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Paper Programs and Educational Practice: The CHID Experience

by John Toews, Director,
Comparative History of Ideas Program,
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I recently suffered through an experience that has become an all-too-familiar part of academic life at American universities in the late twentieth century. A large committee with broad representation from potentially affected constituencies devoted endless hours to the detailed construction of a curricular reform.

Possible opponents were consulted and invited to submit revisions and counter-proposals. Every attempt was made to predict and pre-empt possible objections, to clarify the institutional implications in ambiguous areas, and to predict and find adequate funding for all dimensions of the proposal.

It was assumed that we needed to provide a detailed knowledge of future practices and their consequences in order to create a consensus and "get everyone on board." But in most cases of curricular innovation, by the time everyone is on board the ship has sunk or at least lost its rudder. Ambitious paper programs quickly become dead letters piled up in some divisional dean's office.

Using the institutional emergence and development of the Comparative History of Ideas Program (CHID) as an example, I would like to make a plea for the priority of experimental practice over theoretical proposal construction in the production of curricular change. Interdisciplinary programs should have the freedom to evolve not as blueprints put into



John Toews (right) with students. Photo by David Jobanson.

practice but as educational projects that develop their own structures and self-understandings as they grow over time. Scarce resources should not be committed to abstract proposals but to initiatives that have already mobilized intellectual commitment and experimented on a small scale with their scholarly and pedagogical realization.

Interdisciplinarity does have value in its own right. Academic disciplines, especially when they overlap with departmental units, operate in the university like autonomous intellectual cultures, each constituting the world of knowledge in its own fashion. But the virtues of multi-perspectival academic practices remain empty and boring virtues if they lack a substantial focus, if they do not mobilize passions and commitments around problems that matter. A necessary prerequisite for an interdisciplinary program that hopes to attract faculty

loyalty and student enthusiasm is a pressing set of questions that are at least somewhat coherently grouped around a problem that has no obvious or easy solution.

Interdisciplinary undergraduate programs like CHID operate best when organized around problem-based curricula and research agendas. Intellectual focus in subject matter and disciplined rigor in methods of inquiry are not confined to disciplines.

Growing a Program

The CHID program, created in the 1970s, began its period of growth during the mid-1980s when it redefined itself as an open-ended exploration of the ways in which diverse cultural identities can be understood both individually and as part of a larger whole. This theme has had great personal relevance for students living the dilemmas of identity politics in American culture over the past

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decade. It also is of significant professional (and personal) interest for a wide range of faculty in the humanities and social sciences.

The problem was focused enough to allow for the development of a core course on the interpretation of "difference" or "otherness" in the study of texts and cultures and a fairly systematic curriculum of required courses in various historical and cultural areas. Yet the problem also was open-ended enough to generate a constant proliferation of spin-off study groups, special projects, and new courses.

Moreover, the issues being explored—such as communication across the cultural divides produced by gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, professional status, or institutional authority—were present in classroom dynamics as well as in the tensions in the world "outside" which the members of the classroom were trying to understand.

The issues at the core of CHID, however, did not spontaneously produce their own institutional practices. These practices gradually evolved through experiments shaped by a combination of faculty suggestion and student initiative. Students have assumed significant responsibility for their own education and for shaping and reshaping the curriculum.

The Development of Student Culture

It was largely due to the remarkable pedagogical vision of James Clowes, CHID's associate director, that the coordination between CHID's intellectual mission and its day-to-day reality was accomplished. Two factors were particularly important in accomplishing this. First and probably most critical (at least in retrospect) was the creation of an undergraduate student culture that mobilized a constant stream

of student interactions and educational projects and nourished a sense of collective responsibility and ownership of the program.

The process of building this culture began with informal social gatherings (that still continue) and moved on to the creation of a vast array of focus groups, student-run seminars, email discussion lists, career seminars, and annual projects like the publication of a student journal. Students also do much of the office work and are active as peer advisers.

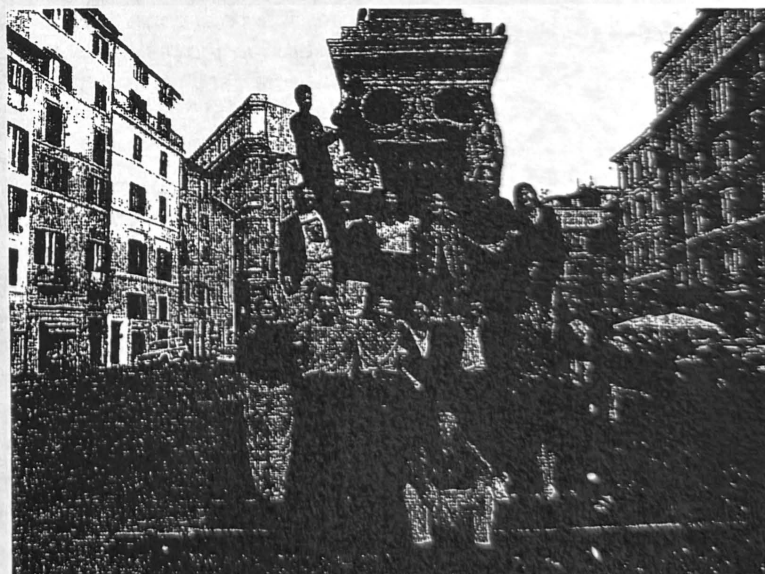
A second significant factor was the integration of this student culture into a larger framework of common responsibility and loyalty that included faculty, staff, and graduate teaching assistants in a learning community in which everyone's voice was heard and respected.

Interdisciplinary programs tend to encourage individualized academic programs that require

program, they participate in an advising focus group led by advisers in the program.

We could now draw up an elaborate institutional chart of the ways in which responsibility and autonomy on the part of both students and faculty are put into motion within the program. Virtually none of this would have been obvious to us at the beginning. The institutional structure of the program has developed to meet the needs felt by members of the program as they pursued their intellectual and pedagogical goals.

A program whose intellectual content entails a process of critical self-reflection, which runs the students' most basic assumptions about cultural identity through the wringer of historical contingency, needs the stability and security of a strong student culture. The delegation of responsibility to the students for creation of this culture in turn



In 1995, participants in CHID's first foreign study program posed in the Campo Di Fiore in Rome. Photo by Samantha Appleton.

persistent attention and self-reflection. A striking characteristic of CHID is an elaborate, intensive advising system. Students enter CHID by writing out a plan for their own educational development and discussing it with an adviser. In their first year in the

requires an assumption of responsibility for advising by faculty.

The equation seems almost too simple. Give students a stake in the program and their loyalty, energy, and academic accomplish

ment will be remarkable. CHID has sometimes been accused of skimming off the best students from other programs and departments. In fact many of our students who have attained national academic recognition only emerged as such "best students" when they came to recognize their own capacity for academic excellence within this program.

Experiencing Cultural Displacement Through Foreign Study

As CHID faculty, staff, students, and teaching assistants worked through the implications of the program's intellectual project, we became more and more convinced of the value of practical experiences of cultural displacement and community integration. Projects that helped students take on responsibilities in local schools and community service organizations were one avenue to accomplish this; another was the integration of foreign study projects into our regular curriculum.

We have developed bi-annual international programs in Rome, Prague, and Berlin, taking 15-20 students to these sites for an advanced course or series of courses that link the sites' possibilities and the program's general perspective. We are in the advanced stages of planning a program in South Africa and Zimbabwe and are projecting more non-European programs as well as some native "foreign" experiences in American immigrant and minority communities.

Our experience has been that foreign study, if organized as part of our regular curriculum and within the framework of our developed pedagogical practices, can become a life-defining moment for individuals. It also can enrich the sense of collective identity among students and add unexpected complications and

perspectives to their classroom knowledge.

Again, however, the success of these programs was based on slow development and practical experiment. Foreign study simply emerged as what seemed to be the next logical step in the elaboration of the CHID curriculum. We produced no sweeping theories or claims about the need to internationalize our students for the global economy of the twenty-first century but simply tried out a few limited versions of the experience of cultural displacement and went on from there. Our first experiments provided their own guidelines for development and expansion and also produced the personal and institutional connections that made development and expansion feasible.

The Importance of a Light Administrative Touch

I believe that a pervasive, elaborate, activist student culture that respects student initiative is at the very core of the CHID program. The intellectual attractiveness and contemporary relevance of our project—studying cultural diversity from an interdisciplinary perspective—would go nowhere unless it was sustained by a committed, lively community of students and teachers constantly able to develop new questions and new projects from within the programmatic core.

It is the buzz of self-generated and self-generating student activity; the messy, often virtually chaotic energy of projects succeeding and failing; and the focused educational practices of the participants, that define the CHID program—not the paper curriculum in its brochure.

The institutional problem raised by CHID is not so much how programs of this kind can be created from above as administrative policy—they must be allowed

to create themselves from within the actual learning communities at the University—but how they can be sustained without stifling their creativity.

CHID has flourished under a very light administrative touch. We have not asked for much financial support and have been fortunate to receive just enough at crucial moments to keep the activities going. Although we have a constituency of majors (175) that would place us among major departments in Arts and Sciences, we have no faculty lines. Becoming a department with permanent faculty would in many ways undermine the program's emphasis on cross- and interdisciplinary investigation and comparative cultural and historical area studies.

What an interdisciplinary program like CHID needs from the University is institutional flexibility and experimental freedom. Faculty within departments should be free to teach in programs like CHID as part of their regular teaching obligations. Participation in such programs should be considered in a special category in decisions about promotion and merit salary increases, so that junior faculty need not fear career damage if they devote a significant part of their teaching to experimental educational initiatives outside their departments.

Seed money for special projects and new initiatives should be made available as such projects and initiatives develop. Those that produce their own momentum should then receive continuing support.

The big ship is not going to come in, and if it ever does we will all be drawing retirement pay and be too old to enjoy the ballrooms and swimming pools. Anyway, it is liable to be another Titanic. A dynamic program cannot provide five-year plans for its future

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What an interdisciplinary program like CHID needs from the University is institutional flexibility and experimental freedom.

The CHID Experience

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development and divert a major part of its energies to drawing up detailed but speculative blueprints for administrators and potential funding sources. There should be funds available to sustain the kind of labor-intensive advising and "facilitating" processes that nourish the student culture that is the core of any successful undergraduate program.

Just as faculty must develop a trust for their students, administrators have to trust the faculty to produce viable programs in alliance with their student constituencies. If we as faculty take back the ownership of the means of education, we might be able to join students in their efforts at self-determination as well. The point is not to create an educational utopia but to make life interesting again, to experience the excitement and

energy, the risk and the adventure, the painful setbacks and failures, of exploring new intellectual and pedagogical territory as part of a learning community. ■

NEWS AND NOTES

Program on the Environment Established

A new interdisciplinary program—Program on the Environment—has been established at the UW, with Zoology Professor John Palka and Atmospheric Sciences Professor John (Mike) Wallace appointed as co-directors. Fred Campbell, Dean of Undergraduate Education and Vice Provost, and Marsha Landolt, Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost, are the two supervising deans.

The program was created in response to a report prepared by the Task Force on Environmental Education. "The Task Force

envisioned an entity on campus with a novel structure to deal with environmental studies—a unit whose main job would be facilitating, networking, and stimulating rather than carrying out its own agenda," says Palka.

Following those recommendations, the program's first project has been the compilation of an index of existing UW courses related to the environment. The index is included on the program's web site.

The program has established three working groups to help with its numerous tasks. One group is working on the course index; another is planning a foundation course for a variety of prospective degree tracks in environmental studies; and a third is focusing on the development of environmentally related graduate programs.

For more information about Program on the Environment, visit the program's web site at <http://tao.atmos.washington.edu/poe/>. ■

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