Chapter 1
Interdisciplinary Learning from a Student's Perspective

Marlene Hidalgo
New York City College of Technology, City University of New York, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides a retrospective look at my experiences during an interdisciplinary course at an urban university. Course format and objectives allowed for a varied experience by combining multiple learning methodologies and opportunities. A focus is given to two class assignments that illustrate the process of integrating insights from disparate disciplines through critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork. Despite the variability and unpredictability of individual experience, the review provides evidence for the unique challenges and distinct advantages of interdisciplinary learning.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

New York City College of Technology was established in 1881 as a four-year public college of technology. Located in Downtown Brooklyn, New York City, it has an average enrollment of over 15,000 students in 62 technical and professional programs and approximately 16,000 students in continuing education classes (see http://www.citytech.cuny.edu/files/aboutus/facts.pdf).

SETTING THE STAGE

Weird Science: Interpreting and Redefining Humanity was a course offered by the English department of New York City College of Technology for the first time in the spring of 2011. This interdisciplinary course followed a thematic teaching format to explore definitions of humanity and post-humanity from the perspectives of the natural and social sciences, technology and engineering. Students reviewed the literature and participated in discussions led by invited speakers with expertise in a field perspective (see Course Outline).

The course was held at a computer laboratory, although the computers did not come into significant use until the second half of the semester. Speakers incorporated digital media in their presentations, including slide shows and video. Because the course required students to research and communicate information using media technology, computer proficiency was required. All assignments were submitted electronically, and one assignment used the virtual world *Second Life* as a platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

In over 18 years of schooling experience, "Weird Science: Interpreting and Redefining Humanity" was the only course I took that followed an interdisciplinary teaching format. My primary motivation for enrollment as a student was for elective credit to complete a certificate in interactive media technologies. I previously earned a master's degree in psychology and sought to establish a career in interaction design. Even though the course description alluded to its unique presentation, I was primarily drawn to its provocative theme.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The demands of interdisciplinary learning for "Weird Science: Interpreting and Redefining Humanity" focused on advanced research and argumentation. It extended the instructional goals of a typical college writing course to tackle a very dense question: what does it mean to be human? I will use my experience in completing the final term paper to illustrate a few of the distinguishing features of research of a complex topic. The integration of technology in the curriculum provided additional learning opportunities that I will explore in an analysis of the group project and presentation.

Course Outline

Course lecture topics fell under one of two main themes, being human and being virtually human, each theme covering the first and second half the semester,

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