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Senior Inquiry: A University/High School Collaboration

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Abstract

Portland State University has been collaborating with four area high schools to deliver a high school course based on the university's Freshman Inquiry model. Senior Inquiry is taught by a team of high school and university faculty partnered with peer mentors from the university. It is designed to provide college experience and credit for any senior in good academic standing who wants to gain the skills needed to succeed in college.

Project Description

The University Studies program at Portland State University (PSU) is engaged in a collaborative project with four metropolitan high schools to provide yearlong inquiry courses for high school seniors as an extension of the Freshman Inquiry general education program at PSU (White, 1994). The project began in 1995 at Westview High School in suburban Beaverton, and has since added Grant, Vocational Village, and Jefferson High Schools in urban Portland. Westview teaches "Embracing Einstein's Universe: Language, Culture and Relativity," an interdisciplinary curriculum based on University Studies' goals: communication, critical thinking, diversity of human experience, and social responsibility (Rennie-Hill & Toth, 1999). The teaching team consists of one PSU faculty member, three high school faculty, and two PSU juniors or seniors who act as peer mentors.

The course meets for 85 minutes, 5 days a week. Any motivated student who wishes to work at college level may take the course, which offers support to achieve college level standards and 15 college credits. It is designed to be a bridge between high school and college, a truly academically collegiate experience within the high school.

Senior Inquiry at Westview High School

Senior Inquiry is distinctive because it is a learning community that is a powerful new tool for secondary education. The learning community created in Senior Inquiry at Westview High School is unique in our teaching experience. Powerful intellectual and personal bonds are forged. Students are more engaged in learning and more concerned with one another than in any other class. We have asked ourselves why Senior Inquiry, alone in the high school, becomes a community. In our experience, as in the literature (Shapiro & Levine, 1999), this arises from the combination of: team-teaching, an interdisciplinary theme, an emphasis on active learning, a value is placed on emotional as well as intellectual responses, and peer mentorship.

The team is at the very heart of Senior Inquiry. We decided early on that we did not want the class to be merely a series of "experts," each teaching about his/her own field. We pledged to both plan and teach together and to teach everything. The result has been a class where the teachers set a tone of camaraderie and friendship. We also constantly

model the excitement of learning since each of us must master material outside of our own discipline:

The interdisciplinary and thematic approach of Senior Inquiry is also a great strength. For years, students have been asked to master subjects in isolation. Now a premium is placed on drawing connections, and tying diverse ideas and information together. At first, our students are reluctant, sometimes confused, and, on occasion, rebellious. However, by the end of the first semester they have discovered the joy and exhilaration of creating their own meaning and constructing their own knowledge (Freire, 1999; Horton & Freire, 1991). (Note: Material in italics comes from student reflections in their portfolios.)

The ideas that I had were the ideas that were expected and not thought of as high level. When I would come up with an interesting twist on a quote some one would be two steps ahead of me with an even higher level thought. This became quite frustrating. I was now required to think an idea over several times to come up with more and more diverse ways to look at things. I could no longer read something once and go with my first impression, I had to dig a lot deeper and think a lot harder and do it all faster (Jarrod).

Students are taught, encouraged, and expected to bring questions, observations, and insights about the reading to class. Consequently, they determine what will be discussed about any particular reading. We teach them how to function in a large- and small-group discussion and the necessity of taking risks with ideas. As a result, the discussions are safe havens for ideas. We are active participants, but avoid proselytizing any particular viewpoint and mostly guide the active learning (Karre, 1994).

Discussions were a place to express your individuality and to bond with others through your differences. . . . The teachers treated us not as students but as equals whose ideas were just as valid as their own. The excitement of learning came back to me. I looked forward to reading the next book and doing the new physics homework (Rea).

One day during a heated discussion about racism [MS] said something that struck me. She was going to say something that she knew many people would not agree with or even view as racist, but she said it anyway. I felt bad for her at first, people would ridicule her or make assumptions, I was suddenly thankful for my enraged silence. The class did not react how I had anticipated. [She] had verbalized what a lot of people feel but are too scared to say and there was a sense of relief. I do not remember exactly what the comment was, but the fact that she said it made me realize what a discussion can be. It does not have to be a battle between right and wrong, but a rational discussion to work out how and why we feel the way we do (Rea).

The emphasis on active learning in Senior Inquiry creates bonds among students. In a class where lectures are rare and group work and discussion paramount (Astin, 1992), passive listening is seldom possible. Students who work together for one and one-half hours a day cannot ignore one another. Even the challenging nature of the course helps these bonds.

Before the test, a group of us from both classes got together to study. I was leery of how successful it would be; however, I now realize the value of study groups. Each of us understood different parts and as we discussed the different concepts and formulas, things began to click in my head and I realized I understood more than I thought. When I was forced to be the teacher in some areas, I gained more confidence in my own knowledge that was validated by others. I went into the test with confidence, but I never anticipated that all my efforts to understand this mind-boggling concept would pay-off.

When the tests were handed back, I was surprised and pleased to see a 70/70 on the top of the paper (Beth).

Valuing emotional as well as intellectual response in class also results in more student engagement and in a stronger community. Students care more about what they are studying when they feel angry or sad or happy about it. When they can go beyond seeing individuals as “right” or “wrong” and share personal stories of emotional experience, they are more engaged and the group is drawn closer together. The emotional bonds increase understanding in ways that intellectual discussion does not. Many teachers fear allowing emotions into a course, but, in fact, it is often the best thing that can happen in a class.

This was English class, what did feelings have to do with anything? I felt nothing. That is until the day that we were assigned to read about Eugenics in America. I was so enraged. How could anyone think this way? I took up my pen and began to write like a mad man. I couldn't stop. With every line I found myself growing more and more anxious and I began to dive deeper into the meaning of the words written on this white piece of paper.... My hand could barely keep up with my ideas and flashes, but I felt a feeling of relief when I had finished scribbling my thoughts out on the piece of paper. It was almost as though I was face to face with the author and I could tell [him] my side of the story. Instead of keeping my anger inside I was able to let it out in a productive manner. I sat back and realized that reading articles, poems, and short stories had never been interesting to me because I agreed with them, or because there was no point to argue (Rea).

The PSU peer mentors play a key role in creating community (Reynolds, 2003). Two days a week the class is split into mentor sections that have fewer than 15 students, which provide an ideal forum for the exchange of ideas. Their role is varied and crucial, ranging from helping students with writing, to teaching some of the content, to facilitating discussions, to acting as role models and guidance counselors, to simply providing a place where students can express their frustrations and complaints. Their primary job, however, is to create community and foster discussion. They do many group-building activities and provide students invaluable support. Students who might be uncomfortable approaching a teacher always have someone to turn to who is closer to them in age.

Senior Inquiry not only creates a community, but it changes student attitudes toward learning. For many students, “learning” consists of memorizing information, or finding out what the teacher “wants,” and repeating it back. If their grades are high, they feel they have “learned.” In Senior Inquiry, students move to a different level of understanding. Students come to see the power of their own ideas, the joy in reaching their own interpretation, and the exhilaration of seeing a new connection. They realize learning is internal, not external, and that it is different from receiving grades. This excitement can spill over into other classes.

As I became a part of the class I realized that I was in charge of my own education. I was responsible for doing my homework in order to be prepared for the next day. If I didn't do my homework I wouldn't know what was happening in class discussion. Because of that change I realized that it wasn't about the grades. If I was putting my best into each assignment my grade would reflect it. Now I am doing schoolwork because I am in charge of my education and I enjoy what I am doing (Bret).

The course's emphasis on inquiry and interpretation and its theme of paradigm shifts encourage students to question their assumptions about reality. For them, scientific

knowledge is no longer “fixed.” They know that new models will supersede what we use now. In particular, our study of issues relating to diversity has changed students’ views of themselves and their place in society. One student noted, “I am more aware of what I do not know and my obligation to society to know more. My perception of my world and the society I live in has been made bigger.” Our goal has never been to make students share our views. It is, rather, to encourage inquiry and critical thought, to help students understand why they hold their ideas and beliefs. Surely, one of the highest aspirations for education is that it encourages the critical examination of received ideas and promotes broader toleration of the beliefs of others.

Throughout the last two years of learning I have slowly begun a personal paradigm shift in my attitude towards many more personal issues. I have found that many other people within Sr. Inquiry have also started to question what they believe to be true and why. The hardest thing for me is to look at something I have always believed and ask 18 years later “why?” This class has helped to force me to examine many accepted issues and look differently at others. The beginning was during evolution lectures in AP Biology when for the first time I listened to such a lecture without scoffing, and began to wonder “why not?” I still maintain to this day belief in God, but I have found I care less about what happened [than] about what could have happened. Sr. Inquiry has shown me the evolution of thought through the ages, and how today’s known ideas are mocked tomorrow. For this reason I see it as necessary to remain open to all possibilities. I admit that I doubt I will ever consider the possibility of a Godless World, but at least I now can sit without judgment on someone who does (Jackie).

How the course has changed our teaching and us

Senior Inquiry has been the most exhilarating course we have ever taught. We have experienced the same benefits as our students. We are constantly exposed to new ideas, new ways of seeing reality. We have the scary, but satisfying, task of mastering material outside of our own areas of expertise. We, too, are part of a “learning community” and that is far more rewarding than filling the role of “expert.” Our other classes also benefit because we can apply some of what we do in Senior Inquiry in those courses. The benefits to us of teaching Senior Inquiry must be great when you realize how much time and effort we put into the course. Our planning meetings require at least two hours a week, and we must prepare in several disciplines. In a given week, for example, we might need to read *The Sound and the Fury*, brush up on general relativity, and spend hours in writing conferences with students working on research papers. We are willing to go above and beyond because that is what is necessary to make the program work. The joy of teaching this class is well worth it!

Outcomes

Too often high school/university collaboration consists of “experts” swooping down from the university to tell high school teachers what to do. Senior Inquiry is far more effective because it is a collaboration of teams and because a PSU professor teaches at the high school, not on an occasional basis, but as part of his/her assignment. The team approach is powerful at both the high school and the university and the cross-fertilization that occurs because of Senior Inquiry strengthens both (Thompson, 2002).

We have gained far more from the project than anyone might have suspected. Year-end assessments of a random sample of portfolios show that high school Senior Inquiry students have mastered the University Studies Program learning goals at least as well as PSU Freshman Inquiry students. While the collaboration did not begin as a recruitment strategy, the number of students choosing to attend PSU has increased appreciably.

Overall, 90 to 95% of the students who finish the course enroll in some post-secondary institution.

The program demands resources from the university, which sends faculty and mentors into the partner schools each year. But the expense has helped build relationships between the high schools and the university, helped students grow and succeed, and helped of PSU fulfill its charge to serve the city.

[W]hat I have learned in Senior Inquiry is what will stay with me for years and has changed me in ways no other class have ever come close to. The difference between Senior Inquiry and every other course is very clear. In other classes emotions are not present, ethics and morals are not challenged and independence is not encouraged. This is how I see myself as different from those who did not take Senior Inquiry. I feel I am stronger and confident in expressing my emotions and feeling when dealing with topics. I have forced myself to question my own ethics and morals to understand why I believe in them and I have realized, and been encouraged to realize, I am a unique learner and if I understand a concept differently than the person next to me, that's great (Shawna).

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