

## **Philosophy, Theology, and the Core Curriculum: Case Studies at the University of St. Thomas**

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### **Introduction**

Recently, my colleague Bernard V. Brady, Chair of the Theology Department at the University of St. Thomas, observed:

Catholic colleges and universities tend to have a strong set of core course requirements, not unlike non-Catholic liberal arts institutions. Catholic schools, however, frequently include as part of the core a number of theology and philosophy courses. This course of study, the liberal arts with strong theology/philosophy requirements, is said by some to be *the* Catholic intellectual tradition. At the heart of this view is the idea that theology and philosophy provide some context *to understand and to integrate* the other disciplines. Unfortunately, it is the experience of many students in Catholic colleges and universities that the core required courses are discrete and unrelated hurdles to jump over on the way to one's major.<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this “hurdle” view is exactly what many students at the University of St. Thomas experience and report. Fortunately, however, it is not what *all* of them experience—especially, students in our Paired Courses Program. As a result, the purpose of this essay is to explain one practical way that Philosophy and Theology can serve as “bridge” or linking courses unifying the students' experience of the core curriculum at a Catholic university. My plan is to use my own extensive experiences teaching in the University of St. Thomas Paired Courses Program (twelve years) and the latest version of our Theology department's “Bridge Courses” as case studies showing the kinds of ways that the disciplines of Philosophy and Theology can serve not only as vehicles for supporting the mission of a Catholic university, but as the glue that helps connect and integrate the various elements of a core curriculum.

I begin with an account of the aims and goals of our Paired Courses Program—from both administrative and faculty perspectives—and then describe the various forms that Paired Courses may take. I then briefly report my own experiences teaching in pairs with colleagues in Economics, Journalism, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Theology.<sup>2</sup> I also explain how our third-

level Theology “Bridge Courses” work. I conclude with some critical reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of these programs, and assess how they are helping overcome what I take to be two of the major obstacles in a typical undergraduate experience: namely, prematurely focused specialization and an inability to see the “big picture”—or, more precisely, how the various elements of a Catholic, liberal arts education fit together.

## **Paired Courses at UST**

### The Administration’s View

The Paired Courses Program at the University of St. Thomas was initiated in 1995 by the Office of Academic Affairs and the Office of Academic Counseling with one goal in mind: retention, retention, retention. According to the Associate Dean of Academic Counseling, there are two key factors involved in retaining students: first, there are the relationships students establish with their peers; and second, there must be at least one significant relationship with a faculty member. In other words, the key factors in predicting whether a student will continue their course of studies at a college or university are their peer relationships—in terms of both quantity and quality—and their connection with at least one faculty member. That, in a nutshell, is the Administration’s view of the aims and goals of the Paired Courses Program: it is a vehicle for retention. This is not, however, the faculty’s view of the Paired Courses Program.

### The Faculty’s View

The Faculty’s view, at least among the colleagues I have taught with, is that the Paired Courses Program is a vehicle for helping students make connections across the courses in the Core Curriculum.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, it is a useful way to help students think through the relationships between the content and methodologies of the various disciplines that constitute the courses in the Core. At the University of St. Thomas, the Core Curriculum includes three courses in Faith and the Catholic Tradition (Theology), two in Moral and Philosophical Reasoning (Philosophy), two in Literature and Writing (English), a combination of three in the Natural Sciences and Mathematical and Quantitative Reasoning, three in Language and Culture (Modern and Classical Languages), and one each in Social Analysis, Historical Studies, Fine Arts, and Human Diversity.

As faculty also will attest, however, while there are important academic benefits associated with teaching in the Paired Courses Program, there are likewise significant costs associated with each of its elements.

With respect to teaching, the typical costs include all of the time and energy spent finding a suitable partner—who is both easy to work with and committed to working together—in a relevant

discipline, and who happens to be teaching a course at the appropriate level the content of which is meaningfully related to the subject matter of your own course. Then there is the time spent preparing with your partner and devising common activities, time spent sitting in on one another's classes—either occasionally or throughout the semester—and time spent doing the readings and preparing for the other course. And none of these considerations includes either the time and energy needed to talk about the quality of the students' experiences or the time required to consider pedagogical issues and values.

On the other hand, the teaching benefits include the invaluable opportunity to observe other teachers in action, and presumably the chance to improve one's own practices in light of these observations. As Confucius once said, "In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly."<sup>4</sup>

The teaching benefits also include the opportunity to learn about the particular courses in the Core Curriculum. I personally have had the opportunity to study and learn about the subject matter of introductory psychology, the Christian theological tradition, the basic concepts of sociology and criminal justice, the content of both micro- and macroeconomics, the social scientific principles of politics and government, and the essential skills of the communications and journalism disciplines. Not only have I had the opportunity to learn new and interesting things in disciplines outside of my own area of expertise, but I also have had the opportunity to reflect on the relationships among the courses in our Core and make concrete connections between the content of my own courses and the other courses in the Core. I have more to say on this "big picture" benefit later in this essay.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the Paired Courses Program has given me the opportunity for extended interactions with my current students and advisees and with colleagues in other departments as well.<sup>5</sup> When you see your students five to six times each week in class, and have at least that many chances to get to know them in settings outside the classroom—both before and after class, and in the cafeteria and the library—you cannot help but acquire a better sense of them as individuals. And they have the same opportunity to learn more about who you are as their teacher and adviser and as a person.

With respect to the advising component of the Paired Courses Program, there are quite literally no additional costs, and the benefits include, as just noted, the chance to get to know your students and advisees better and more intimately by being readily available to answer their ordinary questions and address their daily concerns. The practical structure of the Paired Courses Program also provides numerous opportunities for non-threatening, non-evaluative interactions with your students and advisees outside of the classroom and office setting. Ordinary and daily interactions with your students and advisees provide a perfect opportunity not only to show genuine concern for your students and their academic progress, but also to display compassion as an intellectual mentor and competence as an academic adviser.

### The Student's View

The typical student view of the costs of the Paired Courses Program with respect to learning includes the obvious fact that there is quite literally nowhere to run to and nowhere to hide from your teacher and adviser. The students learn rather quickly that the only way to avoid their professors and advisers is to skip classes and office meetings, but eventually they come to realize—sometimes with prodding from the Office of Academic Counseling—that such a strategy is a recipe for academic disaster. They also, though seldom, report that they do not like to see “the same old people” in two of their four classes.

The student view of the benefits of the Paired Courses Program with respect to learning includes the recognition of the academic benefit of greater student-teacher interactions, especially when students are asked to compare their Paired Courses experience with their other typical course experiences. The students also usually recognize the social benefits of enhanced peer relationships (in terms of both quantity and quality), which help with the transition to college work and college life more generally. Finally, many of them are able to appreciate the benefits of the connections that they see and make among courses in the Core.

### **Practical Advice about How to Pair**

Perhaps the most important—in the sense of useful—part of this essay is my practical advice about how to pair your course with another course. I have three suggestions in this regard: first, consider natural connections; second, explore your own intellectual curiosity; and third, be open to trial and error.

While I am willing to admit that all courses in the Core Curriculum are related or connected to other courses in the Core (even if remotely or tangentially), it is rather obvious that some disciplines are closer to and more intimately connected with some disciplines than others. For example, it is beyond dispute that philosophy is more closely connected and related to theology, psychology, and political science than it is with, say, mechanical engineering, computer programming, or geology. So the way to begin thinking about pairing courses is to think about which disciplines are closest to your own.

Second, consider your own intellectual curiosity. What are you interested in? What would you like to learn about or learn more about? What courses were missing from your own undergraduate and graduate education? In which direction or directions would you like to expand your own areas of competence and expertise? How would learning about a related discipline help you improve your understanding of your own discipline and also help you improve your teaching about that discipline? In short, what other disciplines would expand your intellectual horizons?

Finally, you must be willing to learn—by trial and error—and you must be willing to fail. I think it goes without saying (but I will say it anyway) that every experienced teacher knows that, the first time you try new things in the classroom, things may not and usually do not go as well as planned. The same thing is true about learning: every student knows that some things are easier to learn than others, and some things are just plain difficult to understand, even after hours of dedicated study. Experience has taught me that the best approach to both teaching and learning is to be willing to fail, because success or excellence, as Aristotle famously suggested, is the result of continuous and unrelenting effort—it is not an act, but a habit, which is acquired through repetition.<sup>6</sup> So, do not be afraid to fail!

### **The Mechanics of Pairing**

The most difficult part of teaching a Paired Course is finding a suitable partner. Just like dating and looking for a mate, you have to shop around. My suggestions include, first, talking to colleagues (whose opinions you respect) about whom they know or whom they have heard good things about with respect to their teaching; second, talking to your own students about “the word on the street” concerning faculty in other departments and disciplines; third, talking to your Chair and your Dean, because they tend to know more about the reputations of colleagues outside of your own department; and finally, talking to those in Academic Counseling or whatever department or office it is that oversees the program—assuming there is a centralized office involved—for their suggestions about possible partners.

Once you have found a suitable partner, you need to talk to each other about your courses, their content, and your individual pedagogical goals. If you already know the basics of your partner’s discipline, it should be relatively easy to figure out how your courses are connected and how their contents are related to one another. If, though, you do not know much about the content of your partner’s discipline, then you will need to spend more time both learning the basics and figuring out how the contents of your courses are related to one another.

Once you have a satisfactory understanding of the contents of your courses and how they are related to one another, you should then talk about the kinds of activities that would help your students see and make connections between your disciplines. Possible activities could include common readings, in-class debates about common topics, threaded discussion areas on Blackboard or other supplemental course sites, and common papers. The key is to find activities that will help your students both understand the contents of each course as distinct disciplines and see and make connections between the disciplines.

My own experiences in teaching twelve Paired Courses has helped me see that in an ideal world your chosen activities ought to accomplish two important things at the same time: first, they ought to help your students learn the content of each course; and second, they ought to teach them how

to anticipate, look for, see, and make connections with other disciplines beyond your own. In other words, the common pedagogical activities ought to help the students in your Pair see both the “small picture” of your particular courses and the “big picture” of the Core or other parts of the curriculum.

### **Paired Courses Activities**

What follows is a summary of the kinds of successful activities that have worked in my various Pairs.

In three Paired Courses with a colleague in Psychology, my partner and I attended each other’s classes, asked our students to keep a journal of their ideas about how what they were learning in each class was related to what they were learning in their other classes, and had an in-class debate on which particular philosophical view of the human person was more compatible with the approach to the person in psychology.<sup>7</sup> The in-class debate was moderated by our Student Orientation Leader, who had been working with our first-year students from the beginning of the academic year. We also asked our students to write a final, common paper—i.e., one paper submitted to both professors, graded separately, with a negotiated final grade common to each class—based on their own views about the debate topic.

In two Paired Courses with colleagues in Theology, my partners and I sat in on each other’s classes, focused part of our courses on discussions about the existence and nature of the soul in theological and philosophical texts, and had an in-class debate on which particular philosophical view of the human person was most compatible with the approach to the person in theology. Again, our Student Orientation Leader moderated the in-class debate, and we also asked our students to write a final, common paper based on their own views about the debate topic.

In two Paired Courses with colleagues in Sociology, my partners and I sat in on each other’s classes, agreed to focus discussions on the nature of the person in sociological and philosophical texts, and had an in-class debate on which discipline’s approach to the human person was more accurate in terms of explaining students’ own conception of the nature of the human person.

In two Paired Courses with colleagues in Economics, one macro and one micro, I attended all of my partners’ classes (while they visited my classes from time to time throughout the semester), and we had in-class debates on which particular philosophical views of the human person were assumed or at work in the discipline of economics.

In two Paired Courses with a colleague in Political Science, I sat in on my partner’s classes, we selected readings that focused on the nature of the human person as a political creature, and we had an in-class debate on the political consequences of each particular philosophical view of the human person.

Finally, in one Paired Course with a colleague in Communications and Journalism, my partner

and I sat in on each other's classes, and we had an in-class debate on how the various philosophical views of the human person were related to ethical matters and judgments in journalism.

Obviously, there are many other ways to go about pairing courses and other kinds of activities that one might employ to achieve the same end as our Paired Courses Program. I offer these samples merely as examples of the kinds of things that have worked well for me and my colleagues at the University of St. Thomas. It is also important to keep in mind that not everything we tried worked, or worked as well as we thought it might: for example, sometimes the debates were sluggish and uneven, and the final papers were not uniformly as well-written as we had hoped they would be. In short, we worked by trial and error and learned from our mistakes.

### **Theology “Bridge Courses”**

I conclude this paper with a final suggestion about a different kind of course that can also help unify the students' experiences of a core curriculum at a Catholic University: namely, Theology “Bridge Courses.”

To quote from our Undergraduate Catalog:

In every historical period and cultural context, there are fundamental questions that concern human beings: the nature of the universe, the existence and nature of God, the nature of human beings, the relationship of humans to God and to the world, the nature of evil, and the possibility of redemption.

The Department of Theology has designed a sequence of courses that acquaint students with these questions and assist them in articulating thoughtful responses formulated in light of the Catholic tradition and Christian faith. These courses contribute to the students' liberal arts education at the University through the development of writing, reading, and critical thinking skills.

The first course, “The Christian Theological Tradition,” introduces students to the theological frameworks that Christians have historically used to address questions of faith and human existence. The core readings for the course are from the Bible and from classic writers within the Christian tradition. The course provides students with an opportunity to reflect critically on the Catholic and Christian traditions within the context of contemporary life. Finally, it provides students with a basic level of theological literacy to prepare them for the second and third-level courses.

The second-level courses invite students to practice theology by engaging at a deeper level in the discipline of “faith seeking understanding.” Courses at this level

focus on a particular area of the Christian tradition, namely: the Bible, historical theology, systematic theology, or moral theology. Students critically examine core elements of the tradition, such as classic texts, concepts, persons, and events while remaining mindful of the contemporary context. Through these courses, students learn the skills and methods of the discipline. These second-level courses then serve as a foundation for the interdisciplinary “Bridge Courses” at the next level.

The “Bridge Course,” as the third course in the Faith and the Catholic Tradition sequence, will provide an opportunity for students to draw upon their entire program of studies. *Serving as the culminating point for the curriculum, the Bridge Course prepares students to build connections between their studies in the liberal arts and the broader world for which their St. Thomas education has prepared them.* A principal concern of the course is to guide students toward experiencing a sense of vocation in their professional, familial, and social lives [...].

*The three levels of courses, thus, form an integrated sequence* in the Faith and Catholic Tradition core area requirement. The first course introduces the tradition of Christian theological reflection. The second-level courses invite students to “do” theology—that is, to engage in reasoning about faith. *In the third-level courses, students bring theological concepts and methods into dialogue with other disciplines.* (emphasis added)

The most important strength of the theology courses at the University of St. Thomas is not only the fact that they form an “integrated sequence” in the Core area, but also that they help “students bring theological concepts and methods into dialogue with other disciplines.” In both of these respects, the theology courses in general, and “Bridge Courses” and Paired Courses in particular, help overcome what I and many educators take to be two of the major obstacles in a typical undergraduate educational experience: namely, prematurely focused specialization, and an inability on the part of the students to see the “big picture,” which is to say to see how the various elements of a Catholic, liberal arts education fit together. “Bridge Courses” and Paired Courses not only force students to think and reflect on the “big picture”; more positively, they can inspire students to draw their own “big pictures.”

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that “Bridge Courses” and Paired Courses are not without their drawbacks and challenges. These include, among other things, all of the practical problems noted above associated with forming a pair, as well as administrative and employment issues, involving workload, compensation, and how participation in these time-intensive courses is counted toward tenure and promotion.

In addition to these challenges, there is the most basic and ongoing problem of finding interested and qualified faculty members who are both willing and able to participate. The key is finding a critical mass, or even just a few dedicated faculty members, with interests in making connections beyond their own disciplines. In fact, experience has taught me that these kinds of faculty members not only model the very goals they are trying to help their students achieve—an integrated vision and comprehensive understanding of the various disciplines of higher education—but also can inspire their students to see the “big picture” themselves, which after all is just what Catholic, liberal arts education is really all about.

## Notes

1. Brady 2013, 201.
2. In numerical order, I have taught three Paired Courses with a colleague in Psychology, two Paired Courses with colleagues in Theology, Sociology, Economics, and Political Science, and one Paired Course with a colleague in Communications and Journalism.
3. Paired Courses come in many forms. “Lite” versions are those where the same group of students (the advisees of the faculty pair), as a cohort, just happen to be in two different classes during the same semester but with no common activities. On the other end of the spectrum, “intensive” versions involve various kinds of common activities, including faculty partners who sit in on one another’s classes.
4. Confucius 1998, 115–116 (7.22).
5. As a result of these interactions I not only have been able to work with colleagues in other departments, but I also have had the opportunity to work with them on professional conference presentations, workshops, and faculty travel programs.
6. Aristotle 1999, 22 (2.4).
7. This is commonly referred to as an “intensive” version of a Paired Course—where each faculty member commits to attending the other’s classes. This type of Paired Course is obviously very time-intensive for the faculty partners involved, but from personal experience I can report that the social and academic rewards and benefits in terms of getting to know my students and helping them both adjust to college life and learn how to be college students far outweigh the temporal costs.

**Works Cited**

Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

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