In his book, *What Matters in College*, Alexander Astin (1993) reports the results of a comprehensive, four-year longitudinal study that involved a national sample of approximately 500,000 college students at 1300 institutions. He found that the particular courses which comprised different general education curricula had no significant effect on a wide range of educational outcomes. The only curricular variable that had positive effects on educational outcomes was a “true-core” curriculum, whereby students took exactly the same courses. Thus, what mattered more than the content covered in the general education curriculum was whether or not that content had been commonly experienced by all students. This finding reinforces a comment once made by the philosopher George Santayana, when asked about what “great books” young people should read. He replied: “It doesn’t matter, as long as they read the same ones” (cited in Atlas, 1988).

It could be argued that a common reading may simulate, on a smaller scale, the advantages associated with a true core curriculum by providing a “core” learning experience that is shared by all students. The impact of a common reading experience on student learning may be *magnified by multiple conversations* students have about the common reading experience, through formal faculty- or staff-led discussions and spontaneous student-student conversations that may “spill over” to informal settings anywhere on campus. If such conversational synergy occurs, then two key theoretical principles of student retention and learning are likely to be implemented, namely: (a) *active involvement* (Astin, 1984, 1985), because these multiple conversations increase the amount of student time and level of student involvement invested in the learning experience, and (b) *social integration* (Tinto, 1975, 1993), because this common source of conversation promotes student interaction with other members of the college community (e.g., peers, faculty), serving to “connect” students with the institution and strengthen their sense of community membership.

Possible empirical support for these propositions is provided by the aforementioned study by Astin (1993), which revealed that the college-experience variable having the most significant impact on students’ educational development was the frequency of student-student and student-faculty interaction. Combining this finding with the previously cited finding of positive outcomes associated with a true core curriculum, one could conclude that the educational advantage of a true core curriculum—relative to general education curriculum that consists of electives chosen from a wide variety “distribution requirements”—is that the core curriculum is more likely to stimulate multiple, common conversations, which in turn, result in higher levels of active involvement and social integration.

This interpretation would be consistent with the epistemological theory of *social constructivism*, which posits that human thinking is shaped by social interaction and conversation, resulting in individual thought processes that represent internal manifestations of these external dialogues (Vygotsky, 1978). Social interactions among students that revolve around shared intellectual experiences, such as a common curriculum or a common reading, may be particularly powerful or influential dialogues because they occur among peers who (a) are at “proximal” (nearby) stages of cognitive
development (Vygotsky, 1978) and (b) have similar levels of experience with respect to the concepts being discussed (Whitman, 1988).

Lastly, I think it reasonable to contend that the positive impact of shared intellectual conversations centering around a common reading experience are magnified further when these conversations are relevant to a common transitional issues that students are experiencing at the time of the reading (e.g., issues relating to the transition from high school to college, or to the transition from work world to college). Such transitional relevance increases the personal meaning and significance of the common reading for students, because they experience it at a time when they may be most “ready” or receptive to its message. If this contention is accurate, then an optimal reading would be one that is not only commonly experienced by all students, but also has common relevance for a life transition that all students are currently experiencing.

References:


