

## **Strategies and Tactics for Interdisciplinary Experiential Environmental Education and Digital Media Production**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay describes a series of interdisciplinary projects addressing environmental issues in Florida where faculty and students from different departments collaborate on complex problems and produce multimedia work aimed at reaching a public audience. Through a series of brief case studies, a model of interdisciplinary experiential education emerges, providing a pathway forward for other faculty to create community engaged projects that have real world impacts.

### **Keywords:**

Interdisciplinary Project, Experiential Environmental Education, Digital Media Production

## **Reports and Briefings:**

### **Strategies and Tactics for Interdisciplinary Experiential Environmental Education and Digital Media Production**

While eating dinner with Georgia Ackerman in 2016, shortly after American Rivers named The Apalachicola River the #1 most endangered river in the U.S. (Kober, 2016), I suggested that we find a way for Florida State students to become involved in this local issue. Georgia was then the President of the Board of the Apalachicola Riverkeeper and I was a Professor in the School of Communication at Florida State University (FSU) and Director of the Digital Media Production Program. The Apalachicola River, Florida's largest by volume, was just 40 miles west of campus. That dinner conversation sparked an interdisciplinary project that has established ongoing connections between FSU and the river basin, produced a PBS documentary film, launched a series of social media campaigns, and strengthened the connections between FSU and the local community.

For many years, I have been interested in finding ways to get more than one faculty in a classroom at the same time, as well as get students from different majors working together on the same project. Maybe this comes from my years of experience playing music in bands, recognizing the essential roles of the different instruments and feeling the power of the whole is larger than the sum of its parts. Or maybe this comes from my experience as a documentary filmmaker, where talking to new people about diverse subjects requires an openness coupled with technical skill that, when done well, can translate complex subjects into something accessible and entertaining to a diverse audience. Regardless of the source of my impulse, the university is usually not set up to facilitate faculty and students from different departments working together to address complex problems.

### **Project Nero and Direct-Action Pedagogy**

My first attempt at building an interdisciplinary project was in response to entrenched and explicit climate denial in the Florida State Government. In the spring of 2014, I partnered with FSU Department of Earth, Oceans and Atmospheric Science Professor Dr. Bill Landing and we created Project Nero. Combining my Digital Media Production students and Bill's Environmental Science majors, this class set out to answer two questions: Who was blocking climate legislation in the State of Florida and why? Bill's students were well versed in the details of climate science and my students were good at getting clean audio and visual materials and creating compelling visual stories. Combining these strengths, Bill and I arranged our classes to meet at the same time so he and I and all the students could be in the same room at the same time. Named for the fifth emperor of Rome who is rumored to have "fiddled while Rome burned," Project Nero hoped to begin an intervention against the apathy that Florida's legislature and many of the state's citizens have toward climate change and its impending effects.

Because FSU is walking distance to the Florida Capitol, the building where the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest state in the U.S. makes policy during the annual 8-week legislative session, the class was focused on drawing attention to the climate change issue during the legislative session. In the lead up to the class, a longtime lobbyist asked me, "Why are you talking about climate change? It is not on the legislative agenda and no one in the Capitol is talking about this issue?" I responded,

“Exactly!” This led to a form of direct-action pedagogy, where students took an active role in applying their knowledge – climate science and media production – to the political spaces where this knowledge could be translated into policy. This was part of a long tradition of communication activism (Frey, L. R., Carragee, K. M., Crabtree, R. D., & Ford, L. A., 2006) with a secondary goal of harnessing the embodied experience of students’ first-person interactions and direct questioning of policymakers. We hoped to open a new discursive space while transforming individual students through the personal experience of confronting systems of power.

Student efforts yielded a wide range of products, though no significant movement on the climate policy front in the State of Florida. Students created a blog,<sup>1</sup> a Facebook page,<sup>2</sup> a Twitter account,<sup>3</sup> and a series of YouTube videos.<sup>4</sup> The class attempted to use media spectacle as an intervention during the first day of the legislative session, dressing in Roman togas with head laurels (ala Nero) and handing legislators fliers with facts about the impacts of climate change on Florida. Unfortunately, our visual stunt was overshadowed by a large group of demonstrators protesting the “stand your ground” laws that were associated with the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin.

Despite limited media attention and no discernable impact on climate policy in Florida, the class did have some very tangible impacts. These impacts were documented throughout the course by asking students to answer a series of questions while being video recorded alone in a room. Students were told their answers would not be viewed until the class was over. These candid responses revealed the depth of the student commitment to this project as well as the frustration at the seemingly impenetrable political process. After an initial round of enthusiastic responses at the outset of the project, the optimism began to fade as students ran into the closed doors of their legislative representatives. One student said, “When I started this class, I was really, really excited. It was something I was so into. . . I really love learning how these things work. In school you don’t get that experience.” Another student commented, “Pretty much no one wanted to talk to us and a couple were vocal saying they didn’t believe in it (climate change).” A third student reflected, “It’s making me get super involved. I didn’t know a whole lot about civic involvement before this semester.”<sup>5</sup> The impact of this effort can be seen in the responses as well as a couple of students who took major career turns after the class, becoming

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[https://projectneroofsu.blogspot.com/?fbclid=IwAR1eRIJMbm3v0BPNEN\\_iUhFPPb26xU5hc\\_HmpsKe4JRSIRIp9BTEwCE44wM](https://projectneroofsu.blogspot.com/?fbclid=IwAR1eRIJMbm3v0BPNEN_iUhFPPb26xU5hc_HmpsKe4JRSIRIp9BTEwCE44wM)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community/Project-Nero-249618581880279/>

<sup>3</sup> See @projectneroFSU on Twitter.com

<sup>4</sup> See: Scandal: Florida the “cloudy state”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtRd2fgDIOk>  
How Every Trip to the Capitol Went: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuljfH52RBc>  
Interview with a Representative who kicks them out for asking a about his membership with ALEC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FefuTMkQ4vY&feature=youtu.be>  
Interview with a supportive Representative: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sH-NPTXOgiw&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of student comments and clips from the legislative opening day protest see: <https://vimeo.com/126430242>

committed to environmental policy engagement after graduating and working in politics and social movement organizing.

### **The Apalachicola River Project: Interdisciplinary Experiential Community Engagement**

The lessons learned from Project Nero informed the conception of the Apalachicola River Project (ARP). Instead of direct political engagement, the ARP set out to tell the story of the Apalachicola River from a variety of perspectives – social, cultural, ecological, historical, and political. Instead of two classes, the ARP brought together over 130 students from four classes in three different departments at FSU. My Digital Media Production students joined a graduate course on social media campaigns, Environmental Science and Policy majors, and an English non-fiction writing class, all working in partnership with the Apalachicola Riverkeeper, a local environmental organization with an extensive network of community volunteers. Unlike Project Nero, the ARP did not coordinate the class-time meetings so this entire group was only able to meet as a whole a few times during the semester. Each class worked independently to produce content for a shared website where all the project materials are stored.<sup>6</sup> While the river was the focus of the classes, it was the community connections provided by Georgia Ackerman and the Riverkeeper organization that provided the deep resources that made this project a success.

Ackerman and the Riverkeeper volunteers played a central role in the success of the ARP and reinforced the power and potential of community engagement. Getting students off campus, working on tangible issues in their local communities transformed classroom exercises into real-world work with lasting impacts. Based on an introductory survey at the start of the ARP, less than a quarter of the 130 students were confident they knew where the river was – even though it was less than a one-hour drive from where they were sitting. Similarly, the vast majority thought pollution was the dominant issue endangering the river, when in reality it was flow – the level of fresh water in the river – that was causing the river ecosystem to collapse. The lack of connection to a bioregion is not unique to FSU as the divisions between “town” and “gown” are a familiar trope in university towns. These divisions fail to tap the material and intellectual resources of universities to serve their local communities, at the same time that they also prevent students from learning about the people and place where they are living.

Organizations such as the Apalachicola Riverkeeper are often run on small budgets but have deep resources of local knowledge and networks. These resources were brought to bear in this project in numerous ways. For the students doing video work, Georgia and the Riverkeeper network connected students with oyster fishermen, beekeepers, farmers, scientists, politicians, historians, and community members. The volunteers organized a series of kayak trips for groups of 20-30 students at a time, eventually getting almost every student out onto the water experiencing the river directly. A flotilla of motorboats was also coordinated so the environmental science students could explore more distant portions of the river, measure sloughs, and take water quality and flow measurements. This student data was then added to a large, longitudinal data base, reinforcing the real-world value of their efforts. With a caravan of vans and kayak trailers, motorboats, guides, and safety equipment, the Riverkeepers provided invaluable experiences for students, many of whom had never been in a kayak before. The class became more than an exercise or assignment and instead became an embodied experience where

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.apalachicolariverproject.com/>

students learned firsthand knowledge about the river and the people who lived in the Apalachicola basin.

In return for all the effort contributed by the community members, the students produced some of the best work I have seen from a single class. When my students received feedback on their video rough cuts from Apalachicola Riverkeeper Executive Director Dan Tonsmiere or Board President, Georgia Ackerman, they were quick to respond. The work moved from a class exercise to a project with real impacts that other people were depending on. This dynamic had a dramatic impact on work quality and student involvement as almost every project produced in my class was a great success. Rubrics and assignment point values became irrelevant as commitment to the community and the desire to create accurate, useful material superseded grade concerns. This symbiotic connection between the university and the community is critical and reveals just how much is lost in town/gown divides. The knowledge, skills and tools the Riverkeeper network provided to the students and faculty created the context for an incredibly productive semester and in turn, the skills and equipment the students brought to the project allowed them to create media products that were meaningful to them and had enduring value to the Riverkeeper organization.

In addition to the mutual benefits of community engaged, experiential education, the enduring bonds of human relationships have continued long after the class ended and grades submitted. Productive projects build trust and friendship – two essential elements of successful collaborations. Georgia Ackerman gained new relationships with Dr. Jeremy Owen and Danny Goddard, the two faculty leading the environmental science class. While the ARP ended in 2017, the Apalachicola Riverkeeper has continued to coordinate river trips for environmental science students and students have continued to work on water sampling and other river data gathering.

The ARP continued into 2018 with the production of the film, *Stories From the Apalachicola: An Endangered River* (2018). Georgia Ackerman and I received a grant from the Florida Humanities Council to create a one-hour documentary based on the video work generated during the ARP. With additional help from two graduate students and some new video material, a new film was created, aired on PBS in the fall of 2018 and screened regionally. This film captured the diverse stories of the forces shaping this river basin. The screenings created opportunities for the local communities to see their stories represented as well as raise awareness about the work of local environmental groups from the Riverkeepers to the North Florida Sierra Club. This film also has enduring value as an educational and fundraising tool.

### **Navigating Interdisciplinary Projects in the University**

Organizing these projects provided some important lessons about how to manage interdisciplinary projects in a system based on disciplinary boundaries. The best way to initiate these efforts is with excited, willing participants who are open to making something new happen. We had limited participation from one of our partners in the ARP in part because they held tightly to their old version of a class and were hesitant to let go and try something new. The best partners are those who are willing to jump in and make something happen, share work and help solve problems as they arise. Mutual respect and frequent face to face meetings make everything work more smoothly.

A second key element is the need for each faculty to retain their own class syllabi, assignments, and grading scheme. Departments don't like to share student credit hours so by

retaining each class in their original department, many logistical hurdles are avoided. The key to making the interdisciplinary connection then is to schedule the classes to all meet at the same time! This is critical because it allows all the students *and* faculty to be in the same room at the same time. This sort of scheduling can require some long-range planning as many universities schedule classes almost a year in advance but, if planned in advance, this coordination makes everything run more smoothly and effectively. If one large room is reserved, one class meeting a week can be with the whole group and a second meeting can be used for the individual classes to focus on their disciplinary specialty. Finally, a large room with round worktables is conducive to collaborative teams as opposed to a traditional lecture hall.

One final thought is that sometimes it is better to ask forgiveness than permission. By assembling the faculty team and building a vision for the project first, administrators are more likely to agree to let a plan move forward. The fewer special requests or adjustments to the university systems, the more likely the project will be supported. Bringing in community partners from the conception stage helps to build a targeted project that serves local needs. Building in student evaluation throughout the semester allows for course correction along the way as well as gathering documentary evidence about the student experience.

In a world where higher education funding is often under attack from governments and publics alike, engaged community projects help to build connections and alliances, provide tangible benefits to local communities, and apply the power of university resources to pressing issues in need of attention. Interdisciplinary projects model real-world working environments where diverse teams with specialized skillsets learn to translate their knowledge and collaborate across linguistic and cultural divides. These projects also help us connect with our university colleagues across campus as we recognize shared interests and mutually reinforcing skills. In a complex, rapidly changing world, interdisciplinary, experiential environmental education is one of the tools we have immediate access to that can help us act locally while addressing global issues.

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