

Paired Courses Recommendations

Brent Malin
Graduate Council
Spring 2007

During the academic year 2006-2007, the Graduate Council Committee on Paired Courses reviewed the paired course offerings throughout the University. Chief among the committee's goals was understanding the extent to which the graduate portion of paired courses guaranteed a graduate level experience for students. This concern was closely connected to the upcoming review cycle, which will focus on graduate education.

The following set of observations and recommendations serve as a resource for instructors, departments, and administrators currently designing, teaching, considering, or evaluating paired course offerings. By ensuring that course proposals, working syllabi, and actual class practices focus on maintaining the integrity of graduate education, we ensure a stronger educational experience for graduate and undergraduate students.

Understanding Graduate Education

One of the biggest challenges with the graduate component of a paired course is ensuring that the graduate students in the course feel that they have a graduate level experience. Undergraduate courses and graduate courses differ in substantial ways as do the expectations and experiences of undergraduate and graduate students.

For one, by pursuing advanced study in a field, graduate students have demonstrated a commitment to a specific discipline that undergraduates may not necessarily be expected to make. While an undergraduate student is free to sample different majors as part of a larger general education experience, graduate students apply to, and are accepted to, a particular program and do most of their coursework within—or in consultation with—that central program. This means additional levels of commitment from both the student and the program above that of a typical undergraduate degree program. Graduate students are expected to become part of “the field” in the sense that they are pushed to produce original research or creative works that engage a larger artistic or scholarly conversation, and somehow push the field forward. At the same time, graduate programs are expected to mentor students in ways that help them engage with and dig deeply within the particular community of the discipline. Good graduate programs will provide students with the kinds of feedback that they might receive from a wider arena of experts on their particular subject matter.

Given the particular expectations of graduate education, the content and context of a graduate level course will likely differ from an undergraduate course in some substantial ways. When designing syllabi for a paired course, instructors are challenged to consider ways to ensure a strong educational experience for both undergraduate and graduate students. Graduate classes are often smaller to ensure a deeper dialog among the students of the course. Graduate classes tend to move beyond the basic, introductory, background material that might be necessary for a class of undergraduates new to a topic to explore more complicated, specific arguments within a field of scholarship. Because many graduate degrees serve as preparation for further graduate work (for instance, in doctoral

programs) graduate courses also need to help prepare students for a future of academic research and teaching.

In a paired course, instructors have the difficult task of fulfilling these graduate level expectations at the same time that they fulfill the expectations of a typical undergraduate course. In the proposal phase, when designing and implementing syllabi each semester and when engaging the class of students, instructors need to keep these various expectations and experiences in mind.

Possible Areas of Graduate Level Emphasis

The graduate components of paired courses across the university already illustrate a wide-range of ways in which instructors are working to fulfill graduate level educational expectations in these courses. The following is a selection of ideas drawn from the best practices of paired courses from departments across campus. This is hardly exhaustive, but intends to serve as a sample for developing ideas for current and future paired courses.

Application to the field:

As mentioned above, one difference between graduate and undergraduate level expectations concerns a student's orientation to the field of study. Generally, graduate students are expected to understand and engage in the larger scholarly conversations within the field and their research projects are expected to contribute to the field in one manner or another.

Assign graduate students research projects involving practical research with a direct application within the students' field.

Practical projects "in the field" are especially appropriate for graduate programs aimed at preparing students for more hands-on community work. By giving assignments that take the students out of the class room, students can think about the real-world applications of the ideas and theories discussed in their course.

Require graduate students to research theories around a certain topic, and then use this research to explain the potential success of a project completed in the course.

Another way to extend the graduate students' experiences in a course is to encourage them to think on a "meta-level" about any or all of the projects they complete during the semester. Using outside research or tapping into larger theories connected to the project, graduate students can think about the broader scholarly picture in which their specific project takes part.

Leadership/Mentoring:

A useful way of making the most of a paired course situation is to have graduate students teach or mentor undergraduates in one manner or another. In this way, graduate students get to engage the course material in a deeper way and undergraduates benefit from additional information that a graduate student's research might provide.

Assign graduate students a leadership or mentorship role in group discussions.

Because the assumption is that graduate students have plans to go on to leadership positions in the field, it makes sense to have them practice this in their paired courses. Giving graduate students the chance to take on leadership roles in discussion sections or to otherwise serve as mentors to the undergraduates in the course allows them to build these skills.

Require graduate students to deliver a lecture to class, essentially teaching one class period's worth of material.

Given that some graduate students may plan to go on to university teaching positions, a paired course offers a unique opportunity to practice their skills as a lecturer. Here, students must think about ways to organize and communicate course material in a way that is clear to a class of undergraduate students.

Advanced level Graduate Writing:

Differentiating graduate and undergraduate level writing may be one of the most difficult tasks facing the instructor for a paired course. While quantitative measures (such as page length) may suffice in certain circumstances, in other cases instructors may need to set further guidelines in order to ensure the integrity of the graduate portion of the class.

Instruct graduate students to write their projects in an "M.A. thesis format."

One way to help ensure that a student's writing meets graduate level requirements appropriate to the discipline is to instruct them to follow the thesis guidelines in place for their particular program. Here, students can think carefully about such issues as citations, formatting, matters of method, and processes of literature review, as practiced in their particular field. This also serves as a way of helping to acquaint students with these guidelines before they reach the thesis stage.

Assign graduate students analytical research papers that demonstrate some critical engagement with scholarly literature on their topic.

In addition to assigning graduate students longer papers than undergraduates, instructors might also ask students to engage with a larger, more developed body of literature on their topic. This might mean requiring graduate students to accompany their paper with a longer annotated bibliography or literature review, or making specific the kinds, type, and number of sources to be included in their paper.

Require graduate students to complete both primary and secondary research for their papers.

While undergraduate students might not be required to complete original research using primary sources, many programs place this expectation on graduate students. Where appropriate, instructors might make clear that graduate student papers should include both primary and secondary sources, combining their own original research with research already taking place in the field.

Extended Graduate Level Discussion:

In many departments, graduate seminars tend to be kept smaller in order to ensure more in depth, detailed discussions of the topics being explored. In paired courses, graduate students may feel like they miss out on these more detailed conversations. Instructors that find ways to work this into their courses can help to ensure that graduate students feel that they are engaging the topic at an appropriate level of depth.

Create special Graduate Student only online discussion boards.

Using course web software, instructors can create graduate only online discussion boards as a way to create a space for these graduate level conversations. This allows graduate students to converse with each other and to talk about issues of mutual concern to them, without otherwise impinging on regular course discussions.

Create graduate only discussion groups or discussion sections.

Instructors who want to create a space for graduate level discussion should consider creating separate discussion sections for graduate students. In this manner, when the class begins discussing relevant issues, graduate students may feel that they engage the topic more deeply by sharing ideas with students of similar education backgrounds and experiences.