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It's About Time

An Undergraduate Honors Course on the Topic of Time

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Abstract

This paper presents information concerning a specific undergraduate honors course on the interdisciplinary topic of time. True to the cross-cutting nature of time, the course was both led by and primarily taught by two professors from the distinctly different disciplines of information systems and psychology, respectively. It was offered as a special topic honors course in the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida whose rubric ensured that enrollment was limited to a maximum of twenty undergraduate, honors students only. Additionally, selected auditors were allowed to attend specific, special events. The ceiling on enrollment proved critical since it allowed for a broad, discussion-based exploration of time, led on a number of occasions by specialist guest lecturers drawn from the arts, the sciences, and other speakers from well beyond the traditional confines of academe. There was a high demand for, and an excellent reception of, the course as offered. Due to the external constraints of the two professors involved, it proved to be a unique offering. However, the following description is provided for use by other teachers and professors who might wish to peruse and adopt the basic structure and/or some of the content that was collected and created.

The Origins of the Course

Virtually everyone who is reading this paper is joined by a common interest in the subject of time. This interest is not rare. Indeed, most people in everyday life have, at least on one occasion or another, had cause to pause and consider the strange nature of time. Unlike those of us who have the privilege to be able to teach and research in institutions of higher learning, most everyday individuals must quickly revert to considering the necessary ways of making a living to support themselves and their families. It is only the fortunate few who can spend their time on time. The ubiquitous popularity of this topic, however, was attested to by the reaction of the students at our University who immediately exhausted the limited seats in the interdisciplinary honors class that was offered on the topic of time. It is the nature and content of this course that we describe here.

It was the second author (CSS) who initiated the project because of a burgeoning interest about time in relation to business (see Saunders, van Slyke, & Vogel, 2004). In her work on global virtual teams she had noted that not all teammates possessed the same concern with deadlines. In fact, some team members didn't appear to care about deadlines at all. In researching this phenomenon she discovered the human dimension of, and the interdisciplinary nature of time. On reading an announcement from the Burnett Honors College about proposing interdisciplinary courses, she saw the opportunity to offer a course on this fascinating topic, thus facilitating an opportunity to learn more about time from experts in other facets of time. It was therefore originally proposed that the interdisciplinary course on time was to be co-taught by faculty in different Colleges, this format being well-received by the Associate Dean of the Honors College when a preliminary inquiry was made. At this juncture, the Associate Dean suggested collaborating with the first author (PAH) whom he knew had been interested in the various facets of time for many years, having completed a dissertation on the topic some decades earlier (see Hancock, 1984).

Thus arose the opportunity to collaborate and broaden the curriculum beyond management issues alone to include a whole spectrum of topics which are documented in what follows. We then made inquiries of the various Departments about specific faculty members who could represent their Department's view of time by delivering a guest lecture to the class. In the course of this process, some administrative issues had to be resolved but we offered the course in the Spring Semester of 2004. In a number of ways, the course was only possible because of the opportunity and support offered by the Honors College whose personnel specifically search for pedagogical offerings on such cross-cutting issues.

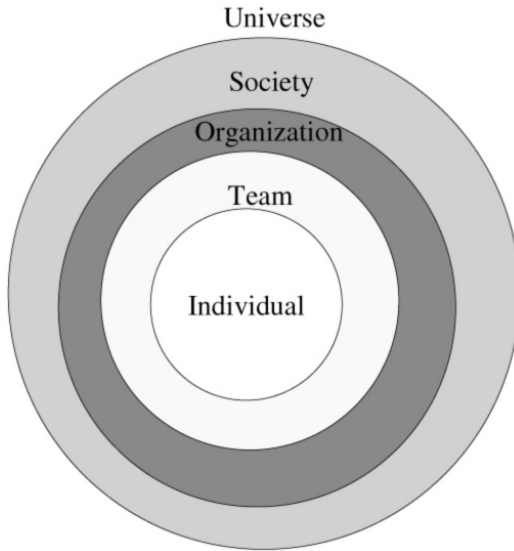


Figure 1: *Forces Impacting Time Conceptualizations.*

The Content of the Course

Time is a concept that features implicitly or explicitly in many different theories across many different disciplines. Our course was designed to expose students to these different conceptualizations of time and the impact that they have in their respective areas of disciplinary study. Concepts of time may be shaped by multiple layers of forces. To understand the various concepts of time and their differential impacts we looked to traverse these layers and study the disciplines associated with the respective concepts (and see Fraser, 1987). For example, at the *societal level*, conceptualizations of time may be explored through the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, religion, and anthropology. Religious and other societal forces impact the cultures in which visions of time are embedded (Balslev & Mohanty, 1992; Tenhouten, 2005). Science fiction literature is also heavily based on conceptions of time (Wells, 1895). At the *organizational level*, the concept of time impacts Management and Accounting applications. Management and Information Systems (MIS) increasingly support work that cuts across space and time (Saunders et al., 2004). Finally, research in psychology about the subjective experience of time can be examined to realize its impact at the individual or personal level (see Block, Hancock, & Zakay, 2000; Block, Zakay, & Hancock, 1999).

Table 1: The Abbreviated Syllabus

<i>Week</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Readings and Supplemental Materials</i>
1	An Introduction to Time	Fraser (1987) <i>Nova: Its About Time</i>
2	What is Time?	Stix (2002), Hall (1982) <i>Longitude</i>
3	Time: A Sociological Perspective	Hall (1982)
4	Time: A Physics Based Approach	Hawking (2000)
5	Time: A Philosophical Perspective	Musser (2002), Grudin (1982), <i>Run Lola Run</i>
6	Time in Science Fiction	Davies (2002) <i>Donnie Darko</i>
7	Anthropological Time	Ezzell (2002)
8	Time in Film	<i>Before the Rain</i>
9	Time and Accounting	Nandhakumar, J. et al (2001), Goulet (1999)
10	Time and Management	Vinton (1992), Servan-Schrieber (2000), T.S. Eliot (1941) <i>The Big Lebowski</i>
11	Time and Information Systems	Saunders et al. (2004), Kelley (2001), Lee and Liebenau (2000)
12	Time in a Social Group Context	McGrath & Kelly (1991)
13	Time in Biology and Neuroscience	Wright (2002), Damasio (2002), Hastings (1998) <i>Memento</i>
14	Psychological Time	Hancock (2002) <i>Groundhog Day</i>
15	Take Home Final Examination	

The abbreviated course syllabus given in Table 1 above provides details about specific topic coverage and the associated readings and Table 2 shows course requirements. However, this does not cover all of the materials handed out to students which because of space limitations we have not included. As indicated in the original full syllabus, the objectives of the course were to:

1. Present the different views of time across multiple disciplines, and
2. Critically assess the impact of multiple views of time among these disciplines.

The students learned about the multiple temporal perspectives from the various textbooks, articles, and from the guest lecturers, as well as from class discussions with these guest lecturers and from class discussions led by us to help them analyze and integrate the material. They were further encouraged to reflect upon the issues in entries in their journals, in addition to an integrative paper and a take-home final. We read the journals regularly, shortly after they were turned in for us to grade. Often the entries were used to elicit discussion, especially from the less loquacious members of the class. We used class-specific funding resources supplied by the Honors College to the instructors to bring in the director, Milo Manchevski, who presented a showing of his various films including a full showing of *‘Before the Rain’*. Mr. Manchevski was kind enough to discuss his work extensively with the audience and with members of the greater University community who were invited to attend this particular session.

Table 2: Course Requirements and Grade Determination

<i>Percentage of Overall Grade</i>	<i>Component</i>	<i>Requirements</i>
30%	Journal	The journal was designed to encourage students to record their discoveries, experiences and reactions to the classes, readings and assignments, and to allow them to integrate and apply the material in meaningful ways. The journal entries were expected to reflect integration and application of the material. Merely summarizing the material was an inappropriate use of the journal (integration and application were the two key criteria used in reviewing the journals). The journals were collected and reviewed every four weeks. Journal entries provided input to classroom discussions. Students were required to have at least one integrated, dated journal entry per week.
30%	Paper	The paper required students to compare the views of time across three disciplines and to evaluate the implications of these different views of time. A draft was due approximately one month before the final paper was due so that each student’s progress could be monitored and feedback provided. Papers were evaluated on the basis of completeness, depth of understanding of material, ability to integrate material, level of detail and quality of writing style.

*Percentage
of Overall*

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Component</i>	<i>Requirements</i>
20%	Take-Home Essay Final	The take-home final was evaluated on the basis of completeness, depth of understanding of material, ability to integrate material, level of detail, and quality of response.
20%	Participation in Class Discussion	Class participation was evaluated after each class session using a rubric that considers exemplary (A), adequate (B), minimal (C) and unacceptable (F) performance on substantive areas (states and identifies issues, uses foundational knowledge, stipulates claims or definitions, elaborates statements with explanations, reason, or evidence, recognizes values or value conflict, argues by analogy) as well as any procedural contributions (invites contributions from others; acknowledges the statements of others; challenges the accuracy, logic, relevance, or clarity of statements; summarizes points of agreement and disagreement).

Student Response and Reaction

The student responses to this course offering were, fortunately, outstanding. The objective ratings were consistently high, although interestingly, they differed in their pattern contingent upon the three different evaluations of the course (an evaluation being required from each of our “home” colleges, as well as the Honors College). Selected written comments on the student evaluations about the best thing about this class included the following:

- “nature of it all, a discussion with no ‘right’ answer, very thought-provoking.”
- “discussions and interaction with speakers.”
- “it stimulated much introspective thought.”
- “the fact that many disciplines were brought into the class.”
- “the encouraged discussions and debate.”
- “the other students were obviously interested in the subject matter and we were able to hold wonderful discussions on a difficult subject matter.”

Below is a sample of excerpts from different students in response to a question about what they had learned from the class:

“Above all, this class taught me that time in the classroom can be well spent, for never have I learned so much about myself and about life in one semester.”

“This class is without a doubt the best and most beneficial class I have ever taken.... There were excellent discussions and debates, the material was interesting, and the workloads were not too encumbering to miss the points both of you were trying to get across. The class has changed my perspective on life, and I have learned concepts that will stay with me forever. It is a good thing you asked us to be brief, because I could have easily written 20 pages of material on what I learned in this class.”

“Much has been covered in this class: everything from the purpose of existence to “The Big Lebowski” has been debated. Something new was learned during each of these exchanges and regardless of how relevant each revelation was, an enjoyable and productive time was had. Perhaps the true secrets of time will never be known, but I would put forth that it isn’t necessarily the answer, but the pursuit thereof that makes life worth having.”

Of course, we have selected laudatory examples but nevertheless these were typical of the responses of all of the students and were not especially exceptional.

Ingredients for Success

The class discussions, journal entries, and take-home exams demonstrated that the students were successful in accomplishing the course objectives. The student evaluations indicated that they enjoyed the learning process. We believe that there were several factors that lead to the success of the class:

- Faculty from other colleges who were willing to engage the students in discussion and who were creative in their presentation. For example, the faculty member from Philosophy illustrated somewhat difficult philosophical readings with points from *Run Lola Run*. The guest speaker on Physics generated so much debate that we asked him to return to address unresolved issues.
- Bright, eager students who were willing to complete the assignments and bring a lot of themselves to discussions and debates that were far from trivial.
- Support from the institution in terms of allowing ‘something new’ and in providing financial support (i.e., to bring in the movie director). It is typically difficult to justify having two teachers teaching one course—with full credit for each professor.
- An intriguing topic that can be viewed from multi-disciplinary perspectives.

Of course, we would like to believe that as faculty members we played a central role. However, truth be known, it was a learning adventure for us also and

maybe that is what made it such an enjoyable experience. Each week presented new learning opportunities for all of us as a learning community.

Things We Would Do Differently

Are there some things we would do differently now that we have had time to reflect upon the course? Absolutely! We appreciate all of the guest speakers who gave up their time to join our class. However, in retrospect, some were only tangentially interested in time as a topic and, in consequence, their lectures were not quite as stimulating as the others. We suggest interviewing potential speakers extensively about their specific research and interests in advance of class. The disciplines we selected all had intriguing perspectives about time. Other areas that the students suggested could be added if we taught the course again in the future were Religion and Music.

Summary and Conclusion

Time can be one of the great unifying principles of knowledge across disparate areas of human endeavor. As such, pedagogical offerings which emphasize both the breadth and the depth of this ubiquity are helpful beyond the specific content alone. Since answers about time are rare indeed, thought and contemplation on this issue forces students to re-evaluate some of their basic assumptions which is always a beneficial educational exercise. Similarly, as these radically different perspectives emerge, the examination of time permits even entrenched individuals to, as Marcel Proust put it: “*make it new.*” (Proust, 2003) Time education is always accomplished by the self. The mentor, the master, or the Professor should stimulate and direct. However, it is the intrinsic and very personal act of discovery that connotes the real act of learning. In the evolution from neophyte, to pupil, to student, to apprentice and eventually to master, the steps of insight are not the dry, piecemeal assimilation of singular facts or sterile data. Rather, learning is indexed by the moments of wonder and the eureka of comprehension. Truly, time can act to “disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed” (Kramer, 1960). In this manner it can be a true anodyne for the descent into purely professional and almost mindless training that many modern University courses of instruction appear in danger of becoming.

Acknowledgements

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