

Highlighting Cross-Disciplinary Relevance to Students in a Required Course

Jacki Fitzpatrick, Ph.D.
Texas Tech University

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to describe the change process for an undergraduate family studies course (HDFS 3320: Contemporary Family). As the course was required for students in majors (e.g., food & nutrition, fashion & interior design) outside of the family studies field, it was necessary to increase the cross-disciplinary relevance of the course. The change process involved (a) collaboration with other faculty members, (b) responding to student feedback and (c) refining the course model so that it could be used by more than one instructor. The course was changed so that a minimum of 40% of topics directly addressed students' major fields. The lessons learned from this course transformation might be valuable for instructors/administrators who face the demands of an evolving student population.

Some instructors have the freedom to teach courses as they wish. They might teach with little consideration of how well the course (a) fits into the departmental vision (e.g., LeBlanc, 2007), (b) serves the needs of various constituencies, such as students or college administrators (Boretz, 2004; Howell, Williams & Lindsay, 2003), (c) facilitates deep learning (the application of course concepts across multiple courses/environments – e.g., Hooyman, 2008) and/or (d) keeps pace with important family/developmental trends (Price & Brosi, 2006). This approach does not inherently imply that they are ineffectual or apathetic colleagues. To the contrary, such instructors might be quite dedicated to their courses. However, these instructors do not engage actively in issues outside of the classroom that are germane to the (a) course, (b) department curriculum, or (c) anticipated professional skill needs for students (e.g., Shell, 2001). Some instructors might consider such issues to be insignificant, but this attitude is not without consequence. For example, lack of sufficient engagement in curricular issues can create or expand fissures in family studies education (Davis & Sandifer-Stech, 2006).

Direct correspondence to Dr. Jacki Fitzpatrick at Jacki.Fitzpatrick@ttu.edu

Allen, Few, Roberto, Blieszner, Meszaros & Henderson, 2006; Busch, Powers, Metzger, Behroozi, Siegel & Cournoyer, 2001), (b) transform educational experiences for students (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2003; Sanders & Armstrong, 2008), and (c) be responsive to administrative/field-based issues in curriculum management. For such instructors, courses are not permanent or inflexible structures. Rather, classrooms are active environments of reflection, openness and refinement (Smith, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the change process for an undergraduate course (HDFS 3320: Contemporary Family). Although the specific course changes might not be particularly salient to other programs, the principles of the change process can be broadly adopted and/or adapted to multiple programs.

Course Issues/Challenges

At the time that I became involved in the course, prior instructors had taught the course in a manner that was consistent with a standard family studies textbook. The course followed a family developmental lifecycle model, and added a few topics about family problems, such as violence (see Table 1). This format might be a good design if (a) an Introduction to Family Science/Studies course is being taught and (b) there are few (if any) other family studies courses being offered in a department. This design might fit quite well in a community college or Department of Social Sciences.

However, this was not the context for this specific course. It was an upper-level undergraduate course and one of many family courses in the department (Human Development and Family Studies, HDFS). Some course topics (e.g., marriage) were addressed (and repeated) in multiple courses. Indeed, the HDFS Department had separate courses that focused on research methods, gender roles, dating/marriage, parenting, aging families and family problems. Under these conditions, there were some questions as to whether the extent of course overlap was necessary or helpful. In addition, the course was a requirement for students in multiple majors (e.g., family studies, food & nutrition, hotel & restaurant management, fashion & interior design) in the College of Human Sciences.¹ So, instructors were challenged to meet the needs of (a) family studies students who might have high familiarity [based on other HDFS courses] and (b) all other students [from diverse majors] who might have low familiarity with course concepts.

In my capacity as Associate Chair for the HDFS Department, I was asked by a Department Chair to address the challenges associated with the course. More specifically, the Department Chair reported that (a) faculty outside of Family Studies complained that the course was not sufficiently relevant to their students, (b) course instructors reported that students were resistant (in the classroom) because they did not see the applicability of course topics for them, and (c) course instructors felt challenged to balance student engagement with addressing the topics that were listed in the textbook.

Theoretical Foundation for Course Change

The theoretical foundation for this course change was engagement theory (e.g., Kearsley & Schneidermann, 1998). According to engagement theory, instructors have a responsibility to maximize the value of the learning environment for students. Instructors do not have to abandon academic standards to create an environment that students enjoy. Rather, instructors maintain standards as they focus on conveying information to create meaning for students (Fitzpatrick, Boden & Kostina-Ritchey, 2010).

Engagement theory recognizes that instructors, students and colleagues are co-creators of the class. So, students have some rights to input in the course process. According to engagement theory, students will be more active learners if they have the opportunity for input (e.g., Kearsley & Schneidermann, 1998). Instructors are responsible for bringing their expertise and general structure to the classroom (Giordano, 2007), but engaged instructors understand that they can also be learners (Wong, 2007). The information that they can gain from colleagues and students can generate improvements that instructors might not have considered from their own perspective (e.g., Allen, Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2001). Through such collaboration, there is shared ownership (by all parties) of the educational value of the course.

Change Procedures based on Engagement Theory Principles

My first step was to identify the ways in which this course might make a unique educational contribution for (a) family studies majors and (b) students in other major fields who were also enrolled in the course. This required a willingness to reduce/eliminate topics (e.g., marriage, parenting) that were addressed typically in other courses offered by the Human Development and Family Studies Department. Second, I focused on fulfillment of the course title. If the course truly focused on contemporary families, then it was necessary to more fully address the diversity of family structures (e.g., childfree/childless couples, adoptive families, gay/lesbian families).

After I completed these two tasks, I recognized that I could create more “space” to address relevancy issues. So, the third step was to meet with faculty in four different programs/departments. These programs represented other major fields/specialties in the College of Human Sciences (e.g., fashion & interior design, food & nutrition, personal/family financial management, hotel & restaurant management). During each meeting, I explained (a) my efforts to revise the course design, and (b) the essential family topics that could not be eliminated from the course. Then, I asked the faculty to identify topics that were (a) pertinent to their fields and (b) could be integrated into a family studies course. I explained that the instructors for this course were never going to have their level of expertise (e.g., in fashion, nutrition, finance). However, I did state that family studies instructors could draw more direct linkages between the course topics and the other Human Sciences fields/specialties. If faculty from other

fields/specialties asked that a specific topic be added to the course, then I requested that they provide a value-added rationale.

For example, some faculty who specialized in hotel & restaurant management asked that the topic “Work & Family” be addressed in the course. They explained that when students graduated and entered the profession, it was not uncommon for them (as new employees) to face long work shifts (of more than 60 hours per week). The faculty noted that there were important issues about work-family balance and/or work-family conflict that could be discussed. They noted that when students became full-time employees, they would face these issues for themselves and other staffmembers (whom they would supervise). These faculty asked that both workplace policies (e.g., Family and Medical Leave Act, flextime) and family strategies (e.g., tag team parenting) be discussed. Based on this rationale, I agreed that the topic of “Work & Family” could be addressed in the course.² However, I emphasized that the topic would be addressed from a ‘family studies’ approach (e.g., empirical research on work-family issues, public policy/practice-based literature) rather than from a ‘family advice’ approach (e.g., self-help literature).

Following the faculty meetings, I met with two groups of undergraduate students who had completed the course. Although the groups were not random samples, the students represented the various major fields in the college. I inquired about the course information which they had found to be (a) most meaningful/valuable and (b) least meaningful/valuable to their professional development. I also inquired about the topics that they would like to see added to the course.

Based on all of this information, I generated a revised list of course topics (see Table 2). The first portion of the course focused on general topics (e.g., Introduction, Family Theory, Historical Trends) that would serve as a foundation for current family issues. The second portion focused on various family structures (e.g., Single Parent, Extended [grandparents raising grandchildren]). The third portion focused on linkages between (a) family topics and (b) topics drawn from the other fields (e.g., Families & Housing, Families & Food). This portion addressed the ways in which families and contexts are mutually influential (e.g., families impact fashion and fashion impacts families). Although students from diverse majors might not be interested in every topic, students were assured that I was making a good-faith effort to focus one week’s worth of class on topics that were directly germane. Yet, there was an attempt to provide something of interest to many students.

At the same time, I would note that the course did not lose its focus on family issues. Rather, a family primacy remained essential to the inclusion of any course concepts. An exploration of journals in diverse fields (e.g., International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management) revealed that there were family-relevant articles. In addition, an argument could be made that topics such as homeschooling, twinning [dressing twins identically], and copreneurship [married co-owners of companies] should be addressed in family studies courses.

For approximately six years (2000-2006), I modified and taught sections of this course. I continued to seek feedback from others (e.g., students, faculty in other departments). I engaged in continuous improvement practices to refine the course over time. During this period, I also generated a course template (so that the course could be taught by other instructors). By 2009, six different instructors had taught the course in the revised format. During the most recent year that I taught an oncampus section of this course, I also included guest speakers from other departments within the College of Human Sciences. These speakers described ways in which concepts from their fields could be applied to family issues (e.g., nutritional impact on children of fewer family dinners, impact of modern lifestyles on housing design). Through this application approach, the speakers also reinforced the salience of cross-disciplinary perspectives.

Conclusion

Consistent with principles of scholarly teaching (e.g., Smith, 2008), instructors should be reflective about the ways in which courses are meeting (or failing to meet) students and departments' needs. In designing course changes, it is important to keep in mind that students can be a valuable source of information. Students can identify issues/resources which might not occur to the instructor, but can be insightful (e.g., Sanders & Armstrong, 2008).

This course change was a time-consuming task. In this particular case, I had to take responsibility for reading dozens of articles in various journals to find readings that would be a good fit for this course. I also had to find a family studies textbook that would be a good fit for the revised course design and blend well with supplemental readings. In addition, it was necessary to revise course assignments (e.g., group media analysis assignment) that would allow students to apply the linkage concepts. In sum, the course changes took hundreds of hours to identify, develop and execute. This was largely invisible labor (e.g., I was not given a course release) that came from my own time. Under these types of conditions, I cannot recommend such a transformation for untenured faculty. However, it is possible that such transformation could be accomplished by a committee (rather than a single instructor). It might be possible for individuals with different perspectives (e.g., undergraduate students, graduate teaching assistants, untenured/tenured faculty, administrators) to collaborate on course analyses and revisions.

It should also be noted that course change is not always a static process. Such transformations can be temporary, as administrators change visions, accrediting organizations change course requirements, faculty assignments are rotated and the broader fields (e.g., education, finance) move in new directions. Thus, it would be wise to consider the department's dialectics (e.g., balance of stability vs. change) before initiating such a transformation.

In addition, I would note that such a significant course change is contingent upon a particular perspective on textbooks. If instructors view textbooks as defining the course content, then they might be unwilling to consider the inclusion of topics that are not included in the book.

If instructors consider themselves to be responsible for defining the course content, then the textbook is simply a tool that helps them to fulfill their teaching goals. From this instructor perspective, the selection of a book (and/or supplemental readings) is made after the general course design has been completed. This approach fits with backward-planning principles (e.g., Barták & Toropila, 2009)

Finally, I would note that it is important to discuss course transformations with administrators (e.g., Department Chairs, Associate Chairs) who have responsibility for the curriculum. Course transformations can have intended (and unintended) consequences on other courses. Instructors of these other courses might have a vested interest in the success (or failure) of transformation processes. Under these circumstances, it is important to have the clear, direct and public support of administrators for course changes. If the support is absent or unreliable, then instructors should engage in significant reflection before they initiate any substantive course transformations.

If instructors want to explore consider course transformations, then they are advised to consider the following question sets:

(1) What topics are essential to the course? What makes this course a unique educational experience for students?

(2) What topics can be deleted? If topics are deleted from this course, is it essential for students to still be exposed to the topics in other courses? For example, does an academic program need to assure that information is provided in some course for accreditation purposes? If some topics are deleted from this course, who will be responsible for assuring that the topics are “picked up” or addressed adequately in other courses?

(3) What topics should be added? How does each topic enhance the course for the instructor and students? How much course time is going to be dedicated to the additional topics?

(4) Is additional expertise needed to address the added topics? Is such expertise accessible to the instructor? For example, are guest speakers (from other departments) going to be necessary to address adequately the topics? If guest speakers are included, is there a limit as to the number of speakers that are included in a course? How is teaching credit allocated if an instructor is only lecturing for a small number of topics and using guest speakers to address a large number of topics?

(5) Where does the textbook fit into the conceptualization of the course? Is the textbook used primarily to guide course construction (e.g., Week 1=Chapter 1→Week 16=Chapter16)? Alternatively, is the textbook used simply as a resource to provide information (about the topics that are chosen by the instructor)? If the instructor includes topics in the course that are not addressed in the textbook, will the instructor assume responsibility for selecting supplementary readings (e.g., journal articles, book chapters) to address these topics?

(6) Who has the authority to make large changes in course content? Does the authority reside with individual instructors, curriculum committees, or department/college administrators? Is the ‘chain of command’ in such course changes clearly articulated?

(7) How long are the course changes likely to be used? If the changes will only be temporary, then is the effort still worthwhile (for instructors and students)? If the changes will be long-term, then who is responsible for (a) orienting new instructors to the course format and (b) monitoring fulfillment of the course format across instructors/years?

Jacki Fitzpatrick, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Human Development & Family Studies Department at Texas Tech University; Mail Stop 1230, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

References

- Allen, K., Floyd-Thomas, S. & Gillman, L. (2001). Teaching to transform: From volatility to solidarity in an interdisciplinary family studies classroom. *Family Relations, 50*, 317-325.
- Ambert, A. (2001). *Families in the new millennium*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Barták R. & Toropila, D. (2009). Revisiting constraint models for planning problems. *Foundations of Intelligent Systems: Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 5722*, 582-591.
- Benson, M., Allen, K., Few, A., Roberto, K., Blieszner, R., Meszaros, P. & Henderson, T. (2006). Transforming the Master's degree in human development and family science. *Family Relations, 55*, 44-55.
- Blaisure, K. & Koivunen, J. (2003). Family science faculty members' experiences with teaching from a feminist perspective. *Family Relations, 52*, 22-32.
- Boretz, E. (2004). Grade inflation and the myth of student consumerism. *College Teaching, 52*, 42-46.
- Busch, M., Powers, G., Metzger, D., Behroozi, C., Siegel, S. & Cournoyer, B. (2001). Indiana University School of Social Work: 90 years of professional education. *Advances in Social Work, 2*, 83-100.
- Clark, S. (2001). Work cultures and work/family balance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 58*, 348-365.
- Darian, J. (1998). Parent-child decision making in children's clothing stores. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management, 11*, 421-429.

- Davis, J. & Sandifer-Stech, D. (2006). Wade into the water: Preparing students for successful quantitative research. *Family Relations*, 55, 56-66.
- De Ollis, I. & Kapinus, C. (2002). Aging childless couples and individuals: Suggestions for new directions in research. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72, 72-80.
- Erera, P. (2002). *Family diversity: Continuity and change in contemporary family* (Chapter 6 [Lesbian and gay families], pp. 160-182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Erich, S., Leung, P., Kindle, P. & Carter, S. (2005). Gay and lesbian adoptive families: An exploratory study of family functioning, adoptive child's behavior, and familial support networks. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 9, 17-32.
- Falicov, C. (2001). The cultural meanings of money. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45, 313-328.
- Fitzpatrick, J., Boden, J. & Kostina-Ritchey, E. (2010). Student engagement challenges in teaching about controversial issues. *Journal of Graduate and Professional Student Development*, 13, 84-102.
- Giordano, E. (2007, February). *Southeast Asian-American political participation: Engaging students to educate voters*. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association's Conference on Teaching and Learning, Charlotte, NC.
- Gladstone, J. & Westhues, A. (1998). Adoption reunions: A new side to intergenerational family relationships. *Family Relations*, 47, 177-184.
- Howell, S., Williams, P. & Lindsay, N. (2003). Thirty-two trends affecting distance education: An informed foundation for strategic planning. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 6, 1-23. Retrieved February 5, 2012 from http://umsi.edu/~wilmarthp/modla-links-2011/32_trends_affecting_DL.pdf.
- Hooyman, N. (2008). Challenges to adopting and sustaining family-focused competencies in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 44, 137-141.
- Kearsley, G. & Schneidermann, B. (1998). Engagement theory: A framework for technology-based teaching and learning. *Educational Technology*, 38, 20-23.
- Keeling, R. (2001). Food: Sustenance and symbol. *Journal of American College Health*, 49, 153-159.
- LeBlanc, E. (2007). Internationalizing the curriculum: A discussion of challenges and first

- steps within business schools. *Higher Education Perspectives*, 3, 28-44.
- Nickerson, N. & Jurowski, C. (2000). The influence of children on vacation travel patterns. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 7, 19-30.
- Price, C. & Brosi, W. (2006). Resources for advancing family gerontology education and practice. *Family Relations*, 55, 649-662.
- Sanders, D. & Armstrong, K. (2008). Understanding students' perceptions and experience of a tourism management field trip: The need for a graduated approach. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education*, 20, 29-37.
- Shell, R. (2001). Perceived barriers to teaching for critical thinking by BSN nursing faculty. *Nursing and Health Care Perspectives*, 22, 286-291.
- Smith, R. (2008). Moving toward the scholarship of teaching and learning: The classroom can be a lab, too! *Teaching of Psychology*, 35, 262-266.
- Susanka, S. (2002). *Not so big solutions for your home* ([*The kitchen/family room relationship*] pp. 39-47, 53-57). Newtown, CT: Taunton Press.
- Wong, P. (2007). Six multicultural service-learning lessons I learned in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. *Multicultural Education*, 15, 52-54.

Table 1.

Sample List of Course Topics (Prior to Substantive Change)

Week 1:	Introduction
Week 2:	Family Theory and Research Methods
Week 3:	Historical Trends in Family Development
Week 4:	Gender Roles
Week 5:	Love and Romance
Week 6:	Cohabitation and Marriage
Week 7:	Becoming Parents
Week 8:	Parenting in the Toddler, Elementary and Adolescent Years
Week 9:	Work and Retirement
Week 10:	Family Violence and Addiction
Week 11:	Divorce
Week 12:	Remarriage
Week 13:	Old Age and Death
Week 14:	Future of Families

Table 2.

Sample List of Course Topics (After Substantive Change)

Note: Ambert (2001) textbook plus supplemental readings were utilized. See references for full citations of supplemental readings.

Week 1:	Introduction/Family Theory (Ambert book)
Week 2:	Historical Trends in Family Development (Ambert book)
Week 3:	Childfree/Single Parent Families (Ambert book and De Ollis reading)
Week 4:	Divorced/Remarried Families (Ambert book)
Week 5:	Biological/Extended Families (Ambert book)
Week 6:	Homosexual Families (Erera reading)
Week 7:	Adoptive Families (Erich & Gladstone readings)
Week 8:	Families & Work (Clark reading)
Week 9:	Families & Money (Ambert book and Falicov reading)
Week 10:	Families & Food (Keeling reading)
Week 11:	Families & Fashion (Darian reading)
Week 12:	Families & Education (Ambert book)
Week 13:	Families & Housing (Susanka reading)
Week 14:	Families & Hospitality/Leisure (Nickerson reading)

Author Note

¹Based on the perspective that students would benefit from cross-disciplinary exposure, the College of Human Sciences students were required to take one course within each major field.

²Although the “Work & Family” topic was raised by restaurant and hotel management faculty, I recognized that it was possible that work-family balance might be relevant to many professionals. When students graduated and became fulltime employees in fields such as fashion, financial management, merchandising, or design, then they (as new employees) might also face work-family conflicts. Thus, the rationale for topic inclusion by a few faculty seemed potentially relevant to a broad range of students.