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THROUGH TEACHING

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Two Birds with One Stone:

Using a capstone course to integrate curricular knowledge and assess educational outcomes

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As the name implies, a capstone course is designed to “crown” the major, i.e., to help students reach closure on their disciplinary studies. As such, capstone courses should require students to synthesize and integrate previously learned information.

Traditionally, courses such as independent senior theses, specific “senior-level courses” (e.g., History & Systems in Psychology), a practicum, or a “senior seminar” have been used as capstones. However, some educators are dissatisfied with such approaches because they often focus on specialized, narrow topics or entail learning of new information or skills (e.g., History & Systems of Psychology or Practicum).

According to some, a “true” capstone course should attempt to **integrate** the students’ prior learning and encourage them to **apply** their knowledge in novel ways. Such an approach is based on the assumption that students taking the capstone have a common knowledge base from which to work.

Meeting the Need

The Psychology Department recently revised its curriculum to provide students with more coherence and structure in their major requirements and added an integrative capstone course to its program of study. The curricular revision was necessary to insure a

Last summer we received a faculty development grant from CETL to design the psychology capstone course. In a review of the higher education and psychology literature, we were surprised to find that while many advocate the philosophy of using an integrative capstone course for assessment,

Why Do I Teach?

We asked the 1993-1994 Teacher Award finalists to answer that question. This is what they said:

Christine Ziegler, Associate Professor of Psychology. Seven years at KSC.

“Because I love it! Teaching allows me to share what I know and learn at the same time. It’s stimulating, challenging and, yes, at times, tedious, and I love it!”

Tom Scott, Professor of History. Twenty-six years at KSC.

“For me, teaching is a calling. It is not only what I want to do; it is what I have to do. It is the only thing I enjoy doing on a full-time basis.”

more uniform experience for all students entering the capstone course.

In addition to the pedagogical intent of a capstone, such a course can serve as a vehicle for educational outcomes assessment. By examining how seniors integrate prior learning and apply their knowledge to novel challenges in relation to the learning objectives of the major, the department can use “performance assessment” to determine the effectiveness of the major in meeting its educational goals.

virtually no model on **how** to use the capstone for assessment purposes appears to exist. While this made our task more challenging than we had anticipated, it also provided us with the rare opportunity to engage in truly innovative instructional design.

Creating a New Capstone Model

Given our curriculum and the learning objectives of our major, we searched the literature on the

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teaching of psychology to discover activities, exercises and assignments that would allow students to integrate knowledge and demonstrate competencies. These were compiled into an Instructor's Resource Manual. Each activity was labeled in terms of the curricular areas to which it was applicable, as well as the specific learning objective(s) in our major it assesses (e.g., critical thinking, oral communications, scientific method).


The resource manual will allow different instructors to tailor their course to fit their individual styles, yet insure that all seniors "cover the bases."

While we feel comfortable with

this approach to capstone instructional design, we must admit that our plan for the course as a method of assessing program effectiveness could benefit from "creative" collegial input. Activities and assignments from the instructor's manual will provide measures of student performance on particular learning outcomes, thereby documenting their achievements in the spirit of "performance or authentic assessment."

As a final assessment tool in the capstone, students will critically review the literature on a specific question in psychology and prepare a proposal for a research study or instructional

module. This final project will be submitted both in writing and in a formal oral presentation. These products of student learning will serve as "capstone" measures of student performance to assess program effectiveness.

The department will first offer the capstone course in the 1994-95 academic year. We are aware that the effectiveness of our course as an integrative experience and as an assessment tool can only be determined over time and with intense self-study. We are excited about offering the course and are committed to exploring its usefulness to our program. 

HOW TO BUILD A CAPSTONE COURSE

1. **Begin with a dream** - In the ideal world, how would you like to cap the major? What knowledge, skills and competencies do you teach in your program?

2. **Survey the landscape** - Are there models available in your discipline for capstone courses? Check teaching journals and conferences. A prefab structure saves time and effort; clear-cutting the land may require too much.

3. **Lay a strong foundation** - Make sure the department's faculty support the idea. All faculty/courses required for the major contribute to the capstone either directly or indirectly.

4. **Hire an architect** - Have an individual or team from the department develop a "vision" and sketch an idealized proposal. Only later let the engineers or draftsmen scale back the plan.

5. **Develop a blueprint** - The capstone sits atop the structure of the major. It may be necessary to reconceptualize major requirements and/or develop new courses for the capstone to crown.

6. **Hire a project manager** - Someone must be responsible for moving this project from "vision" to "reality," preferably someone who finds the painstaking process of curriculum development interesting (and, personally, must have a low need for immediate gratification!).

7. **Budget for cost overruns** - If you think it will take you a quarter to develop your capstone, make sure to budget for **three!** Departments that begin the process undercapitalized (i.e., not enough time) invariably will make compromises that may affect structural integrity.

8. **Establish the framework** - A scaffold based upon the learning outcomes of your major should be erected to provide support for the curriculum and to facilitate construction from the ground up (i.e., Intro course through 400 level).

9. **Put the capstone in place** - When the structure nears completion, it's time to crown the major. The capstone should be both aesthetically pleasing (i.e., provide coherence and closure to the major) as well as functional (i.e., integrate previous learning and demonstrate achievement of educational outcomes).

10. **Enjoy the view** - Do students finally see the forest from the trees? If you gave them the intellectual tools to build their own home, reward yourself for a job well done!