



# TANDEM COURSES:



## A MEANS TO CORE CONNECTEDNESS

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One of the primary objectives of the new core curriculum at Kennesaw State College is to provide the student with an understanding of the connections among academic disciplines. Although this objective is sound in principle, ways to accomplish this are sometimes abstract and vague. We would like to suggest re-visiting the concept of the tandem course as one practical and realistic method of making discipline associations apparent to the student.

The English and psychology departments offered a tandem course pairing during Fall Quarter of 1991: English 101 (Composition I) and Psychology 105 (Psychology and Contemporary Issues), one of the new core courses designed to satisfy the three-hour social science elective. As instructors of these courses, we sought materials and exercises that would connect the two subject areas and meet some of the skill-building objectives of the core: critical thinking ability, analytical/problem solving skills, writing, and speaking skills. The English course used a rhetoric and handbook but the psychology texts, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Psychological Issues* and *Psychology Updates: Articles on Psychology from the New York Times*, provided both courses with subjects for classroom discussion, formal debate, and writing topics. Topics included animal rights issues, alcoholism, sexual violence, racial and gender differences, pornography and more.

Critical thinking seemed to us a fundamental starting point, so the quarter began with an introduction to the concept of scientific thinking and its connection to critical thinking. Stu-

dents were asked in psychology to read headlines and stories from tabloids, emphasizing criteria to evaluate the credibility of each story. Discussion centered on critical analysis of material and the use of evidence to support the claims being made. Taking that knowledge with them, the students learned in English that analytical, scientific thinking was valuable in that discipline, too, when they had to read material and weigh its reliability in terms of the author's valid assumptions, logical fallacies, effective reasoning, adequate evidence, and so on. We encouraged students to examine their own biases and methods of arriving at conclusions so they would be aware of thought processes that hamper an effective evaluation of someone else's argument and the formulation of their own legitimate arguments. To further that end of strengthening the students' ability to offer an effectively reasoned and persuasively stated argument, student panels researched and debated issues in psychology and then wrote on these topics in English. In both the debates and the essays we stressed the significance of developing well-stated thesis arguments supported by clearly relevant evidence. Ineffective techniques that weakened their argument were identified by both instructors and students, and suggestions were made on ways to replace such techniques with more effective ones. Evaluation of the formal debates also addressed effective oral presentation skills, emphasizing clarity and conciseness in speaking. We encouraged students to employ the scientific method and critical thinking in all subject areas they studied.

We also urged students to value effective writing skills as a means of achieving success in any course area. To further accent the tandem nature of the courses and to stress the importance of writing as a tool for self-discovery, psychology classes sometimes began with a period of freewriting, ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning of a

period during which students explored their thoughts about a question on that day's reading assignment. This technique enabled them to articulate more clearly their ideas which were sometimes vague and intuitive; it also generated material for more productive class discussions which followed. Also, exams in psychology were always essays and were evaluated on factual content as well as on style, grammar, correct documentation, in short, for the same things that English essays were evaluated on. A plan to require students to keep journals which would be graded jointly fell through, but we do believe it is a good idea.

What did the students think of the linked classes? They appreciated the fact that the reading and research they did could be applied to two separate classes for credit. In self-report measures, some expressed first-time awareness that material and techniques learned in English are also part of the study of psychology and vice versa. One student even reported being able to use some of what she learned in English and psychology in other courses.

Did the tandem course provide connections between the two core courses that would not have been made in separate course offerings? Although we have no quantitative data to answer that question at this point, informal student feedback during the quarter clearly showed that participating in the tandem course opened their eyes to overlapping areas in the two disciplines.

We recommend that departments teaching core courses seriously consider tandem course offerings with other disciplines in the core (the possible combinations are many). It is a relatively easy and overt way to emphasize the integration of the new core curriculum. We recommend it highly. We had fun and so did the students. The only negative comment we received was from the one student who wrote that she got "tired of seeing the exact same people in two classes"! ●