

Motivating Mental Clicks: A Case Study in the Use of Interdisciplinary Resources for the Successful Implementation of Distance Education Learning in the Advancement of Analogical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

Arguably, the discipline of Ethnic Studies is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary in theory and practice. Focusing as it does on sets of specialized knowledge (i.e., linguistic, cultural, historical, geographical, etc.) that seek to define particular groups and/or coteries of individuals as peoples with some semblance of shared experience, the Ethnic Studies field utilizes such disciplines as history, literature, historic preservation, folklore, music, visual art, etc., not only in consideration of multiple perspectives, but also in recognition that diverse theoretical platforms can contribute to a richer understanding and appreciation of specific collective experiences. Recognizing this integrative approach, this paper presents as a case study a 2010 undergraduate distance education course that focused specifically on the peoples of Ireland. Anchored in Anthropology and taught during the summer, the course presented numerous modules – revolutionary history and social change; institutionalization and feminist discourse; musical traditions and diasporic communities; folklore usages and massive psychic trauma – that drew from a multitude of disciplines. Numerous distance education tools were incorporated into the course platform for enabling students to engage in the auditory, visual, and interactive features more commonly associated with face-to-face (FTF) classroom learning. The outcomes,

gauged by students' responses that addressed positively the worthiness of being exposed to the intra-relationship approach, suggest that the development of analogical thinking, that is to say, cross-domain mapping and problem-solving (Dirks 1998) [1], can be advanced through the use of digital learning systems, especially if the content delivered is, in and of itself, interdisciplinary in scope.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies, Irish Studies, distance learning, interdisciplinary course offerings, analogical thinking; digital systems

1. INTRODUCTION

As many know, the academy's teaching of "Ethnic Studies" arose in the fervor and foment of the 1960s. Although definitions varied, most addressed the need to deal with the histories and experiences of non-white groups in the United States [2]. During that time, many scholars challenged what became known as the "master narrative" [3] for its alleged inconsistencies and partial truths. Lobbying for courses that would include individuals, peoples, and groups believed to have been "written out" of history, literature, and a host of other disciplines, these advocates argued that multiculturalism and diversity should become, at the very least better understood; at the same time, they emphasized the importance of viewing education as "the practice of freedom" [4].

One need only recall the Third World Project, proposed at San Francisco State College in 1968, to grasp the tenor of this movement. The program organizers sought “to aid in further developing politically, economically and culturally the revolutionary third-world consciousness of oppressed people both on and off campus” [5].

Now, as an outgrowth of these efforts, terms like “postcolonial studies” have entered into common parlance. However, in some quarters, the latter have come under scrutiny of late, and many are being supplanted by a return to pre-Ethnic Studies courses that boast of older labels like “world literature” [6].

This trajectory chronicles in brief how Ethnic Studies emerged and evolved over the years. It behooves this discussion to mention the fact that the field of Irish Studies in the United States has interesting parallels. Although in the 1930s, one Professor Eoin MacNeill proffered “the possibility of developing a systematic and informed study of Irish history and language in America,” it was not until 1962 that the Irish Historical Society, later called the American Committee for Irish Studies, was formed [7]. In 1978, twenty-five years after the organization was founded, the membership felt the need to rebrand itself in response to growth and interest. Now known as The American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS), it is emblematic of the particular within the wider Ethnic Studies field itself. Its members and affiliates work to unravel the myriad array of experiences of the Irish at home and abroad, and they continue to interrogate representations made of the Irish by colonial forces and others.

Within Anthropology, the need for a parallel corrective emerged. Despite the fact that, traditionally, the field is oriented to the study of people who live in small-scale societies who often exist on the periphery, concerns arose in terms of how “the other” was represented textually and visually. They examined how privileged members of the profession profited personally, professionally and financially from data they had collected from informants who had been compensated badly—if at all—or acknowledged poorly for the roles they had

played as consultants. In *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Clifford Geertz [8] argued that “being there” narratives create a verisimilitude that frequently goes unchecked and unexamined; likewise, James Clifford, George E. Marcus, and Michael M. J. Fischer [9; 10] concerned themselves with the politics of representation, drawing attention to the asymmetrical relationships that often exist between anthropological subjects and the fieldworkers who collect from them.

In terms of Irish materials, arguably the *sine qua non* of this non-egalitarian perspective is Robert Flaherty’s 1934 film, “Man of Aran,” a documentary that purports to tell the truth about life on an Irish island. In truth, the harpooning tradition that Flaherty depicted had become obsolete by the time of the filming; a Scot was “imported” to the island to instruct the cast on how to carry out its work. The perils encountered in the Irish waters would not have been undertaken had it not been for excessive amounts of money paid in order to capture Flaherty’s romantic ideal of the nobility of the Irish peasant. In truth, the “hero husband,” his “ideal” wife, and his boy child were fictions. Flaherty, however, never acknowledged his use of them as poetic conceits, and because of this, he was accused of allowing his misrepresentations to obfuscate the fact that the more pressing and insidious tenant/landlord issues were inimical to the survival of Aran islanders. Arthur Calder-Marshall explains:

Flaherty did not give a press conference and say, ‘These are the people whom I used for a poetic presentation of the age-long struggle of Man against the Sea. The reality which I attempted was poetic and *Man of Aran* was not intended to be an actual representation of everyday life on the Aran Islands.’ On the contrary, *Man of Aran* was presented as a true film of real life [11].

Clearly, then, Ethnic Studies, both at general and particular levels, arose as a result of the conscious realization of the pressing need to acknowledge those who had been ignored in texts, films, etc. This growing awareness was

felt across disciplines, as historians, social scientists, literary critics and others recognized that subject and/or colonized peoples, including those from Ireland, had suffered from dismissal, belittling, obscurantism, sins of omission, misrepresentation, etc. Such practices served to ignore and/or dismiss significant factors of inequality that existed on the ground and that continued to keep peoples around the globe in less than ideal circumstances. Those desirous of correcting such imbalances saw the virtue in drawing widely and in utilizing materials from a broad array of disciplines.

2. PEOPLES AND CULTURES OF IRELAND

Frequently, students at institutions that offer a “four fields” approach to the subject of Anthropology are required to enroll in at least one course devoted to a particular people and culture. At the College of Charleston in South Carolina, such courses have been offered for such places as Europe, Africa, Appalachia, Central and South America, Latin America, and Ireland. As for the latter, a three-week study-abroad course provides direct experience of living and working in rural and urban Irish settings. Written materials chosen for study abroad provide a context by which to understand the lived experience. Another course called “Maymester” and defined for its compacted and intense (thirteen days, three-hour-per-day) sessions, introduces Peoples and Cultures of Ireland students to a variety of interdisciplinary topics that enable them through analogical reasoning to arrive at recognitions similar to those of Ethnic Studies professors and practitioners. A third Peoples and Cultures type, a Distance Education (hereinafter, DE) course, was offered in Maymester of 2011. By its very nature, it lacked the “face to face” (FTF) formats of study abroad and classroom work. However, its intent, to honor an interdisciplinary perspective, endemic, as noted in the abstract, to the successful implementation of Ethnic Studies, was expressed from the outset and experienced over the course of the entire DE experience. The course’s description reads:

Anthropology confronts the challenges of culture and difference in the contemporary social world. The special mandate of the field is to discover new and less harmful ways of perceiving, understanding, reporting on, and therefore validating the different experiences, histories, and values of peoples and communities from all parts of the world. This course, **Peoples and Cultures of Ireland**, is a ‘sampler’ from which students can launch their own research agendas and explorations. It introduces students to some of the key historical, cultural, political, and ideological aspects of Ireland and Irish America. Students learn about prehistoric Ireland, ‘Celtic Ireland,’ and the intersection of the latter with the coming of Christianity in the fifth century C.E. They explore one of the great ‘turning points’ in Irish history known as ‘The Great Irish Famine,’ and consider cultural issues having to do with language, music, religion, cultural nationalism, pub life, etc. They look at the modern ‘Troubles,’ ongoing peace efforts, and problems and issues of emigration.

A selection of visual materials is used to acquaint students with issues relating to the representation of Irish culture. Problems and possibilities of visual culture form a theme throughout the course.

Such a course description prepared students for the fact that they would be exposed, and expected to master, a set of materials that lay at the juncture of interdisciplinary subject matter. They were also made aware of the fact that in their final work, they could move beyond anthropological literature and present materials that would be shared with the class through Internet/cyberspace networks. In their final essays, students were expected to incorporate aspects of interdisciplinary materials as well, drawn from the DE interface, the professor’s lectures, required films, and the like.

The course opened with the requirement that students read an on-line document entitled *Ireland in Brief* [12]. This is a Republic of Ireland embassy-sponsored booklet of approximately one hundred (100) pages that features summaries on the following topics:

environment, history, the Irish state, the economy, services, Northern Ireland, International relations, and arts and culture. Beginning with this document insured that students would acquire an overall sense of what was important at the time to the presenting body. Immediately, students gained access to the notion of the “positioned” status of the Irish government regarding several topics. The ensuing discussion, which unfolded in “real” as well as “virtual” time via a demarcated DE platform, required that the students speak to topics that caught them off guard, that challenged their stereotypes and biases, and that demanded that they cognitively entertain the subjects of Ireland, the Irish and Irishness from beyond demarcated disciplinary boundaries.

On the second day, students viewed the aforementioned documentary, “Man of Aran,” learning more about it through reading an article entitled “How the Myth was Made” and, perhaps more importantly, viewing an on-line interview with the filmmaker himself. The sympathetic portrayal of Flaherty in prose complimented the humanlike self-portrait, a strategy that pivoted the students in one direction before it demanded of them an even fuller and more nuanced interpretation of the man and his work. This second course selection embedded students more solidly in the interdisciplinary experience and, despite its lack of FTF work in real time, forced them to make decisions by considering multiple points of view. They came away with the experience by presenting statements like, “Nothing is quite so clear cut as it seems at first.”

A drop back into the ancient Irish past was next. On the third day of the Peoples and Cultures of Ireland Maymester course, students encountered readings that focused on famous megalithic sites like Newgrange, Dowth, Knowth, and Tara. One of the readings included information that drew from studies of linguistics and folklore. Coupled with archaeological knowledge, this concomitant material enriched students’ understandings of what these monuments mean, not only to archaeologists but to a wide variety of people, including local inhabitants and tourists. These kinds of readings also

acknowledged another aspect of Ethnic Studies research, the aim to, if not actually *resist* linear, chronological, and teleological dimensions of learning that presuppose “natural” cause and effect consequences, then at least *call them into question* [see 4]. By the end of the first week, students were apprised of the immediate present and what official hegemonic forces like state governments deemed important; course enrollees had been made aware of the ancient Irish past and some of its most well-known archaeological sites; and most important, they reckoned with the fact that what they were reading and seeing was not without contestation or controversy. What they happened to think about debates over filmic portrayals, etc., however, was less important to the pedagogical emphasis than that they were required to think about them. Course enrollees began to realize that all learning contains points of view and because of that fact, it is value-laden; students primed to proceed to question as they prepared to encounter ensuing modules on language, song, music, dance, and film, the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852), and varieties of sexuality and difference.

Audiofiles and videofiles—lectures posted to the students’ dedicated website—scaffolded students and anchored their learning experiences through the professor’s voice and visage. Powerpoint presentations, internet sites, and films that included the Irish travelers and the John Wayne cult film called “The Quiet Man” enabled students to interact visually with stereotypes even as they read materials that counteracted, nuanced, or rejected outright biased ideas. To reiterate, although students were not taught what opinions or interpretations to hold, they were instructed that such understandings exist, and taught how to detect them. In addition, they were presented with other sets of materials that opened their minds and challenged their preconceptions. These included feminist interpretations of religion; subalterns’ strategies to subvert hegemonic discourses with such genres as macaronic verse; immigrants’ attempts to preserve culture through codes and idioms; and activists’ work to unravel institutional hierarchies that kept

reputed “fallen” women in positions of servitude. Default views that the Irish were “drunken Paddys” wielding shillelaghs were overridden, not by telling course enrollees that such ideas were limited, but by exposing them to the panoply of characters and circumstances that make up the peoples and histories of Ireland. Even the professor’s own research was brought to bear on numerous subjects under investigation: students learned about fieldwork undertaken in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the kinds of on-the-ground experiences that led to their professor’s collections of photographs, material cultural displays, etc.

The final week of the course involved both a study of the Irish Rising of 1916, a time during which rebel leaders fought to win freedom from Great Britain, and a in depth look at “the other Ireland,” that is to say, Northern Ireland. The latter materials circled back to the historical legacy of plantation and colonialism, and students learned about annual Orange Order parades and the heritage of religious demarcations. They became aware of traditions like “Bloody Sunday” and the power of the spoken word to keep political commemorations alive. Course enrollees also investigated how aspects of Northern Irish emigration affected the state of South Carolina, shaped the American Civil War, and contributed to the rise of the Confederacy. Again, opinions were called into question as the nature of the historical materials had the power to explode taken-for-granted understandings and demand that attitudes be approached from a fresh set of interdisciplinary perspectives.

For instance, students learned how cultural venues like traveling minstrel shows gained popularity among Irish immigrants in the antebellum South, providing a platform for the exploration and expression of ethnic identities. They learned that Irish women played vital roles in breaking the back of the Confederacy due to the fact that many had grown weary of tending house and farm devoid of the help and support of fathers, husbands, brothers, and lovers; and they learned of the role that religious orders played in establishing makeshift hospitals in

both the North and the South. Ultimately, the ideology to present a broad array of material, which has been part and parcel of Ethnic Studies’ approaches since its inception, served students well as they entered their final days of classes, prepared for their final examinations, and completed their course projects.

3. OUTCOMES

What had students (N = 6) to say about this course? Evaluations were particularly strong. Despite the fact that two-thirds of those reporting admitted that they found the course load “very heavy,” eighty per cent (80%) stated that it was a “good course”; one hundred per cent (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that the instructor was effective. Over eighty per cent (80%) reported that they had developed skills and knowledge, and readings and texts were valuable. Students performed well on final examinations and/or course projects, and final grades reflected these strong performances. Perhaps most important, interest in the subject was reported to have increased by nearly ninety per cent (90%).

These figures indicate that Distance Education courses can achieve favorable student responses when an Ethnic Studies curriculum is employed.

4. CONCLUSION: REVISITING THE NATURE OF ACTION RESEARCH

Eileen T. Borgia and Dorothy Schuler argue that healthy action research “integrates theory, practice and [a] meaningful concurrent application of results” [13]. Moreover, others recognize the processual nature of this work, stressing its transformative, creative aspect, especially when the opportunity is provided for learners to modify their ideas when presented with opportunities to reflect, contemplate, and evaluate their points of view [14].

In an Anthropology course entitled Peoples and Cultures of Ireland, students were given a distance education opportunity to succeed in action research. They were able to confront their preconceptions and default opinions, and

exposed to a plethora of material that crossed strict subject lines and enabled them to form opinions without discipline constraint. Cross-domain mapping and problem solving occurred in a multitude of settings that included on-line postings to one's fellow classmates and to the professor. The digital learning interface was a freeing mechanism that created a platform for the occurrence of advanced problem solving and the motivation of mental clicks of understanding and awareness.

Finally, due to the fact that it fell under the wide rubric of Ethnic Studies (which, by its very nature, admits of interdisciplinary energies and encourages a cross-fertilization of ideas), this course was less constraining; it was able to advance analogical thinking with the right kinds of scaffolding and the provision of opportunities to share enlightening and enriching experiences.

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