- Agree to agree and disagree on issues and approaches
- Clarify differences in approach, language, documentation, and opinion

Problems that confront linkers:

- Seeing connections early in the course
- Thinking and working across disciplines
- Doing documentation more than one way
- Striking a balance between the disciplines
- Synthesizing
- Actively participating in seminars

Benefits reaped by linkers:

- They make connections between areas of knowledge and integrate them as they study subjects, events, and issues
- They begin to understand the different approaches that academicians in different disciplines use to study different issues, policies, and programs
- They begin to comprehend why people in different disciplines take different approaches and end up with very different outcomes
- They recognize the importance of interdisciplinary exchanges in areas of critical thinking and problem solving
- In some cases, they develop computer skills, particularly in using listservs, data bases, websites, and discussion forums for finding useful learning materials and disseminating knowledge

Part Two

Linking Worksheet

Your history course—

The other course—

The other instructor (strong in her/his discipline, collegial?)--

What are the natural connections one makes between these courses?

What issues or topics provide good points of intersection?

What common theme or themes can you pursue in these different courses?

What learning objectives can both faculty share?

What outcomes can you set and measure?

What books or articles can you think of that pull these two subjects together?

What other learning resources connect the subjects?

What learning activities will reinforce the connections? (Papers, seminars, debates, discussion, digs, oral histories, mock trials, problem solving activities, listserv postings)

What can you do to assure that your linkers and non-linkers are treated equitably?