A Few Words From This Year’s Winners...

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“Share a key teaching method/strategy which you have successfully employed within your domain/classes.”

Integrating the curriculum in class is often viewed as a “good” thing. It allows students to see how different bits and pieces are put together into a coherent framework. Students develop a new set of integrative skills. Finally, it is often what happens in practice, such as constructing a building through a collaborative team effort.

Of course, there are also many other reasons it is considered a good teaching practice, such as the fact that it engages students in the digital age where you are seriously competing for airtime with mobile gadgets. Unfortunately, many “texts,” including your precious slides, are just a click away if boredom sets in.

Why then, is curriculum integration in class not as widely practiced? One can think of the above in reverse: a coherent framework may be hard to understand (e.g. global economy) or it does not exist (e.g. integrative mathematics), and so there are no integrative skills to learn or the practical applications of such knowledge are not of the integrative type.

Still, there are many examples where products or services must be integrated as a coherent whole (e.g. bridges, airplanes, buildings, computers, software, and so on). How then, should one integrate the curriculum effectively?

There is no simple answer, but in PF4205 “Integrated Projects”, which I developed and co-teach with Professor Wong Nyuk Hien, we use two teachers with complementing skills. Next, we make sure that the nature of the problem itself requires integration by selecting a site near NUS for a mall/office redevelopment. Third, we ensure that the composition of students (in two project teams) is realistic. So we have final year students from architecture, real estate, and project and facilities management in our class, and we get them to form teams. We then strengthen the teams with students who are doing graduate studies by coursework; they are usually architects and engineers, and tend to have practical experience. In essence, we have two credible project teams. Finally, we run the studio class as project meetings each time, with the teachers acting as project owners. The class in effect takes place in its natural setting. In this way, students are taught a wide range of skills such as the entire project cycle (i.e. process learning), presentation skills, leadership, project documentation, writing skills (a project report is to be submitted), how to manage design conflicts (integration), the roles of different parties, and so on.

Student feedback has been very positive. Students say there have been “lots of interaction with group members and lecturers,” they get to “work with students from different departments,” and they “understand perspectives from different disciplines.” Overall, it gives them “a very good perspective of managing a project as a whole.” For the two of us teaching the module, we are glad to have beaten boredom by really engaging our students and stimulating their interest in the subject.