

Nomination Portfolio for

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Recipient of the 2001 Regents' Research in  
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**Recent Projects in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**  
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Teaching has always been my first priority as a scholar, and there is a symbiosis between good teaching and good scholarship. I have attempted to model my own approach after that of such great minds of the past as Confucius and Socrates, who were also some of our greatest teachers. We have no writings from either scholar, but only the record of their teachings. Since the publication of Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), the academy has been discussing the importance of rethinking our work on teaching and learning as a "new" area of scholarship. Yet in the works of the ancients, in particular the Platonic dialogs, we have long had great examples of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The dialogs are transcripts of Socrates's discussions with his students and peers, and of the process by which the participants grew in their understanding of the many dimensions of their ideas. They are in essence profound records of a master teacher's development of deep understanding in students. Although the same sort of dialog often goes on in today's classroom, it just as often remains relatively unexplored. Not only are most practitioners isolated by not being subject to peer review in the classroom, but even when we do begin to explore what is going on in our hallowed halls, we have tended to focus on what the modern counterparts of Socrates are doing rather than on what their students are learning. Lee Shulman, President of the [Carnegie Foundation](#), reminds us that teaching needs once again to be brought into the public domain and subjected to the same standards of peer review to which our "traditional" research articles are subject. I have long been interested in moving beyond discussions of pedagogy to an understanding of the mysterious ways we as teachers actually connect with our students and those rather magical moments in which we, if lucky, succeed in inspiring deep understanding of our subject matter in our students.

As an historian, I am most interested in how to teach students the historical method of analysis. I try to convey the need for students to engage the sources actively rather than to wait passively for their instructor to fill them with facts, dates, and events. Since the word "history" comes from a Greek verb of action, *historien*, the nature of history as a discipline is not passive, but is one in which, as Carl Becker once wrote, the students must themselves learn to "become their own historian." The challenge is to teach students how to be historians rather than to "teach them history." Yet this is precisely the point where we often bog down in courses, as students often do not have the background to engage sources critically and to analyze and synthesize contradictory materials. Although I practiced Socratic dialog with primary sources often in class, I often found that my students did not seem to be able to implement source analyses on exams or papers as well as I hoped. I initially explored some innovative techniques to teach basic interpretive problems within the context of an interdisciplinary learning community. I taught a ten-credit course block with a Humanities professor for several years and eventually wrote an article on the use of creative writing in history classes.<sup>1</sup> In this article I described the use of creative writing assignments to teach E. H. Carr's statement that facts are dependent on interpretation and also Robin Collingwood's notion of the biographer as having to enter

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<sup>1</sup>Deborah L. Vess, "Creative Writing and the Historian: An Active Learning Model for Teaching the Craft of History," in [The History Teacher](#) vol. 30 no. 1 (November 1996): 43-55; abstract reprinted in a special issue of [The History Teacher](#) (January 1997).

into the minds of those he or she studies.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite the success of this technique within the interdisciplinary learning community, I still felt that student analytical skills had not reached the level I desired.

I therefore became very interested in technology as a creative way of enabling a cyberspace Socrates to be with them when class was not in session. I have now spent several years creating an ever-expanding World Civ web site and designing and writing several interactive Socratically-driven primary source modules in Authorware for my history students.<sup>3</sup> I was interested in not only trying to provide an environment which promoted student critical thinking, but in documenting for my colleagues the ways in which these projects were or were not effective. These efforts led to my publication of articles that documented the design of the materials, but the historical theories on which they were based, their classroom enactment, and their impact on student learning.<sup>4</sup>

I designed the programs to record student interactions, including the amount of time spent in them, how many times they were accessed, and scores on each attempt. Since history is to be an active inquiry, Socratic questions appear in the hyperlinks and instructor commentary appears only after the students had worked their way through the dialog with the sources. The programs also contained critical thinking modules. I was able to demonstrate that students who used the Authorware modules improved their overall course grades by a mean fourteen points over those who did not, and that students who spent more time in the programs and accessed them more often wrote better essays and performed better in class discussions. The programs were effective primarily because they created an active learning environment for students and forced them to apply the techniques we practiced in class. I concluded that students in my history classes had at least learned to imitate these models of the historical method. Students learned to be more systematic with sources but also to be more confident in their own power to ask and respond to questions about sources.

I have also been deeply engaged in interdisciplinary studies, and have implemented much larger scale projects in the scholarship of teaching and learning in this area. I was selected as a Carnegie Scholar in the Pew National Fellowship Program for 1999-2000, and in the fall of 2000 also received a [Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](#) (CASTL) grant for work sponsored by academic associations to create an [online course portfolio documenting](#) the results of my project. The grant is also

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<sup>2</sup>See Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1967); Robbin Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) and *Essays in the Philosophy of History* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1958).

<sup>3</sup>Readers may visit my web site at <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~dvess/dvess.shtml> and the authorware modules at <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~dvess/author.htm>.

<sup>4</sup>Deborah L. Vess, "Applications for the World Wide Web in the History Classroom," in *The History Teacher* vol. 30 no.3 (May 1997):265-283. Special Issue on *Computers in the Classroom: Using the World Wide Web and the Internet in Research and Teaching*; "Socrates On-Line: A Multimedia Tool for the Development of Critical Thought," in *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*. Special issue on *Technology in Education* (March 1997):13-22.

co-sponsored by [The American Association of Higher Education](#) and endorsed by [The Association of Integrative Studies](#). This work will also be highlighted in two forthcoming articles, one in a book to be published by the [Carnegie Foundation](#) and the [AAHE](#) and another in *Inventio*, both due out in spring 2001. During the course of my work with the Carnegie community, we have developed many peer review groups composed of members from often very diverse disciplinary backgrounds. As a result of their influence, my project employs a wide array of methods and is also designed to complement and build upon that of other interdisciplinarians not only in the Carnegie group but also in [The Association of Integrative Studies](#).

My Carnegie project aims to better understand how students learn to think in an interdisciplinary way and what obstacles they face as they attempt to integrate disparate disciplinary materials. Further, I wanted to know whether and to what extent it was possible for core level students to engage effectively in interdisciplinary work, and what impact interdisciplinary classes had on their cognitive development. Although there is a great deal of literature on interdisciplinary theory and the benefits of interdisciplinary education, there have been few attempts to document actual results in student learning. Most assessment instruments for interdisciplinary programs look at retention as a barometer of success; few studies have attempted to chart whether interdisciplinary education actually does produce the benefits in learning claimed by the literature. Although there is a deep interest in pedagogy among interdisciplinarians, there has been little work to explore what goes on with students. My project sought to provide some hard data on student experience in interdisciplinary classes, and to try to make some connections between the plethora of theoretical models of interdisciplinarity in the literature and the structure and practice of actual courses.<sup>5</sup> I also wanted to document the differences in learning that might arise from different course structures and pedagogical techniques. I studied two courses in the core curriculum at [Georgia College & State University](#): [IDST 2310 The Fine and Applied Arts in Literature](#) and [IDST 2205 Global Issues in Society](#). I studied sections which I team-taught, sections I taught alone, and sections taught by other faculty.

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<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of different models and definitions of interdisciplinarity, see William H. Newell and William J. Green, "Defining and Teaching Interdisciplinary Studies," in *Improving College and University Teaching* 30:1 (Winter 1982), 21-39.

My project was very complex in design and relied upon both qualitative and quantitative data. I was interested in obtaining a baseline measure of student learning styles and their level of cognitive development. I used two instruments that were well-accepted by educational and psychological theorists and whose reliability was well-documented. I had the results evaluated by outside raters through blind review. I administered the [Jackson Personality Inventory once per semester](#) and [pre- and post tests of Marcia Baxter Magdola's Measure of Epistemological Reflection to students who gave their consent](#). The Jackson Personality Inventory provided information on over 300 different personality traits and learning preferences. The Measure of Epistemological Reflection was especially valuable as it provided not only a quantitative result but also qualitative materials on learning preferences and cognitive development. Both instruments allowed me to generate some baseline profiles of the student body in these courses. A semester is not a very long period, and it was unrealistic to hope for dramatic changes between the pre- and post-MERs. However, just as Jean MacGregor's assessment of learning communities was able to show that the skills of students in interdisciplinary classes were on a par with students in more traditional curricula, my data also showed that the students in these two courses did not decline in ability during the course, but maintained or even slightly increased their cognitive skills.<sup>6</sup> The results of the JPIs showed that the students in my sample, many of whom were from Middle Georgia, as a group fell under the national norms for their gender and age groups in their lack of tolerance for diversity and risk-taking, among other areas. Many students had strong preferences for lack of complexity, predictability and clear structures without ambiguity. These results were not only interesting to contemplate in the context of an interdisciplinary class, but also were most enlightening in the context of other data I collected, to which I now turn.

At the end of each semester, I and my graduate assistant conducted extensive face-to-face interviews with students and also [administered online surveys designed to probe student understanding of interdisciplinarity](#), aspects of the course which students found most valuable and why, and those areas they found most difficult and why. Finally, I collected student essays, applied projects, and video-taped student discussions, collaborative groups, and simulations. I then triangulated all of this material with some very interesting results. While the data generated by the quantitative instruments was interesting in itself, it was much more interesting when viewed in conjunction with student interviews. I was able to document in many cases that students *perceived* that they had experienced a shift in their learning preferences during the course of an interdisciplinary course. For example, students who ranked extremely low on their willingness to accept risk or on tolerance of diverse opinions would report in interviews at the end of class that the interdisciplinarity and the global perspectives of both courses inspired them to look at new ways of learning and to value the opinions of others.

More importantly, I also discovered that what prompted the most intellectual growth for many students was subjecting them to assignments that forced them to leave their comfort zone and engage in alternate ways of knowing combined with active learning applications. For example, I had a student who scored very high on the need for clear and unambiguous organization, predictability, and logical explanations; he reported in the interviews that the assignments which integrated these ways of knowing with more emotive ways of knowing were the ones that had most challenged him to grow. My research suggests that active and collaborative

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<sup>6</sup>Jean MacGregor, "Assessing Learning Communities," *Washington Center News* Fall 1991.

learning had a bigger, more measurable impact on the development of deep understanding than the interdisciplinarity of the courses themselves. Teaching techniques which most prompted growth were the ones which combined very disparate disciplinary approaches with active learning modules.

Obviously, what students report in interviews may be interesting, but means little when not viewed in the context of their actual work. In examining student work, what I discovered was that students in the core are very able to engage in integrative thinking by imitating the instructor's models, but they may not realize that this is what they are doing. [Student interviews in the first semester of my research made clear the extent to which students had no idea what "interdisciplinarity" was at all](#), but these same students often did very well in the course. The first question I asked students in the interviews was to define an interdisciplinary class. I wanted to see what their understanding of interdisciplinarity was at the end of the course, and was startled to find that fewer than one-third of the students in both the broad and narrow courses were able to give a classic textbook definition of interdisciplinarity. However, when I coordinated the JPI data on the students who gave a textbook response, I discovered that those students who could "define" interdisciplinarity were the very ones who had a great preference for simplicity as opposed to complexity and for whom order and predictability were a high value. I realized I was looking at the classic regurgitated answer to my question and began to turn instead for enlightenment to the ones I had initially regarded as off-the-wall responses. The most common "definition" of interdisciplinarity given by students in both courses was that IDST courses involved a great deal of hands-on work and collaborative learning, and that they had more discussion and interaction between teachers and students than other more "traditional" disciplinary courses.

One strong result of my first semester of research, however, indicates that disciplinary perspectives should be clearly delineated in interdisciplinary courses. [Students in the Fine Arts course reported difficulty in responding to my interview question asking them to list the different disciplines represented in the course, because they said the arts were all ?art? and so it was difficult to differentiate the approach of painting from architecture](#). Similarly, although students in the Global Issues course engaged in a debate over the plight of the world's rain forests where they clearly demonstrated mastery of multiple disciplinary perspectives, they could not specify in the interviews which disciplines or methodologies were represented by their roles in the debate or in their formal papers. Surely some of this was due to their own lack of solid background in the disciplines, as well as to the enactment of the course itself. Consequently, [I redesigned my own section of the Fine and Applied Arts course to devise more ways to juxtapose very diverse disciplinary materials in the course and created an entire new introductory unit in the course where the visual arts were more often juxtaposed with music, theater, and other resources, and devised several assignments that required students to apply their knowledge to new contexts](#). For example, I created an introductory unit on the elements of art and compared the use of color in the visual arts to tonality, consonance, and dissonance in music and to aspects of poetry. This and other units did in fact produce greater awareness in subsequent semesters of diverse disciplinary perspectives.

One burning question on our campus as well as on campuses across the nation has been whether core-level students can effectively engage in interdisciplinary work before they have a thorough grounding in the disciplines themselves. My research has shown that to the extent that the instructor models a particular interdisciplinary approach, core-level students will learn to mimic that approach. Due to the range of

definitions of interdisciplinarity in the literature, it was important for me to document my enactment of the course. I created a [WEBCT package for students in this course with extensive documentary chapters](#) and several faculty members wrote along with other resources.<sup>7</sup> These chapters document very thoroughly the interdisciplinary models used in various units of the course; to my knowledge, this is the first project I am aware of to link such thorough documentation of enactment with actual examples of student learning. What I also documented was that actual classroom practice often blurred the theoretical boundaries between multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary classes. Further, I also came to the conclusion that my own students were not asked often enough to apply their knowledge to new contexts. [Many of my exam questions](#), although requiring a synthesis of many diverse disciplinary perspectives, for the most part required mastery of basic facts and issues. An excellent student essay was in many cases an essay which mimicked very strongly either the in-class approach to a topic or that of the online chapter. Although such mastery is a necessary foundation of later work, I wanted my students to go beyond that and realized that I did not ask them often enough to apply their basic knowledge to new contexts.

Deep understanding occurs in stages; while we certainly want students to master the models we present, we also must allow them to learn to think in an integrative fashion by forcing them to apply their knowledge to unfamiliar contexts. I designed several new assignments which required the actual application of knowledge to an unfamiliar context. For example, following the elements of art unit, I asked students to analyze the elements of unfamiliar paintings and then write a poem whose use of language, meter and other elements replicated the overall emotional effect of the paintings with an explanation of their reasoning. In another unit, I had students read the *Tao of Pooh*, master the tenets of Taoism through an [interactive module I wrote in Authorware](#), and then play the role of Pooh trying to teach a Chinese artist how to paint a landscape before they actually studied Chinese landscape art. When I piloted the new version of the course, student understanding of interdisciplinarity and the different disciplinary perspectives of the course was substantially clearer. Further, these assignments forced students who naturally preferred less complex and unambiguous assignments to think in ways with which they were initially uncomfortable, but would later report as the most valuable aspect of their experience in the course. Our class session then became a mutual analysis of paintings rather than one in which the instructor alone knew where the Taoist elements lay hidden.

The most exciting part of my research has shown that students do feel that interdisciplinary classes provide them with something that applies to life beyond the classroom, but what they fear most is what they perceive as the “traditional” context where they are expected to regurgitate the answer defined as ?correct? rather than to think critically and arrive at their own answer. Students whose JPIs show greater acceptance of high risk factors were the most likely to be willing to apply what they learn in an interdisciplinary environment to other contexts. My project suggests that educators need to more often create environments where students are expected to do more than master a body of knowledge. My research suggests that interdisciplinary learning takes place not so much in the classroom itself as through experiential learning in unknown contexts and it complements that of other Carnegie Scholars, such as Larry Michaelson at the University of Oklahoma. Larry teaches in an interdisciplinary business program that makes no attempt to

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<sup>7</sup>To visit the site go to <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu:8900/>. Readers may log on with the username: dvess\_stu and the password: dvess\_stu.

integrate materials across the curricula, but rather forces students to learn relationships on the job. His students must develop, fund, and run a profitable business. The results have been phenomenal. In the same way as Socrates maintained that he only created an environment where his students discovered what they already knew, our projects suggest that it is not so much the instructors who should do the integrating in interdisciplinary courses as the students. Further, our Carnegie projects in scholarship of teaching and learning show clearly that documenting the processes by which students learn to become historians or to think in an interdisciplinary way provides special insight into the nature of all of our disciplines. Through looking at student learning we gain insight into the ways in which our disciplines grow, evolve, and become part of the vast interdisciplinary network that we call knowledge.

**Dr. Deborah Vess**  
**Condensed Statement of Professional Accomplishments**

I received my Ph.D. in Medieval History from the University of North Texas in 1991. I also have a M.A. degree in Philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh and earned the B.A. in Philosophy with honors and high distinction from Indiana University in Bloomington in 1979. In addition, I hold the B.MUS in Piano Performance with highest distinction from The Pennsylvania State University in 1985. I have been the Director of interdisciplinary Studies and Associate Professor of History and Interdisciplinary Studies Georgia College & State University since 1997. In my professional career, I have sought to achieve a balance of teaching, research, and service and my various projects reflect my interdisciplinary interests. I am strongly committed to teaching, and have devoted considerable time to the development and creative use of electronic resources for the classroom. I have developed numerous course web sites to enhance student learning which include original materials not available elsewhere on the Internet. For example, my web site for [HIST 4950 Medieval Monasticism](#) includes several virtual tours of monastic ruins with commentaries. My [World Civilization Virtual Library](#) includes virtual tours of Native American and other ancient and medieval centers of civilization, and interactive Socratic primary source exercises, maps, and chronologies in Authorware. I have also received two Model Technology Infused Course Development grants from the University System of Georgia to develop web sites, including a multimedia textbook for [IDST 2310 Fine and Applied Arts in Civilization](#) (WEBCT version at <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu:8900>) and a course web site for [IDST 2205 Global Issues in Society](#). In addition, I served on the development team for the University System of Georgia's **U.S. HIST eCORE** online course. From 1997-1998 I also served as Internet Review editor of the *History Computer Review*. I have given numerous presentations on educational technology and on the Scholarship of Teaching at annual conferences of The American Association of Higher Education and other organizations. I have also given faculty development workshops at Georgia State University, Macon State College, and other institutions.

My research in medieval and Renaissance intellectual and cultural history has inspired me to spend considerable time abroad studying monastic ruins and medieval spirituality, and I have done field work in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, England, Italy, and Israel. I have also taught study abroad courses on ancient and medieval history in Greece and in England. I am the founding co-editor of *Magistra: A Journal of Women's Spirituality in History* and continue to serve on the Board of Editors; from 1992-1994 I also served as joint editor of *Vox Benedictina: A Journal of Women's and Monastic Spirituality*. I have given over thirty-five presentations at the annual meetings of The International Medieval Congress, The Sixteenth-Century Studies Conference, The Central Renaissance Association, The Texas Medieval Association, The Southeastern Medieval Association, and other organizations.

My refereed publications reflect these various interests and include:

"Navigating the Interdisciplinary Archipelago: the Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching," in *Disciplinary Styles of Research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and The American Association of Higher Education, forthcoming 2001.

? Issues for Interdisciplinary in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, ? forthcoming in *Inventio* Spring 2001. Co-authored with Sherry Linkon and Charles Carter.

"The Emperor Hath no Clothes: Film and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Mali," forthcoming in *Selected proceedings of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas*, MIT press.

Articles on Abelard, Heloise, Lanfranc, England: Sites, Monte Cassino, and Assisi in *The Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, Fitzroy Dearborn Press, November 2000.

"Abelard on Meaning and Usage: Some Implications for the *Ethics*," in *The Modern Schoolman* LXXVII (March 2000):217-234.

"The Mud Fish and the European: An African Record of the Age of Discovery," in *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 22.2 (Fall 1997): 80-91.

"Applications for the World Wide Web in the History Classroom," in *The History Teacher* 30.3 (May 1997):265-283. Special Issue on *Computers in the Classroom: Using the World Wide Web and the Internet in Research and Teaching*.

"Socrates On-Line: A Multimedia Tool for the Development of Critical Thought," in *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*. Special issue on *Technology in Education* (March 1997):13-22.

"Creative Writing and the Historian: An Active Learning Model for Teaching the Craft of History," in *The History Teacher* (November 1996): 43-55; abstract reprinted in a special issue of *The History Teacher* (January 1997).

"The Augustinian Mysticism of St. Thomas More," in *Mystics Quarterly* vol. XXII number 1 (March 1996): 21-37.

"Multicultural Perspectives on the Middle Ages" in *The Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians* vol. XV (1994): 277-304.

"A Place Where Virtue May be Magnified: The City, the *Polis*, and the Monastery" in *Word and Spirit* vol 16 (1994): 3-13. Co-authored with Judith Sutera, O.S.B.

"Continuity and Conservatism in the Cathedral Schools of the Twelfth Century: The Role of Monastic Thought in the So-Called Intellectual Revolution of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance" in *The American Benedictine Review* vol. 45 no. 2 (June 1994): 161-184.

In addition to the grants mentioned above, I have also received the following awards:

CASTL (Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) Seed Grant for Projects in the Scholarship of Teaching, awarded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Association of Higher Education for work under the auspices of the Association for Integrative Studies, September 2000, \$5,000.

"Cultivating Humanity: Knowledge as Transformative," conference grant from the Georgia Humanities Council, 1999-2000. \$8,000.

Collaborator on Project Intermath Consortium grant (funded by the National Science Foundation) for creation of Gödel, Escher, Bach (IDST 4950) course, and Digital Art (IDST 3950) course, Summer 1999. \$37,200

During the course of my professional career, I have won several awards, including:

Carnegie Scholar (Pew National Fellowship Program for Carnegie Scholars), Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement for Teaching, 1999-2000.

Powell-Whipple Award for Outstanding Collaboration between the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education, Georgia College & State University, 1999.

University System of Georgia Board of Regents? Distinguished Professor of Teaching and Learning, 1996-1997.

Excellence Award in Teaching, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, May 1997.

Instructional Enhancement Grant, DeKalb College (now Georgia Perimeter College), 1996.

General Education Outcomes Award, DeKalb College (Georgia Perimeter College), 1995.

Excellence Award in Teaching, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, 1994.

New Faculty Award, DeKalb College (Georgia Perimeter College), 1993.

Monastic Research Fellowship, granted by Mount Angel Abbey, Oregon, 1993.

The Arts and Sciences Dean's Dissertation Award for Research Excellence in the Arts, Humanities, or Social Sciences, University of North Texas, 1992.

Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs Award: Outstanding Teaching Fellow, University of North Texas, 1991.

I have also been elected to membership in Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Alpha Theta, Phi Kappa Phi, Pi Kappa Lambda, Alpha Lambda Delta, and The Golden Key National Honor Society.