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# Bridging Asian Studies and International Political Economy at the University of Puget Sound

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# EXCHANGE

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# **Integrating Asian Studies into the Liberal Arts Curriculum: Bridge Building, Synergy, and Cross Fertilization**

*Bridging Asian Studies  
and International Political Economy  
at the University of Puget Sound*  
**Nick Kontogeorgopoulos**  
**University of Puget Sound**

## **INTRODUCTION**

During the 1999-2000 academic year, the International Political Economy (IPE) Program at the University of Puget Sound integrated the Asian financial crisis as the central theme tying together all sections of its introductory course (IPE 201). The integration of an Asian theme into the liberal arts curriculum at UPS, and into IPE courses specifically, promoted several objectives. First, the IPE Advisory Committee sought to introduce, for the first time, a theme that unified the many sections of IPE 201, a course taken by a wide range of students due to its inclusion in the International Studies core curriculum at UPS. It was felt that introducing the theme of the ongoing Asian financial crisis would not only spark excitement among both students and faculty, but would also give students a concrete example of the value of IPE in explaining and providing a context for "real-world" events. Second, with few opportunities during the school year for collaboration, the faculty involved in the IPE program decided that a summer seminar centered on curriculum design would afford an ideal collaborative opportunity.

Third, as strong interdisciplinary programs, IPE and Asian Studies had much to offer one another in curricular overlap. However, other than sharing three faculty members, including me, who teach in both programs, IPE and Asian Studies had not, until this past year, engaged in any collaborative efforts. Finally, in addition to serving the needs of the IPE program, the integration of the Asian crisis into IPE 201 courses furthered a longstanding goal of the UPS Asian Studies program: the exposure of the highest possible number of students to at least one course dealing with Asia. Although IPE 201 was not officially listed as an Asian Studies course, the course nonetheless represents the first and perhaps only experience with Asia that many students will have had in their entire four years at UPS.

## **MAKING IT HAPPEN**

In the Spring of 1999, the director of the IPE program requested resources from the UPS Presidential Discretionary Fund for a summer IPE faculty seminar devoted to developing a theme for the IPE 201 course. The goal of integrating a theme topic was to design a set of classroom and campus experiences meant to define for our students the meaning, relevance, and timeliness of IPE. Prospective participants in the summer seminar decided that the Asian financial crisis would make a perfect choice as the theme topic.

For several hours on five consecutive days, nine faculty members from the departments of Comparative Sociology, Economics, and Politics and Government met to discuss various features of the Asian crisis. Individual chapters of the IPE 201 textbook—which was written by members of the IPE program at UPS—provided the angles from which each of us could address the Asian crisis. Accordingly, seminar participants tackled issues such as the IMF role in the crisis, the impact of the crisis on agriculture, the theoretical underpinnings of the crisis, and the Malaysian example of economic nationalism. My task was to put a "human face" on the crisis in order to show students the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of the crisis and, more importantly, to show students how their lives are intertwined with the lives of those affected by the crisis throughout Asia. In the weeks following the conclusion of the summer seminar, participants gave the IPE director their contributions, usually in the form of written capsules that were then posted on a special website devoted to our Asian crisis theme ([www.ups.edu/ipe/asiacrisis/](http://www.ups.edu/ipe/asiacrisis/)). The website features twelve links, which combine individual capsules prepared by the nine seminar participants with other pertinent websites and articles.

In addition to the website, what united all sections of the IPE 201 course was a list of speakers and events. In the first week of each semester, every IPE 201 student attended a presentation on the human face of the Asian crisis in which I introduced eight personal stories from Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand. This presentation was meant to demonstrate the personal and human dimensions of IPE, and by allowing students to meet the IPE faculty, to meet each other, and to become comfortable and familiar with the meaning of IPE, the presentation succeeded in bringing IPE to life via compelling stories from throughout Asia. During the course of the entire academic year, IPE and Asian Studies sponsored several speakers related to the Asian crisis theme. First, Victoria Beard of the Rand Corporation discussed the social consequences of, and political opportunities created by, the Indonesian monetary crisis. Having just returned from conducting research in Yogyakarta, Dr. Beard was able to give an accurate and up-to-date look at the impacts of the crisis on individuals and households.

Eamonn Fingleton, former editor for the Financial Times and Forbes, was our second speaker. In his talk, entitled "In Praise of Hard Industries: Why Manufacturing, Not the Information Economy, is the Key to Prosperity," Mr. Fingleton argued that, as with Japan's industrial success story, the

Asian crisis illustrates the need for manufacturing-based industry and foreign direct, or “real,” investment. Third, James Fallows, national political commentator, author, and former editor of *Atlantic Monthly* and *US News and World Report*, revisited a previous presentation at UPS several years ago by discussing the topic of “Setting Sun: Reflections on the Asian Crisis.” Finally, towards the end of the year, Professor Jomo Kwame Sundaram from the University of Malaysia presented “Paper Tigers in Southeast Asia? Beyond Miracle and Debacle,” while Professor Walden Bello from the University of The Philippines spoke about the “Rise, Crisis, and Future of East Asia’s Economies.” Both Jomo and Bello gave detailed analyses of the events leading up to, and immediately following, the onset of the Asian crisis in July, 1997. These two final presentations rounded out the theme year nicely, especially since many students commented on how surprised and impressed they were with the depth of knowledge gained in just a matter of months.

### SUCCESSSES

Overall, the project of integrating Asian Studies into the liberal arts curriculum through the IPE program proved successful on many levels. Below, I list both the successes and the crucial ingredients needed for those successes:

- The project brought an awareness of Asian Studies, and issues related to Asia, to a large number of students. In two semesters, over 350 students (out of 600 total sophomores at UPS) enrolled in one of six sections of IPE 201, and the majority of these students were not majors in IPE or related fields such as economics, politics and government, comparative sociology, or business. For me, the ultimate measure of success was hearing biology and occupational therapy majors debating with one another, with insight and determination, outside of class over whether the Asian crisis was caused by greedy investors or corrupt crony capitalists. A crucial ingredient here was the large number of sections of IPE offered. By integrating an Asian theme into a required, and popular, introductory course such as IPE 201, we ensured that a maximum number of students would be exposed to our Asian theme.
- As indicated already, a key goal of this project was to stimulate interest early in IPE, and to chip away at the intimidation that some students felt at the beginning of the course. A clear indication that we achieved this goal was the 36 percent increase in the number of IPE majors in just the past year. The Asian crisis theme also provided continuity in academic programming for the University of Puget Sound since our list of speakers and events brought together students and faculty from across the campus. The three crucial ingredients behind our success in generating intellectual excitement for both IPE and UPS were faculty commitment, efficient organization, and the use of a common text. By limiting participation in the summer seminar to a handful of interested faculty members, we ensured that only those with the time, interest, and commitment to the theme idea

would participate. Having a seminar convener, in this case the IPE director, with good web and organizational skills helped keep the seminar focused and efficient. Lastly, the use of the same text among all instructors of IPE 201 guaranteed continuity and facilitated the integration of common topics, readings, and internet resources (such as the web links mentioned earlier).

- The theme year succeeded in fostering rewarding faculty and program cooperation and collaboration. Many faculty members shared readings or provided relevant research materials to others focusing on other “modules” or aspects of the Asian crisis. The existing bridge between the IPE and Asian Studies programs created by common faculty members was further strengthened as well. The Henry Luce Foundation, which in 1998 created the interdisciplinary position that I hold, was essential in this cross-program collaboration since the position was created for exactly the kind of interdisciplinary approach evident in our incorporation of the Asian crisis into IPE courses. Further, the strength of IPE and Asian Studies, as individual interdisciplinary programs, greatly bolstered the chances of successful collaboration. In short, the whole proved even greater than the sum of the individual parts.

### LESSONS

Although everyone involved with the theme year considered it a success, we also identified several areas of possible improvement for the next theme year, scheduled for the 2001-2002 academic year. First, the timing of the speakers did not always correspond well to the content being covered that particular week in our courses. Of course, coordinating six sections of a course is difficult in a liberal arts school, where flexibility and curricular freedom lend themselves poorly to a standardized course schedule. Further, fitting speakers into specific weeks of a semester is difficult in practice. Nevertheless, greater coordination of speaker dates with course material would have enhanced the relevance and timeliness of our theme year events.

Second, there was a sense among some students of “Asia fatigue.” After several months of learning, reading, and hearing about the Asian crisis, some students commented that we had perhaps committed overkill of the theme. Having said that, however, we decided that it is better that students become sick of talking about Asia than not talking about Asia at all. Third, using current events for pedagogical purposes, and a yearlong theme in particular, is always risky since pressing issues quickly become dated as the media move along to the next hot topic. Convincing students that the consequences of the Asian crisis were *still* ongoing and relevant, despite not making headlines, was challenging, but most of us overcame this problem by illustrating the ways in which the Asian crisis related to many *timeless* dilemmas of international political economy. Finally, a common text was useful, but a set of supplemental readings would have also allowed further coordination between the different sections of IPE 201. One suggestion was for the seminar participants

to write topical summaries which could then be compiled for a course reader.

In conclusion, our efforts to integrate Asian Studies into the liberal arts curriculum were perceived by those participating, and by many in the UPS community, as a success. To those of us who teach in both IPE and Asian Studies, the experience reaffirmed not only the value of studying and understanding Asia, but also the value of building bridges between two dynamic interdisciplinary programs with committed faculty and clearly defined goals.

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*The Co-curricular Initiative:  
Integrating Asian Studies into the  
Liberal Arts Curriculum  
at Trinity College*  
**King-Fai Tam**  
**Trinity College**

In 1998, Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut began a curricular experiment which, by the accounts of the participants, including students and faculty members of the College, the Hartford community, and scholars and artists from outside, has had considerable success in bringing the studies of different areas outside of the United States to the attention of Trinity undergraduates. This experiment is introduced in the following paragraphs from an Asianist point of view. Readers wishing more information are directed to a paper written by Dario Euraque, "Multidisciplinarity and Cross-Cultural Study in the Liberal Arts College of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century".<sup>1</sup> Euraque is a Latin-American historian at Trinity, and director of the curricular experiment in its first two years.

First of all, some background about the teaching about Asia at Trinity College. Asian Studies is one of the six concentrations housed under the International Studies Program, together with African, Russian, Latin American, Comparative Development, and Middle Eastern Studies. While changes will result in wider diversity in the near future, historically the College has not been particularly international in its student body. As if to compensate, Hartford has a sizable population with an international heritage and connections. In recent years Trinity has made significant progress in building links with the community. In this context there are plenty of opportunities for Asia specialists to reach to larger audiences. In addition to the International Studies Program, which provides the curricular framework for the teaching of Asia, Trinity has put other institutional structures in place. The College regularly organizes special events and Asia specialists are always invited to participate. For example, we had a conference on race and ethnicity last year, and I delivered a paper in which I discussed racial tension in Huang Chun-ming's stories in the context of racism in different parts of the world.

As valuable as these opportunities are to me as a

researcher, for students they may amount to no more than one of the many events that take place in a school year. As such, they are like any "event" in that they can be described as top-down, one-way transmission of knowledge. There is little student involvement apart from showing up at the right place at the right time (and sometimes not even at the right time). We all have had the experience of being "evented-out," where we as teachers tire ourselves out by organizing event after event that are attended by only a handful, and often the same handful, of students. For the most part this sort of reaching out is similar to preaching to the converted. The believers appreciate the effort, but the non-believers remain as indifferent as ever.

Officially named the Co-curricular Initiative, this experiment tries to take advantage of the space between the curricular and the extra-curricular with the hope of bypassing the pitfalls of mere "events" described above. Perhaps a description of the substance of the Initiative will explain how that is done. Using as an example last year's theme, entitled "Migrations, Diasporic Communities, and Transnational Identities," the Initiative featured a faculty lecture series, a film series, occasional arts performances and exhibitions, an on-line discussion forum, special guest speakers, and a scholarly conference at the end of the year. In addition, the Initiative selected a cluster of introductory and advanced level courses, and a special independent study course that students could take in conjunction with other activities in the series. On average the Initiative sponsored one or two events a week which were open to the College as well as the broader community. Discussions triggered by these events were then carried out by electronic means, in the context of regular classes, and through independent study courses in the curriculum.

There are several noteworthy things in the design of the Co-curricular Initiative. First of all, the avowed goal of the steering committee was to make the series as multidisciplinary as possible, which was contingent upon the choice of the topic and the willingness of the college members to participate. A glance at the topics of the Co-curricular Initiatives so far, "Decolonization" in 1998, "Diaspora" in 1999, and "Millennium" in 2000, indicates that the topics are of such global dimension that different disciplines, including the sciences, have insights to share. In fact, the steering committee was initially concerned that the science constituent of the college might feel left out from this campus-wide initiative which, on the surface, seems to favor the arts, humanities and social sciences. However, the scientists did us proud, contributing presentations to the "Diaspora" series such as "The First Diaspora: The Peopling of the Globe by Humans and their Ancestors" by a biologist; "Modeling the Spread of Disease in Populations" by a mathematician; and "Global Warming and Future Migrations" by chemistry students.

Even when the topic is right, for the initiative to succeed the faculty members have to be willing to take on extra work with no compensation, slight recognition, and a large amount of aggravation. Considering its scale, the