

A DIPTYCH TO LINK GENERAL EDUCATION AND SPECIALIZED TRAINING

AN INTEGRATIVE PROJECT EXPERIMENT IN THE FOURTH FRENCH COURSE

As teachers, we often question our students' capacities to build bridges and to establish meaningful links between the various courses they take on their journey through college studies in such a way that they will consider their training to be an integrated whole, rather than a mosaic the elements of which are in simple juxtaposition to each other. In this regard, Sophie Dorais stated nearly twenty years ago that, "If there is one criticism we often give to our students, it is about their so-called inability to make connections! We must admit however, that when it comes to programs, we do not give them much help, isolated as we are within our respective departments or services, focussing on the small part of the program that 'concerns us directly.'" (Dorais, 1990)

Even though we have seen significant progress since then, particularly in the area of specialized training, there is still much that needs to be done to ensure cohesion between the different aspects of student training. In this context, as French teachers, we asked ourselves about the role we could play in helping students become more aware of the interrelationships that exist, notably between their general education courses and their specialized training.

In the fourth mandatory French course, we sought to create a session-ending project called "The Municipal Project" that would require students to trace for themselves the close links between the



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two components of their training. Here we present this project in broad brushstrokes as well as our thoughts on the pedagogical means that we implemented in an attempt to reach our objective of integrated knowledge.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The Municipal Project is part of the fourth French course which differs somewhat from the first three courses that focus primarily on Literature. This general training course is more like a communications course which requires that students *produce different types of written and oral discourse* as prescribed in the formulation of the competency. Two of the elements of this competency specify that these discourse assignments must be connected to the students' fields of study. For this French course at Cégep de Sainte-Foy, students are grouped according to three major fields of study¹: *Communication and Science*, *Communication and Social Science*, *Communication and the Arts*. In addition to achieving the goal of integrating the two types of training, The Municipal Project² also leads students to make use of all the skills, knowledge and communication strategies that they have acquired during the first two projects in the session.

Within this *Communication* course, The Municipal Project takes up the last seven weeks of the session. Students working in teams of four or five must develop a project in relation to their fields of study that meets the needs of a fictitious city that has a population of approximately 30,000 inhabitants and is located near a large urban centre. We also present students with a description of the city's different aspects (demographic, socio-economic and geographic profiles; infrastructure; services available to the population; recreational activities, etc.). After their projects have been developed, each team must make an oral presentation to the City Council of the fictitious city named *Sainte-Victoire* in order to obtain funding to carry out their project. Due to budget constraints, the City Council will only subsidize one of the seven or eight applications presented.

The winning team's project will stand out due to the originality of the project created, its ability to meet the needs of *Sainte-Victoire* and the effectiveness of the communication strategies used to sell the advantages of the project during the oral presentation.

¹ At Cégep de Sainte-Foy, the *Communication* course is the last in the sequence of French courses. In this course students are required to read informative, critical and expressive papers, whether they be literary or not. The oral aspect plays an important role in this course (it represents between 40% and 60% of the marks for the session). For the written aspect, during the session students must write informative, critical or expressive papers relating especially to their fields of study. For the final evaluation, students are required to develop an oral presentation linked to their fields of study.

² We developed this project in collaboration with our colleague Manon Perreault and we based it on a practice that she shared with other teachers at Cégep de La Pocatière where she taught before coming to Cégep de Sainte-Foy. Starting from this basic idea, we modified a number of aspects of the project and we have also developed others, particularly with regard to the written aspect.



From the very beginning, students enjoy seeing themselves as winners and they understand the importance of distinguishing themselves from the others. Each team is required to prepare a solid oral argument that sells the merits of their project, and to submit to City Council a complementary document that demonstrates the capacity of the students to act as experts in meeting the needs of the non-specialized population of the city of *Sainte-Victoire* who are in fact the citizens targeted by the project. This document differs from the oral presentation which is essentially argumentative; it is more of an information document in which students select certain concepts that they have already studied in one or more courses in their own specialized training and they make them accessible to the targeted audience. This document is designed to shed light on one or several aspects of the project. It can be in the form of a brochure, magazine, conference summary, information flier, etc., and it should specifically address the intended population. Students are given considerable freedom in selecting the project to defend orally, the type of document to produce and the choice of targeted audience. Consequently, projects are created that are very varied in nature. In the following table we present some examples of projects designed by student teams. Note that the first two examples in the table were created within the framework of the *Communication and Social Science* course and the other two examples within the *Communication and Science*³ course.

▶ A REALISTIC CONTEXT AS THE BACKDROP FOR THE MUNICIPAL PROJECT

In order to enable students to make real connections between their general education and their specialized training, we favoured a learning situation centred on a realistic framework which, in our view, promotes the integration of the different types of knowledge they have acquired during their training.

We therefore wanted all aspects of The Municipal Project to be in a context that is as close as possible to reality, as much for the students' actual development of their projects, as for their oral presentations and the drafting of their complementary documents. Given that the *Communication* course is the last of the French courses and that it serves as a springboard to professional life or further studies in higher education, we designed this project to allow students to project themselves into their future lives. In fact, we wanted them to become aware of the role that the competencies they acquire during their college training will play in their expertise as future workers and citizens. We also felt it was important for students to develop this awareness in a context of action and teamwork.

In order to accomplish this, we wanted the realistic context to be in place from the very first class, during which the students divide up into teams of four or five. Preceding this first team meeting,

EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS CREATED BY STUDENTS		
PROJECT PRESENTED ORALLY DURING THE CITY COUNCIL MEETING	COMPLEMENTARY DOCUMENT	TEAM COMPOSITION BASED ON FIELD OF STUDY
<p>Goal: To convince City Council of the project's relevance in order to obtain funding (argumentative discourse)</p>	<p>Goal: To inform City Council or the intended public about one or more aspects of the project (informative discourse)</p>	
An amusement centre in the form of an historical maze which enables participants to discover the major stages of human history all while having fun.	A pedagogical document describing the major stages of the history of mankind and addressed to group guides (teachers, day camp personnel, etc.).	Five students in Social Science: World and Culture profile
A sexual health clinic for adolescents.	An information brochure for adolescent girls explaining the various aspects of pregnancy.	One student from Natural Science (present in a group from <i>Communication and Social Science</i> because of a scheduling conflict), one student from Social Science: Individual and the Environment profile and two students in Techniques of Specialized Education.
A science-oriented summer camp for children.	A document addressed to children explaining the main experiments that they will carry out during each of the theme weeks (Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy, Environment, etc.).	Four students from Natural Science.
Construction of salmon spawning grounds and an interpretation centre on the bank of a river.	An explanatory document addressed to City Council on the characteristics of salmon migration to be considered in the construction of the spawning grounds.	Three students from Inventory and Research Techniques in Biology and two students from Natural Science.

³ At Cégep de Sainte-Foy, in the *Communication and Social Science* groups, among others we may find students from the following programs: Social Science, Specialized Education Techniques, Childhood Education Techniques, Social Work Techniques, Accounting and Management Techniques, Consulting in Insurance and Financial Services etc. In the *Communication and Science* groups there can be, for example, students from Natural Science, Inhalation Therapy Techniques, Forestry Techniques, Nursing Care, Biomedical Analysis Techniques and other programs.



there is a class in which the general guidelines of The Municipal Project are presented. From the moment teams are formed, each course becomes a structured meeting with a Chairperson, a Secretary and an Agenda, as is found, for example, in Board of Directors' meetings in various organizations. At the beginning of each class we approve the Agenda and that stipulates the upcoming proceedings. Within the team, students take turns moderating the meeting, acting as Secretary and writing the Minutes of the meeting which are submitted at the next class. Students are responsible for how each meeting plays out as well as for the overall evolution of the project, all under the supervision of the teacher who, in light of the Minutes of the meeting that have been handed in, can help to reorient its direction.

Students come to understand that a presentation must be dynamic and appealing while at the same time being adapted to its intended audience.

At this stage of the development of their projects, students face two challenges. First, they must deal with the different programs from which they originate, even if these programs are within the same field of knowledge. For example, there was a team in a *Communication and Science* group that consisted of one student from Natural Science, one from Radiology Techniques, one from Nursing Care Techniques and one from Forestry Technology. This interdisciplinarity compelled the students to take into account the professional differences of their peers and to be creative in order to find a program that integrates concepts taken from each program, while at the same time managing to meet the needs of the fictitious city. (This team decided to set up an alternative birthing house in *Sainte-Victoire* that would be managed

according to sound forestry principles while fulfilling human needs). In addition, students must also take into account their peers' personal differences, a situation they will surely encounter in their future work environments. To facilitate the management of teamwork, we often suggest to students that they make use of the daily Agenda to engage in rigorous reflection on the communication processes within their groups.

CITY COUNCIL PRESENTATIONS

The realistic context of The Municipal Project is also a determining factor for the oral presentations to City Council. Students take turns playing the roles of city councillors and they must evaluate, using a formative grid, the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by the team that is presenting to the class. This formative analysis of the performance of others brings about a sort of mirror effect that leads these 'student-councillors' to also evaluate their own abilities to integrate the communication skills they have developed over the session. The teacher plays the role of Mayor and questions the team on the project's merits with regard to the needs of the citizens of the city. The rest of the class becomes the Assembly of Citizens and is even free to ask questions at the end of each presentation.

This simulation of a City Council meeting actually becomes a game of role-playing in which students become much more involved than they would have initially believed. In spite of this student engagement however, the situation still offers its share of challenges. When a team presents its project, it must make sure to meet the requirements of the realistic context and to select communication strategies that are appropriate for a City Council meeting. In this way, students become aware that some strategies that are useful in the framework of a conventional oral presentation in school may not be at all appropriate. They discover, for example, that trying to be original at all costs in front of the class may not be at all effective in a situation as formal as a City Council meeting. Students come to understand that a presentation must be dynamic and appealing while at the same time being adapted to its intended audience.

POPULARIZATION DOCUMENT

If students must take into account the realistic context in their oral presentation, so too it must be very evident in the adaptations they have made to the written document in an effort to make the concepts linked to their respective fields of study more accessible to their intended audience.

Take, for example, a team that decides to set up a bi-generational Daycare Centre (involving Seniors in daycare activities) in *Sainte-Victoire*, and to write a brochure for parents. In this brochure which is intended to support parents' involvement in their child's education, it would not be appropriate to explain in detail all the aspects and complexities of Maslow's pyramid of needs (concepts covered in a course on Early Childhood Education Techniques); rather it would be necessary to explain, using analogies and popularization strategies, the importance of routine for a child's emotional security. If, on the other hand, the brochure were addressed to a group of educational advisors from an Early Childhood Centre (*Centre de la petite enfance, C.P.E.*), then the communication strategies used to discuss the same concepts would necessarily be different.



This is the specific angle that differentiates The Municipal Project from the Comprehensive Program Assessment at the end of every college-level program of study in which students must demonstrate that they have integrated the competencies they have developed in their program. In the *Communication* course, we want students to examine their knowledge from a particular angle in order to use it in a communication project addressing a concretely defined audience and to decide on the words and strategies to be used. Our intention is to provide students with a kind of “communication lens” that will allow them to graft the skills learned in a general education French course onto their specialized knowledge.

[...] students feel more directly involved in the task to be accomplished mainly because of its realistic context and also due to the fact that they are in their final year, which makes them more aware of the ‘real life’ which awaits them in the near future.

More specifically, in order to help students to integrate this knowledge better, we ask them to make use of literary techniques (such as figures of speech, choice of vocabulary, connotations, language registers, etc.) in the complementary document but for a different purpose than that used in other French courses. In this *Communication* course, the language techniques are no longer only tools for analyzing literary texts, they are also used as communication strategies. Other tools acquired in the other three French courses are also put to use in writing the discourse assignments in order to increase the effectiveness of the written communication and to reach the “realistic” reader. This involves, for example, organizing thinking, using analytical skills, sequencing ideas logically and explaining examples. In short, The Municipal Project’s realistic framework, which is present in the structure of the meetings used to develop the project, in the City Council presentation and in the selection of the recipients of the written document, constitutes the angle by means of which the integration of learning takes place.

► A CONCLUSIVE PICTURE

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The Municipal Project is more than a positive experience, as much for the teacher as for the students. In every case, we witness exemplary student involvement in the project. It is obvious that motivation is even greater than for the other two projects completed during the session, both of which are conducted in a more conventional manner. One of our initial intuitions was confirmed: students feel more directly involved in the task to be accomplished mainly because of its realistic context and also due to the fact that they are in their final year, which makes them more aware of the “real life” which awaits them in the near future. Formal meetings place the school context in the background to some extent and allow students to project themselves into their future roles as workers and citizens. In this respect we can say that The Municipal Project also includes an orientation dimension since it leads students to validate their vocational path. We have found that, even though at first students in the pre-university sector initially seem to be further away from the labour market, their motivation is very strong throughout the project. The concrete and pragmatic aspect of the project may provide a welcome contrast to the more abstract side of

some theoretical classes that require students to master the basic concepts of their disciplines. The act of designing a waste water treatment plant or an avant-garde observatory in the city of *Sainte-Victoire* for example, stimulates Natural Science students who see in it an opportunity to make sense of, and also to give direction to their learning. Their knowledge of the properties of certain organic components which are necessary for the transformation of waste water or the concepts of optical physics they have learned suddenly take on new meaning while they are involved in The Municipal Project.

In addition, some male students who tend to be less involved and less motivated by the type of work normally done in French courses have surprised us with their enthusiasm while participating in the project and with their concern for doing well. For them, the competitive aspect of the race for funding typically creates an emulative effect. Some of these students, who may have had less academic success along the way, have even demonstrated pride in presenting projects in which they are the experts. They feel very valued when they realize that they possess valuable expertise that will make it easier for them to find their place in society. For the teacher, this involvement on the part of the students is very stimulating and gratifying!

SUSTAINED SUPERVISION

In terms of learning, this project also allows for the direct transfer of theoretical concepts of communication to a realistic and complex situation.

During the preparation of both the oral presentation and the complementary document, in effect students must put to use all the knowledge they have acquired during the session and they must adapt it to the requirements of this new situation which is given to them.



To accomplish this, within the framework of the formal meetings, we ask students to perform a metacognitive review of the choices they make in order to adapt to their audience for the oral and written texts (in actual fact, there are peer evaluations at various stages of project development). In a general way, metacognition in fact touches upon all the choices that the students must make with regard to everything that has been covered during the session: the types of arguments to use, the nonverbal attitudes to adopt in the context, the communication concepts studied during the session, popularization strategies for the written document, the choice of a language register to use, the profile of the audience to be taken into account, etc. In short, metacognitive reflection on the choices to be made allows for the transfer of various types of knowledge. We can easily see that students find themselves in a complex learning situation, even if it has a more playful side brought on by the role-playing associated with the presentation to City Council.

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In order to ensure that the project meets its objectives, the teacher must supervise the students in a sustained way throughout all the stages of completion. Granted, students do enjoy a large degree of autonomy; however, it is important that all teams be closely followed since the project runs for nearly seven weeks and the students could easily get lost along the way. We must make sure, right from the start, that each team's imagined project meets the objectives of the *Communication* course and allows for a true integration of training from different fields. With this goal in mind, from the very first meetings we verify that the concepts that they

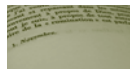
make accessible in the complementary document are truly related to the students' specific training courses and not to their general interest in a field connected to their extra-curricular activities, to complementary courses or to their future field of study in which they have not yet become experts. We emphasize that in order to evaluate students' writing, the teacher must take into account all the language techniques and communication strategies used by the students and then they must evaluate their relevance based on the students' communication purposes. Furthermore, to ensure the seriousness and accuracy of the disciplinary concepts presented, the teacher must insist that students attach to their work, photocopies of the basic documentation which they relied on to develop their project. Also, in order to ensure the success of the project, the teacher must restrain the students' ambitions which are not always realistic. We are talking about a project that is broad in scope and in which the students are certainly very motivated; but we must nevertheless prevent them from overburdening themselves with unnecessary and non-compulsory tasks that they feel ready to undertake. In this context, the Minutes of the meetings become a preferred supervisory tool which allows us to talk with students at every meeting and to redirect them as needed. With these precautions in place, we have learned from experience that all teams succeed in putting their competencies to good use in a most impressive manner.

► IN THE END, A PROJECT THAT PROVIDES PERSPECTIVE

The success of The Municipal Project seems to be linked to the students' high degree of motivation to participate in the project and to the seriousness it brings out in them. The competition between the teams and the students' abilities to project themselves into their future professions fuels their motivation. Added to this keen interest are the richness and depth of the learning. In fact, while carrying out the project, the students' mobilization of the knowledge they have acquired in their specialized training courses, in the three other French courses in general education and in the *Communication* course, constitutes a competency of a high order. At the end of the course, students are truly capable of applying their knowledge in the service of a specific communication purpose in an effective and relevant manner.

In our opinion, it is the implementation of a realistic context at every stage of the project that accounts for our meeting our objective: the overall integration of the knowledge learned in a single program. In this respect, The Municipal Project embodies certain aspects of the program approach. The competencies developed through general education (in the Language of Instruction and Literature) are truly complementary to those developed in specialized training. Students become experts in content, while at the same time communicating this content, because by the end of the session they know how to apply their knowledge in the service of a communication purpose. These competencies will necessarily be sought in the job market, regardless of the field into which the students proceed. This project therefore helps students meet their end-of-program exit profile requirements.

The interest in The Municipal Project also seems to lie in the fact that it can be adapted to other contexts. The use of formal meetings to develop the project, the competitive aspect of the quest for funding in a true-to-life situation along with a realistic audience for the written text can also be used in other courses. In the *Communication* course given to students in the History and Civilization program,



for example, the project has been adapted and has become “The Museum Project” during which students also must prepare and present a funding request to the Board of Directors of a fictitious but realistic museum for a project of activities of a historic and cultural character. There seem to be multiple possibilities for adapting The Municipal Project.

Regardless of the variations introduced, we should keep in mind that pedagogical activities such as The Municipal Project give students the perspective they need to consider their college path as a completed canvas, the various constituting elements of which have been thought out based on a vanishing point which is their own and which provides them with the tools to project themselves beyond the college context. ●

EXAMPLE OF AN AGENDA DISTRIBUTED TO STUDENTS

Agenda for the 4th Meeting (How to develop a convincing oral presentation)

1. Call to order
2. Nomination of the President and the Secretary
3. Adoption of the agenda
4. Reading and adoption of the minutes of the previous meeting
5. Report on the team's functioning
You must discuss, in an atmosphere of constructive exchanges, the team's strengths which you have identified and the problems you may have encountered up until now. Keep things real, precise, honest and respectful. Consider solutions, if need be.
6. Profile of expectations of the intended audience for your oral presentation
Prepare a list of the expectations of the Mayor and the councillors. Emphasize the elements that are of particular interest to the council.
7. Develop arguments that are likely to resonate with the audience
By taking into account, among others, the priorities of the audience for the oral presentation, establish the components of your argument. Do not forget that your audience members are not specialists in your project. Using a table, make a list of arguments and possible rebuttals (see the document on types of arguments).
8. Structure the oral presentation
Prepare the plan for your oral presentation while keeping the following elements in mind:
 - Develop a contact strategy: How to start off by attracting their attention, eliciting their confidence and mainly arousing their interest. How to maintain and then close this contact?
 - Establish an order for the arguments and use a short paragraph to briefly justify this sequence.
 - Identify the visual supports (such as diagrams, images, etc.) used to support certain arguments.
 Do not forget that the speech must only last about twenty minutes.
9. To be done at the next meeting
Distribute the tasks.
10. Adjournment

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