The Capstone Course: A Strategy for Applying Discipline Knowledge
Inside, Outside, and Beyond University*

Abstract

Without necessarily using the designation, many graduate and honours programs in both Arts and Science disciplines have afforded students a capstone experience where they integrate, apply, and demonstrate knowledge of their chosen field of study in a supervised essay or research project. Capstone classes are relatively uncommon in programs for undergraduate majors. This is unfortunate because they can help redress some frequently cited shortcomings of undergraduate education in North America. More specifically, degree programs for majors are often likened to a smorgasbord—i.e., students have a wide variety of classes to choose from each year but nothing at the end of the process that obliges them to tie it all together. Capstone classes can perform this function. They can also prepare students with skills and competencies that are beneficial when entering the employment community. In this context, the paper will discuss the features, rationale, and student evaluations of a capstone class in Sociology and Social Anthropology developed and offered at Dalhousie.

Introduction and Overview

When academics gather to take stock of the state of undergraduate education these days a common lament is that we need to provide more of our students with a capstone experience. While the term has only recently come into vogue, there is nothing new about what it denotes. A capstone experience is an academic activity occurring in the final year of study which, by one means or another, seeks to tie together what students have learned since entering a particular program. Most capstone experiences carry academic credit, but many of them are not classes in the conventional sense. In the visual and performing arts, for example, senior students give recitals, screenings, or exhibits of their work. Students in the natural sciences may be expected to conduct a laboratory experiment and write up the results. Pre-professional programs often involve internships in the final year. Many applied fields such as engineering require graduating students to undertake a practical project in which they demonstrate their proficiency. In both Canadian and American universities it is common practice in many academic disciplines for students earning honours degrees to culminate their undergraduate studies with a formal thesis.

Capstone classes embody the same principles as the activities mentioned above; that is, they seek to present students with opportunities to apply, integrate, and demonstrate what they have been studying, but in the context of a regular course format. Over the past decade many American colleges and universities have introduced capstone classes in a variety of academic fields. Canadian universities, however, have been slow to adopt this trend.
This paper describes a capstone class in sociology recently developed at Dalhousie University: “Majors Seminar: Applying Sociology and Social Anthropology Inside, Outside, and Beyond University.” Although the ideas informing this class began taking shape years ago, its initial offering was in 2003-2004. I will begin by outlining the key features of the class, then attempt to reconstruct the inner struggle that both inspired and hindered the inauguration of this class. After commenting on some of the preparations and research that went into the class, I will outline its intellectual rationale. Based largely on the students’ written responses, I will offer an assessment of how the class operated in practice. The paper will end with some brief remarks on how the capstone concept might be applied in other academic settings.

Features of the Class

Enrolment in the Majors Seminar was capped at 15 students. The class was a full year (two term) elective restricted to fourth year Sociology and Social Anthropology (SOSA) majors. Because the class involved placing students in community organizations, admission was based on a formal application procedure.

The course format in the first term is fairly conventional. We meet for three hours each week and cover a variety of topics including sociological mindfulness, the connection between private troubles and public issues, the joys and hazards of community service, the nature of leadership, and alternative ways of thinking about career choices. The class agenda includes a number of guest speakers and occasional videos. All students participate in a group presentation and deliver at least one oral report. The focus in the first half of the class is on relating sociological/anthropological learning to the student’s everyday life, university experience, and future plans. Accordingly, the major assignment in the first term is the writing of an educational autobiography in which students reflect on the interplay between social factors and their experiences as a student from grade primary to the present (Dominice, 2000).

In the second term students volunteer a total of 30 to 40 hours in a community service activity. While I offer suggestions and assistance, the students are responsible for finding their own placements and negotiating the terms of their service. In view of this time commitment the number and length of class meetings is reduced in the second term. From mid-January to mid-March we meet every other week for two hours. These reflection sessions are mainly for the purpose of discussing problems that may arise in the practicum. These sessions are also an occasion for students to discuss how to fashion a research project out of their service learning. Students are given several options and avenues for doing the final project. At the end of the year the students make a public presentation in which they describe their placement/project, highlighting what they have learned from the exercise and how it is related to sociology and social anthropology. Final papers explore these subjects in greater depth.
The Internal Struggle: Inspiration Versus Procrastination

There is an old saying which states that “When the student is ready, a teacher will appear.” Unfortunately the aphorism was not applicable in this instance. For many years I have been aware that SOSA students at Dalhousie needed a class like the Majors Seminar. What is more, the basic ideas informing this course have been germinating in my mind since the early 1990s. The ten year time lag between conception and realization is worthy of a brief analysis. A key factor holding me back was my own lack of involvement in the local community. This particular obstacle has a certain rational basis; which is more than I can say for some of my other reservations about mounting the class. I was very comfortable teaching my usual repertoire of classes in the traditional manner. Years of habitual complaining about various deficiencies in the curriculum had become a way of life. Such carping has its satisfactions and, perversely, may even begin to seem preferable to remedial action. Ivory tower attitudes also contributed to my inaction. Despite my professed egalitarian values, my classes nonetheless principally targeted the needs and interests of elite students. I tended to rationalize this bias by telling myself that less academically oriented students would benefit, in “trickle down” fashion, from my focus on the top students. The flip side of this dubious pedagogy is that I was by and large oblivious to the educational needs of average students. Only after many years of teaching did it begin to dawn on me that, in terms of supplying students with skills required in the world of work, this strategy was seriously flawed (Evers et al., 1998).

But there were also forces pulling me in the opposite direction. Advancing age and the prospect of mandatory retirement can actually be beneficial for people like me who are in the habit of perennially putting off projects until next year. Equally compelling were some observations arising from my experience as a teacher and academic advisor. Throughout the early years of my career, my teaching methods were generally rather pedestrian. However, I would sometimes dare to be a little creative in designing course assignments. Whenever I got slightly adventurous in my pedagogy one of the results always took me aback—namely, the students who shined in these exercises were often students who had not distinguished themselves on either papers or exams. This discovery both intrigued and frightened me. The fear, I think, derived from a suspicion that the prevailing standards of academic proficiency are more subjective, culture bound and arbitrary than I liked to believe. After all, these were the measures by which I had excelled as a student.

The experience of being an academic advisor was very influential in getting me to rethink my priorities as a teacher. A critical moment in my evolution occurred in the mid 1990s when I did a three year stint as an academic advisor in Dalhousie’s Office of Student Services. As a professor in a liberal arts program, it had always been easy for me to not concern myself very much with the career plans and occupational destinations of the students I taught. As an academic advisor it became painfully obvious to me that vocational issues rank high on the hierarchy of student anxieties. Many of these students aspire to enter professional schools until they discover that their grades (and/or standardized test scores) are not high enough to gain admission. Abandoning or scaling down their aspirations, though necessary, is often accompanied by a diminution of self-confidence. Advisors witness versions of this tragedy on a daily basis. I felt powerless to change the situation, but by the time I resumed full-time teaching I was much more receptive to voices in the academy who argued that we need to place greater emphasis on ensuring that students acquire a range of transferable skills.
I want to relate another incident that gave me pause. Several years ago Dalhousie received a grant from the McConnell Foundation to promote experiential learning in general and career portfolios in particular. One by-product of this funding was the creation of an interdisciplinary 3000-level class called “Communication, Group Dynamics and Career Development.” A distinctive feature of this class is that the students were trained to serve as tutors for first-year students. While the class was available as an elective for students in different faculties, SOSA majors were its largest constituency. I was only dimly aware that this class was popular with sociology students, but that changed when I saw the exhilarating effect the class had on them. This episode added to my dissonance, but it proved to be a healthy, constructive tension.

**Obtaining Approval and Other Preliminaries**

In 2002 inspiration finally won out over procrastination. I needed time to prepare a course proposal. With the agreement of my Department chair I negotiated support for a course release with the Vice-President, Student Services who liked the concept of the class. I immediately began doing research on similar kinds of classes and sought input from SOSA majors before presenting the proposal to my colleagues. The Department recommended that the class should be offered on a trial basis for two years, its place in the regular curriculum to be determined after an evaluation in the second year. This recommendation was then approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

In designing the class I enlisted the aid of three strategically selected senior SOSA students (all of whom would have been prime candidates to enrol in the class if it had been available to them). All three were keen to participate in this venture, for which they received academic credit. We met two to three hours weekly for a full academic term, piloting many of the assignments and reviewing potential readings (See Bell et al., 2005; DuBois & Wright, 2001; Palmer, 2000; Schwalbe 2005; Wagenaar, 1997). Their judgment and input proved invaluable to me. What is more, we had a grand time together in the process.

**The Rationale for the Course**

My reasons for developing this class were many and varied. Some of them reflect concerns particular to my discipline and the type of university in which I teach. However, I expect that some of the reasons may resonate with academics working in other subject areas and institutional settings. Below I offer an inventory of these reasons accompanied by some explanatory comments.

1. *Providing an antidote to the smorgasbord curriculum.*
   Nearly everyone who has written about capstone classes has remarked on the anti-climactic character of most liberal arts programs. Students may take more advanced classes or small enrollment classes in their final year of study, but typically they are not afforded an opportunity to synthesize, apply, or demonstrate what they have learned in the previous years.
2. *Cultivating and validating student’s transferable skills.* I am of the opinion that advances in information technology have tended to obscure the fact that when today’s students enter university their reading, writing, and public speaking skills are often substandard. The Majors Seminar emphasizes all of these skills, especially oral communication because it is a requisite for the types of careers my students are pursuing. Sociology and anthropology students often believe, mistakenly, that they have not acquired any significant skill sets since entering university. I do whatever I can to make them aware of the competencies they have and assure them that there is a demand for these abilities in the world beyond university.

3. *Inducing SOSA students to do a fourth year of study.* Historically, Canadian universities offered four year honours degrees and three year regular degrees. Most institutions have eliminated the latter, but at Dalhousie three-year degrees remain popular with students in Arts and Social Sciences, including many SOSA majors. In my estimation the students who would stand to benefit most from a fourth year of study are, statistically speaking, the least apt to do an additional year. Our 4000-level curriculum was conceived primarily with the intellectual needs of honours students in mind. I saw the introduction of the Majors Seminar as a gesture to rectify this situation.

4. *Creating an academic outlet for the service ethic of SOSA majors.* I have always known that the students I teach want to help people. However, it has taken me awhile to appreciate that for many of them community outreach is an expression of their core values. My impression is that they do not major in sociology because the subject matter is intellectually compelling; they choose it because it enables them to study problems they care about as human beings. The Major Seminar was one way of accommodating the altruistic impulse of my students.

5. *Promoting the pride, identity, and solidarity of SOSA majors.* Unless they elect to do the honours program, SOSA students at Dalhousie generally display little unity or sense of common purpose. At universities like Dalhousie prestige is bestowed primarily on those who study in the sciences or professional programs. Arts students generally, and SOSA students in particular, can feel they have lower
status and the realization is often dispiriting. I saw the Majors Seminar as an opportunity to alleviate these problems.

6. **Countering the negativism that often accompanies social analysis.** Both sociology and anthropology have a reputation among the current generation of students as fostering pessimism and cynicism about the human condition. Anything short of radical transformation is readily dismissed as a “band-aid” solution. For this reason, the course materials include a number of videos that instill hope about human possibilities. Likewise, students often fail to appreciate that the theories and research methods they are learning are tools that, with skill and imagination, can be used to promote social betterment. Service learning can demonstrate this point far better than book learning.

7. **Sensitizing students to the social obstacles and unintended consequences of “doing good.”** Actually, this point has proven to be much more salient than the previous one. Most of the students who take this class are neither cynical nor pessimistic. However, they tend to be idealistic, sometimes naively so. They tend to assume there is a direct correlation between motives and results. The practicum experience is helpful in getting them to see that the relationship between people’s intentions and the social consequences of their behavior is often messy and complicated.

**Assessment of the Maiden Voyage**

Up to this point, most of my comments have been about the concept and design of the course. The first iteration of the Majors Seminar (2003-2004) had some successes and some challenges.

I felt almost everything about the class went well in the Fall Term. The guest speakers were all stimulating and inspiring. It did not take long for the class to acquire some genuine *esprit de corps*. Students overcame their initial reservations about writing their educational autobiographies and agreed that it had been a meaningful assignment because it made them realize how much their education had changed them. Another mark of success was that the students had only minimal difficulty arranging placements in the community.

The experience in the second term was more problematic. As I noted earlier, bi-weekly class meetings were an occasion for students to discuss issues arising in the practicum. Based on my reading about other service-learning classes, I kept waiting for such problems to emerge, but they never materialized (Ostrow et al., 1999). Consequently many of our class meetings in the Winter Term lacked focus. This began to change midway through the term when students had to begin
figuring out what exactly they would do for their final paper and presentation. I offered them plenty of direction, both general and specific, about their projects, but their relatively silent response worried me. However, the student’s public presentations were outstanding. Everyone who attended this event was impressed by their energy and enthusiasm. Their sense of pride and achievement were almost palpable. Their final papers, though variable in quality, were all quite satisfactory.

The students also had a generally favorable opinion of the class. On the official course evaluation they rated it 4.46 on a 5 point scale. Because I knew the class would be reviewed in the following year, I conducted an evaluation of my own last March. I simply asked the students the following questions: Should SOSA 4400 be offered annually?, Why or why not?, Did SOSA 4400 add anything to your education that was unique or different from other classes?, If yes, please identify what you see as the difference and why you believe it has been valuable to your educational development?

All fourteen students completed this questionnaire and they were unanimous that the class should be offered regularly. A sampling of the reasons they expressed is offered below.

I feel it’s . . . relevant to more students than an honours seminar not just from the skills and analyses that are useful for any kind of future work . . . but for the experience of the class itself as a capstone to a university education.

Most students find themselves lost in what they are studying and how it can be used outside in the “real world.” The class helps to break this disconnection one may feel about their education.

I feel like the idea of this class is great. I wanted to take it the second I heard about it . . . I was able to see where my past four year of SOSA would be applied. Before I felt like there was nothing to do with my degree.

The students also weighed in on the distinctive qualities of the class and what they felt it added to their education. Incidentally, the responses to this question are from different students than the three quoted above.

Greater emphasis was placed on tangible, “real world” experiences and [this] allowed me chances to connect what I have learned throughout my degree . . . to the social world. This class also covered various topics that will no doubt be important in the future dealing with burnout, challenges of “doing good,” ethics, etc.

To speak in class and let who you are shine. This class gave us the chance to all be unique and express ourselves like no other class . . . it gives us confidence in who we are . .
In the purest sense it is independent learning . . . that is also peer mediated. We all learn[ed] from each other about the [volunteer] situations we found ourselves in. Constructing the final project the way we saw fit was liberating.

Thus it appears that the students found the Majors Seminar to be a worthwhile experience. Several of the students communicated to me that this class had been the highlight of their undergraduate careers. I was particularly pleased that so many of them viewed the class as a useful bridge linking their university studies to the world of work.

**Concluding Remarks**

To reiterate a point made earlier, SOSA 4400 was devised to address a certain set of issues, many of which may be idiosyncratic. A capstone class of this kind may or may not be appropriate in other settings. That said, this experiment has sold me on the desirability of providing students with some sort of capstone experience. If this type of class is unsuited to your situation, it should be remembered that there are many different types of capstone classes which vary significantly by discipline as well as the nature of the educational institution in which they are offered. (For examples of capstone classes in a number of diverse academic fields, see the Portland State University website: www.pdx.edu/unst/capstone_courses.html).

Colleagues have asked me how the workload in a class like the Majors Seminar compares with a regular class. My short answer is that I found it to be more demanding than other small seminar classes I have taught, but less arduous than most medium-sized lecture classes. I then add that, for me at least, the intrinsic rewards associated with this type of class need to be factored into the workload calculus. Viewed in this light, teaching SOSA 4400 was a real bargain. The satisfaction and gratification I gained from this venture far outweigh the time and effort I expended in preparation and instruction.

Allow me to conclude by stating that most academics, myself included, benefited from a capstone experience when we were students—typically in the form of a thesis or dissertation. Producing a thesis is not only a rite of passage that marks the transition to a new status. Perhaps even more importantly, it also confers new meaning on the endeavours that preceded it. To be sure, an undergraduate capstone class like the Majors Seminar does not carry the same kind of symbolic freight as a postgraduate thesis. However, it can perform a similar function by the enhancing the quality of how students feel about completing a program of study. To continue in this vein, I want to end with a quote from Earl Shorris (1997), the American political philosopher who successfully extended the benefits of university-level humanities classes to the poorest members of society. Shorris’ guiding principle was “the best education for the best is the best education for all.” I would submit that this principle also holds true for capstone experiences.
References


