

# The Disorienting

## The Senior Capstone as a Transformative Experience

UNDERLYING MUCH of what we do in higher education is the often unstated assumption that a college education is a transformative experience. One hundred and fifty years ago, John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* pointed out that education stretches beyond knowledge and skills: “education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character; it is something individual and permanent.” Newman places transformative education in contrast with instruction, which has “little or no effect on the mind itself,” and teaching

methodologies, “which are contained

in rules committed to memory, to tradition, or to use” (1982, 86). Reflecting Newman’s distinction between education and instruction, Robert Kegan (2000) distinguishes between transformational learning and informational learning, and then asks “what ‘form’ transforms?” He argues that transformational learning involves an epistemological change, a new way of knowing, or what Jack Mezirow (1991) calls a new frame of reference. Transformational learning, to have an “effect on the mind itself,” to change ways of knowing, can be discomforting. Kegan points to the importance of contradiction, paradox, and oppositeness in transformational learning. Mezirow argues that a disorienting dilemma is the first step in transformational learning.

Transformation in a university occurs at all levels—student, faculty, programmatic, institutional, and social. Indeed, Paulo Freire argues that the proper purpose of education is cultural transformation for both the individual and society:

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Women and men that we are, we are the only beings who have socio-historically developed the capacity for ‘seizing’ substantively the object of our knowing. For that reason we are the only beings for whom learning is a creative adventure. Something much richer than the simple repetition of a lesson or of something already given. For us, to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing—none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit. (1998, 67)

There is considerable evidence that a senior culminating experience can play a transformative role in student learning. The senior culminating experience is identified by the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) as one of four high-impact activities with demonstrable results. Arthur Levine (1998) identifies four general purposes of the senior capstone: integration (pulling together the four years of college), breadth (taking students beyond the increasing specialization of the major by offering a final general education experience), application (using student expert knowledge to examine a discrete issue and produce a substantial product), and transition (preparing students to move from college to the world beyond). Of these purposes, integration, breadth, and application can facilitate a new way of knowing in Kegan’s sense or what Mezirow called a changed frame of reference. Preparing students to move from college to the world beyond is both a significant part of baccalaureate education and an underlying rationale for creating transformative experiences in senior capstones.

To ground these ideas in real-world experience, we will look at a senior capstone that serves as a transformative experience, the Senior Assignment (SRA) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). Recognized as one of the university’s hallmark features,

**The Senior Assignment represents different stages in the transformation of academic programs driven by a culminating senior capstone**

# Dilemma



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the SRA can bring about transformative learning for students, faculty, and even programs.

In an SRA project, students work closely with faculty members to demonstrate mastery across the baccalaureate learning objectives. Because the SRA often is the student's first opportunity to integrate what was learned across the full baccalaureate experience, students must develop a different perspective, a new way of knowing and frame of reference to complete the SRA project. Many faculty members report that working with students on SRA projects is among the most valuable and meaningful experiences in their teaching careers. Additionally, the design and delivery of the SRA leads individual faculty members to reexamine basic assumptions about teaching and student learning. Because new pedagogies and approaches can be unsettling, the SRA often shakes faculty members out of comfortable places. The SRA can be discomfiting and transformative for programs as well. In some cases, the SRA has elicited change in the curricula and pedagogies of the programs themselves. At all levels, creative tension or unsettledness drives transformation within the limitations and challenges faced in the real world.

#### **An example from art and design**

Among the greatest challenges in any university art department is ensuring that general education material—the “non-art” stuff—is integrated into students' overall learning and manifested in their work. Another challenge is balancing group, in-class learning with developing individual artistic expression. These challenges require certain balances and concessions that seem difficult and even counterintuitive at times, creating the sort of disorienting dilemmas that mark Mezirow's first step in transformational learning.

In the early 1990s, the SRA for studio art majors asked seniors to collect a sample of their artworks representing the skills they developed in the program and to complement the sample with a written artist's statement. Faculty would use these mini-portfolios to assess student learning in the program. It all seemed very cut and dry.

In practice, however, the early results were not as expected. Students did what faculty members asked—exhibiting portfolios throughout the art building and removing

them when the assessment had concluded—but they had not used the portfolios to reflect on their own learning. Although the portfolios involved application, there was no integration, breadth, or transition. With dozens of portfolios to review on a Friday at the end of the semester, and with a marathon consultation meeting scheduled afterward to generate a report, the faculty found that fatigue sabotaged efforts to develop a new way of knowing or frame of reference about student learning. The faculty had assumed that if the students created portfolios and faculty assessed them, then integration, breadth, application, and transition would take care of themselves. But they did not. The hard truth was that the first SRA was transformational for neither students nor faculty. It was time to regroup and try again.

One of the SRA's core problems was its lack of formal structure and intentionality. Students were unaware of the SRA's central place in department or university philosophy and their own learning; for them, it was just another assignment tacked onto their senior year. Once faculty realized this, they could change it. The SRA was formalized by using a preexisting elective course in the program (Art 405: Seminar), which transformed it into the studio art SRA capstone course. As a requirement for all studio art majors, Art 405 became the curricular site where students brought together their artistic skills and their engagement with history, writing, and critical thinking even as they learned about standards in the profession, produced individual artist portfolios, and prepared for their formal review by the faculty. Labeling Art 405 the “capstone” course communicated to students its crucial place in the art program, putting the experience into a larger context and making integration, breadth, application, and transition intentional.

The portfolio or capstone course is not the only SRA option for art majors in the department. Another option is participation in Mexica, a study abroad program that has garnered the department well-deserved attention and is considered one of SIUE's standout SRAs. As successful as Mexica has been, it also reveals some tough truths about the limits within which faculty operate at a state university such as SIUE.

The Mexica program, which began in 1996, is offered every other summer. It allows fifteen



students to spend several weeks learning weaving and ceramics skills from indigenous artists in Tlaxiaco, a small town in Oaxaca State. Designed and conducted by textile arts professor Laura Strand and ceramics professor Paul Dresang, Mexica offers SIUE art students a rare opportunity to experience life in another culture as they develop their individual artistic skills. Mexica provides experiences filled with contradictions, paradoxes, and oppositeness. A key disorienting dilemma emerges not through art but through language. Students study eight hours per day learning from artists without sharing a common language. The students speak English, but the artists speak Mixtec and Spanish. Professor Strand has found that the first week the students get angry, the second week they start to relax, and by the third week Mexica becomes a transformative experience. Many Mexica participants have reported that Mexica changed their lives and their art forever.

Upon their return to campus, participants in Mexica create a major exhibition of artworks inspired by their experience in Mexico.

Students publish an original exhibition catalog, advertise the exhibition, and organize a gala reception that is one of the highlights of the department's special events calendar. Students and faculty integrate artistic, cultural, critical thinking, and communication skills to communicate through art and text their experience learning and surviving in another culture. The application skills in creating the artwork, exhibition, and catalog help prepare students for the transition into the "real world."

The success of Mexica has put continuing pressure on the other options for the SRA to provide quality transformative capstones for students. Ideally, every art student at SIUE would complete an SRA by participating in a program like Mexica. But the reality—the large number of art majors, the relatively small number of available faculty, curricular and budget limitations—makes this impractical. Nevertheless, offering Mexica for some art majors, maintaining a variety of SRA opportunities for all, and being part of a university with an extraordinary commitment to

student learning are clearly strengths. And, as the saying goes, the department chooses to be defined by its strengths, not its limitations.

#### **An example from political science**

The Department of Political Science is in the process of transforming its SRA. Currently, each student develops a learning portfolio that includes four or five written assignments; short essays addressing key methodological or other substantive changes that the student has made to these assignments; an integrative, reflective essay addressing a contemporary political, social, economic, or theoretical issue; and an exit interview and questionnaire. Reviewing each graduate's portfolio then informs programmatic assessment.

While the current SRA measures student learning and departmental performance, the SRA is too often perceived by students and faculty alike as being an important but separable requirement, often disconnected from learning throughout the student's undergraduate experience—very much like the first studio art SRA. It may include an inte-

grative essay, but it does not integrate across the political science curriculum or across the full range of the student's baccalaureate experience. Neither does it include the other three purposes of a capstone: breadth, application, and transition. Additionally, there is no public dimension to the SRA, such as the oral communication of important political ideas. Finally, there is no direct method for recognizing student learning experiences that occur outside (or in connection with) the classroom. Service learning, internships, and study abroad programs are often crucibles for transformative learning for students but are missing from the SRA.

For faculty, reviewing and reflecting on the department's SRA demands that they explore exactly what it is that they want political science students to learn. There are two broad

questions: (1) What would be the desired outcomes of a quality political science curriculum aside from basic informational goals? (2) How can the program both reinforce positive outcomes currently generated and cultivate other desired outcomes?

Because the faculty agree that the current SRA is insufficient to address multiple dimensions of the student experience, they are all comfortable addressing these questions. What is uncomfortable, however, is the creative tension that invariably results from the discussions. As Freire points out, because transformational learning requires construction, reconstruction, and observation with a view to change, it cannot be done without being open to risk. As a collegial department, faculty members are sensitive to the preferences of others. Navigating transformative questions involves "letting go" while recognizing that transformation puts everyone at risk.

The political science faculty came to a new understanding of the desired outcomes for majors, such as multiple methodological approaches, core topics, and application of disciplinary approaches to real-world situations. They then crafted a set of departmental values, which established a new frame of reference for student learning:

- Students should be participants in their own development, as learners, as citizens, and as caretakers active in making meaning and not simply "let it happen"; with support, students should be expected and trusted to be able to confront the messiness of encountering critical academic, moral, political, emotional, and developmental challenges.
  - Experiencing the political science major should be transformative and integrative for the student.
  - There must be some public dimension to student learning (community-based research, service learning, conference presentations, etc.).
  - Not all teachers need to be faculty members. As discussions turned from consideration of desired outcomes and values to the means for achieving those outcomes, the risks of transformation became apparent. Faculty members' individual talents, research interests, and approaches to teaching made it difficult to develop a coherent plan for changing the SRA.
- Faculty members come to discussions of baccalaureate learning well trained by graduate



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programs and years of research and teaching in their particular areas within the discipline. The coin of the realm is not interdisciplinarity—or even *intra*-disciplinarity—but depth within a limited subfield. Disciplinary conceptual boundaries are well-marked frames of reference. But the SRA demands conversations concerning the full range of students' baccalaureate learning. In political science, those conversations have begun to chip away at the conceptual boundaries, making them more porous and helping faculty become more open to risk.

In response, the faculty has begun to develop the Keystone Learning Agreement (KLA). The KLA is not an *ex post* assignment, a disconnected end result of a series of isolated academic and cocurricular experiences. Rather, it reflects integrative and collaborative learning that depends on and buttresses the student experience.

From a pool of local, national, and international scholars and practitioners, the participating student will choose a “KLA fellow” with whom to work. The student will then contract with a departmental adviser and the KLA fellow to design a general course of study within (and perhaps outside) the department that reflects the multiple perspectives that different fields within the discipline can bring to bear on the theme the student has chosen. The KLA will guide the student throughout his or her career, which will culminate in the SRA as a fully integrative capstone experience.

Although the KLA is not yet in place, the faculty's experience with the SRA has brought about a reconsideration of student learning throughout the major program and made implementation of the KLA reasonable and possible. In turn, consideration of the KLA has brought about a rethinking of the major curriculum in political science. Whether implemented or not, consideration of the KLA has brought about epistemological change.

### Concluding thoughts

In *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007), the Association of American Colleges and Universities lists seven Principles of Excellence: aim high and make excellence inclusive;

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give students a compass; teach the arts of inquiry and innovation; engage the big questions; connect knowledge with choices and action; foster civic, intercultural, and ethical learning; and assess students' ability to apply learning to complex problems. These principles, in turn, underpin Levine's purposes of the capstone experience—integration, breadth, application, and tran-

sition. The preceding examples of the SIUE Senior Assignment represent different stages in the transformation of academic programs driven by a culminating senior capstone. Significant changes have already been made in the art and design department, whereas the political science department is currently working on change. At least in part because the Principles of Excellence apply to all levels, the SRA has been able to bring about transformation for students, faculty, and programs. □

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