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## Introduction

Students benefit from an integrated curriculum and research shows that students “persist in their studies if the learning they experience is meaningful, deeply engaging, and relevant to their lives” (Lardner and Malnarich 32). The acquisition of communication skills, then, is enhanced when students understand its importance in their major field and see how the skills they’re learning in foundation communication courses are applicable to their majors and future employment. An integrated curriculum that provides such links is readily developed within learning communities, especially through faculty collaboration and links across disciplines. The most recent National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggests that the most effective learning community feature in positively influencing desired outcomes is integration across disciplines, “Students in LC programs that integrated material across courses—either by discussion groups or class assignments—had higher scores on all five NSSE benchmarks” (15). At least one example of the positive impact of such collaboration has already been quantified here at Iowa State University as, over the past two years, students concurrently enrolled in the Horticulture LC English 250 course and Horticulture 221: Principles of Horticulture have, on average, a 9% higher final grade in Horticulture 221 than their peers—even if the peers were taking a non-linked English 250 course at the same time. The data recommend an active interdisciplinary approach to curricula design.

A purposeful interdisciplinary approach to communication, where interdisciplinary work is a method of cognitive development, provides students with more opportunities for success. An interdisciplinary approach allows students to not only learn the principles of effective communication, but to practice

those principles *in their major area*. In such a course, communication is no longer the domain of a required class whose contents can be forgotten with submission of the final paper, but the building blocks for more advanced communication assignments in the upper-level courses. An interdisciplinary approach to the English link shows students that communication is a required component of their own field and requires them to integrate the discipline of communication into their major area. Students benefit when their foundation courses are no longer distinct and separate from their perceived “real classes,” but are interwoven with them.

## Expectations for English links

### *Communication*

Each semester, as you develop and refine your link, Learning Community Central Administration expects that you will hold:

1. One preliminary meeting between the LC Coordinator, English partner, and interested faculty member to introduce themselves and to begin a discussion of how to proceed developing the course.
2. A second meeting with the LC Coordinator and English partner, as well as faculty members interested in getting involved, to discuss potential topics, assignments, etc.
3. A third visit at the end of the semester to review the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum and to begin discussions for revising for the next time.

### *Coordination*

As an English link is a *link* between your department, its learning community, and the instruction of communication, Learning Community Central Administration expects that your department will work with the English instructor to develop a linked assignment or discussion. Please be aware that those learning communities, or combinations of learning communities, who make use of linked assignments or discussions will be given preference when English links are reserved.

## Conversation starters

The development and further refinement of an effective English link for your learning community is a serious undertaking which requires close collaboration between the Coordinator, the English faculty partner, and faculty members of the major-area department. A link will only be as effective as the amount of effort put into it from all parties.

When undertaking interdisciplinary collaboration, it is often helpful to consider goals, learning, outcomes, expectations, strengths and weaknesses. Please take a few moments to reflect on the

following. *Do not feel that you have to go through each item*—think of them as potential ways of starting the conversation with your English partner.

1. Define the disciplines. The English partner with whom you'll be working will have an interest in your field, but may not be fully aware of all that the field encompasses. How would you explain your field (biology, industrial engineering, design, etc.) to someone unfamiliar with it?

Ask your English partner to share information about the English course. What are its goals? What communication materials will be covered? What assignments will be required of the students?

2. Describe the major program and job prospects.
  - a. What topics will your students learn during their years at Iowa State? What types of courses will they take? What additional work will they do to prepare for graduation?
  - b. What types of jobs will they get once they graduate?
3. Needed communication skills.
  - a. What communication skills are currently emphasized in your major courses? Could they be linked with the English course?
  - b. What, if any, gaps in communication competencies do you see between what your students can do as first-year students and they will need to do by graduation?
4. How would you describe the typical student in your department? What is the general personality? Academic preparation?
5. Students in LC English courses are often surprised, positively and negatively, by the collaborative nature of a linked English course. What do your students expect in a linked English course? What can you do to prepare students for a course that is tailored to their major area, but which differs in content and assignments from the regular sections in which their friends may be enrolled.
6. What are your learning outcomes for the English link?
7. English instructors are quite concerned about effectively and ethically incorporating a new subject area into their own courses. They thoroughly enjoy increasing student interest in communication by showing students how effective communication skills will be of value in their majors, but instructors are also concerned about accurately representing content which lies outside their area of expertise. You and your fellow faculty are the major-area experts, and your knowledge is a valuable commodity to your English instructor. What kinds of assistance could you provide to your English partner? Some examples are, but not limited to the following:
  - a. Provide explanations and descriptions of the major area,
  - b. Be available to take questions throughout the semester,

- c. Assist in finding topics for readings from your field,
  - d. Find quality texts for students to read, and perhaps also contextualizing them for your English link,
  - e. Arrange to visit the English classroom and arrange reciprocal visits,
  - f. Offer to develop a lecture or two on communication in the field that fits with the goals of English 150 and 250 (this particular type of activity really emphasizes the importance of communication for most students),
8. What additional assistance could you provide for development of the course? Again, some examples are, but not limited to:
- a. Organize activities such as field trips or poster sessions,
  - b. Provide monetary support (pay for transportation, poster printing, etc.),
  - c. Encourage involvement of faculty,
  - d. Other things you can do to assist development of the link.
9. Quality collaborations succeed or fail on the individuals involved. What is the general personality of people in your field?

## Types of English assignments

Although English instructors are by and large happy to collaborate with you and your Department in order to develop a linked English course to benefit your students, both English 150 and 250 have specific content material and assignments that English instructors may not change (see requirements below). However, these items can be put into the context of your major area and can be adapted to more closely reflect the specific requirements expected in your students' major area.

### Types of assignments in English 150<sup>1</sup>

These assignments are from Part 2 of *The Brief McGraw-Hill Guide: Writing for College, Writing for Life* (Roen, Glau, and Maid, 2008).

*Sharing experiences*—Focusing on one event or a related series of events in your academic, civic, or personal parts of your life, you will consider your audience and what you are trying to accomplish: Why would you want to share this experience with an audience? What might others gain from it? What do you gain from it? How can you shape the communication so that your intentions are met with this audience? How might visuals or an oral component enhance the sharing of your experience?

*Exploring and providing information*—This project gives you the chance to examine what you know about an idea or subject from various perspectives, to explore new information, and then present that information clearly and efficiently to an audience. Such a project is used to help you clarify your thinking on a topic of importance to you by allowing you to gain insight on the overall picture; it is also designed to help your audience reach a clearer understanding of the topic. Important to this project is an inquiring attitude and providing useful and relevant information: this project will require you to consider several viewpoints without arguing for one, and to present information efficiently, in such a way that an audience can readily make use of it. Again, you will think about how a visual and/or oral component can help you accomplish your goals with your audience.

*Analyzing place or artifact*—Your analysis—which will be of a visual artifact, such as a piece of art on campus or a specific part of the ISU campus landscape—will help your audience come to a clear or fresh understanding of this place or art. Besides communicating why you want them to have this understanding, your project will examine all the elements of the object or place and how they work together to create and overall idea. Important to this project will be your analysis of the “fit” of this place or artwork with the overall environment of ISU. This project uses both your personal impressions as well as some research. Using visuals will be important to this project, and communicating orally about it with a small group or your whole class may be part of the project as well.

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<sup>1</sup> *Student Guide to English 150 and 250*, a required text outlining the goals and expectations for these two courses.

*Composing visual communication*—You will summarize the highlights of your exploration and informational or analysis project by composing a form of visual communication—such as a brochure, newsletter, poster, or video.

*Portfolio*—As a cumulative project, you will create a print or electronic portfolio which represents what you have learned in English 150. It will include samples of your work from the course with your reflections on them, focusing on how you have improved and how you arrived at those improvements, both on individual assignments (above) and as WOVE communicator overall.

## Types of assignments in English 250<sup>2</sup>

*Summary*—You'll learn how to identify main ideas and recast those ideas in your own words. Your active reading skills will help you notice how writers express, organize, and support their points. You must learn to translate others' ideas accurately and to treat those ideas with respect.

*Rhetorical analysis*—You'll analyze readings and visual communication to see how—and how successfully—the author uses substance, organization, style, and delivery to fit the particular context of purpose and audience. Learning to analyze rhetorically will allow you to become adept at noticing how an author accomplishes his/her purpose. This skill will help you plan your own communication efforts.

*Argument and persuasion*—Academic *argument* takes a position on an issue using reasoned claims, documented research, verifiable evidence, and an open-minded approach. *Persuasion*, on the other hand, tries to achieve direct action or behavioral change by using emotional appeals and focusing more on one side of an issue. You'll explore argument and persuasion by analyzing various texts—essays, editorials, advertising, websites, films. You will then apply this knowledge as you construct your own arguments. For example, you might compose a rebuttal to one or more of the readings, an oral presentation recommending changes on campus, or a slide presentation arguing your position on a controversial topic.

*Documented research*—As you develop your own arguments, you'll learn to support your ideas by interweaving sources into your compositions. In English 250, you'll gain experience with basic research methods, standard documentation forms, and the appropriate uses of summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation—all of which will enhance the integrity of your writing. In addition to a written text, your instructor might ask you to share your research with your classmates through a poster or a slide presentation.

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<sup>2</sup> *Student Guide to English 150 and 250*, a required text outlining the goals and expectations for these two courses.

*Portfolio*—As a cumulative project, you are to create a print or electronic portfolio that shows either your growth (developmental portfolio) or best work (showcase portfolio). Include work from English 250 as well as from other courses and activities. Introduce your portfolio by describing your semester’s multimodal communication work and explaining your goals for improvements during your ISU academic career. You probably will also want to include reflections for individual artifacts within your portfolio.

## Examples of Best Practices

### *Encourage faculty involvement*

- Look for ways of integrating topics and discussions  
Agricultural Business LC students concentrate on the farm bill in their English 150 class while hearing discussions of it in Economics 101.
- With the instructor’s permission, invite faculty members to sit in on your Department’s English course and ask the English instructor to sit in on classes the LC students take.  
In the BEST Learning Community, Jim Colbert (Biology) and Bob Corey (English) regularly attend each other’s courses.  
The Horticulture LC English 250 course, which uses the Department’s computer lab, has an open door policy on workshop days so faculty members can swing by and see what the students are doing.
- Offer to create opportunities for students to practice the type of communication they’ll need for their major areas.  
As part of their semester-long research project for English 250, students in the Microbiology LC test water samples collected by the Skunk River Navy and write a lab report. Nancy Boury (Microbiology) arranges the lab, coordinates lab assistants, and runs the lab.  
Horticulture LC students present their English 250 research project in a poster session for the entire Department of Horticulture during its final weekly seminar of the semester.  
Agricultural Business LC link between Economics 235 (marketing) and English 250 requires that all students in both classes keep market reports on a commodity of their choice and create bi-monthly reports to share with their class. At the semester end, English students created presentations about their commodity.
- Ask faculty to read and comment on student papers.  
Every year, around 15 horticulture faculty members read and comment on the content and source material in English 250 research papers.  
John Lawrence, Helen Jensen, and Arne Hallam of Agricultural Business read student papers and provided additional citations for source material.

- Major area faculty could prepare lectures/activities on communication topics for the English course. For example, members of the Horticulture faculty have prepared lectures for their Learning Community's English 250 link:

Anne Marie VanDerZanden lectures on environmental rhetoric, in particular the differences between factual arguments and emotive arguments. She lectures on several case studies where information about herbicides and pesticides was distorted, misinterpreted, or where the study was designed for specific inflammatory results. In addition, she provides examples of emotional red herrings—where pictures of puppies and babies are inserted into a factual discussion of the potential dangers of chemical applications.

In deference to the importance he places on quality source material in his upper-level courses, Nick Christians lectures on effective searches in the turfgrass database, and provides specific examples of the type and amount of source material one gets from a straight-specific search and a general-to-specific search. He also tells the students that when they submit papers to him, he searches the appropriate databases to see the amount and quality of source material available and compares that to what is in the paper, “and it better equal out if you expect an A.” Christians also analyzes a book chapter for its use of information and explains how facts taken out of context, cherry-picked, misinterpreted, or which fly in the face of scientific advancement decimate an argument.

Jeff and Iles and Shui-Zang Fei lecture on ethics and viewing things from multiple perspectives. Iles discusses the ethics of making landscape decisions in an urban setting—balancing economic, esthetic, and safety issues—and asks the students to work their way through several case studies. Fei lectures on the ethical development of a genetically modified organism, and how one must know and understand all sides of an issue, particularly the pros and cons, for an argument to be effective.

### *Organize a shared or common reading*

- The BEST LC students will be reading *Only a Theory* for both English 250 and their introductory Biology course.
- For the Agricultural Business Learning Community, the Economics 101 and English 150 read *Animal Farm*, then the Economics 101 instructor comes to the English class and leads a discussion of the economic nature of the book—the students loved this and were voluntarily prepared with questions
- The Agricultural Business Learning Community share an additional reading with the English 150 course and all learning community members (even those not enrolled in English 150). Discussions are held by the learning community mentors at a time when most students can attend.
- The Horticulture LC read *Nickel and Dimed* while taking English 150 and working on Project Glean.

### *Get a librarian involved*

- Invite your field's subject librarian to provide a lecture and activity on locating sources.

For the Horticulture and Microbiology links, Andrea Dinkelman of Parks Library, works with the students for one week on locating materials on their major area and effectively evaluating sources. Dinkelman also grades the sources on the annotated bibliographies that students complete in preparation for their research papers.

### *Promote communication excellence*

- Look for places in your own courses where the communication skills your students are learning in English 150 and 250 can further develop those skills in their own major area.

In addition to requiring lab reports in Horticulture 221: Principles of Horticulture, Gail Nonnecke asks her students to write newsletters and give plant of the week presentations to the entire class.

The BEST learning community runs an essay contest in which students reflect on their experiences with the Skunk River Navy.

- Consider requesting and developing a 300-level linked communication course.

## **Registration for the English Links**

In order for your students to get the most out of their interdisciplinary learning experience, the English 150/250 classroom should be filled with students who are invested and interested in the course's content. To that end, registration is initially limited to similar majors:

1. After an English link course has been reserved with the Department of English, the Registrar's Office reserves X number of learning team seats for your learning community students.
2. The Registrar's Office then places restrictions on the non-learning team seats so that only students with similar majors may enroll in that section. The Microbiology link, for example, limits non-learning team seats to biological science majors. *[If your LC student enrollment numbers continually fail to fill an English course, you may want to consider linking your learning community with another. Horticulture and Agricultural Business, for example, share an English 250 section.]*
3. However, as such a large number of students need to take English 150 and 250, these restrictions cannot be held indefinitely. After June 30, all non-learning team seats in the section are opened to the general student population.

Quality coordination between an English course and its linked area can provide an intensely memorable and rewarding learning experience for your students, but first-class instruction, assignments, and interdisciplinary coordination cannot benefit your students if a portion of the class is disgruntled or uninterested. It is for this reason that those learning communities, or combinations of learning communities, that can fill sections will be given preference when English links are reserved.

### **Room scheduling**

It may seem insignificant, but the location of the classroom can hamper the efficacy of a link. All ISUComm foundation courses are given one computer lab day per week. The type of work completed on these days varies, but it often includes drafting, revising, or peer reviewing their projects. Lab days are important to the development of your students' communication skills, but there are a limited number of computer labs on campus available to ISUComm foundation courses, and the labs are scattered throughout the campus, often creating schedule difficulties for students.

If your department has a computer lab which could accommodate your English linked course, please consider allowing the class to meet in that computer lab. In addition to addressing the concerns outlined above, housing the English course in your department reinforces the importance your department places on quality communication. For several years now, the Department of Horticulture has provided its English link course with a regular classroom and a computer lab. Not only do the students and professors see each other more frequently, but a few professors have started to swing by the computer lab to ask the students what they're working on, give the students some pointers, and occasionally point out grammatical errors or awkward expression.