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The Use of Civil Discourse to Facilitate Liberal Arts and Liberal Education

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Abstract: Over the last decade or so, several factors have affected the "attractiveness" of liberal arts universities such as the rise in post-secondary vocational institutions, legislation directed at educational requirements, a focus on the hard sciences, technological advances, and the floundering economy. The combined impact of these factors has affected students' motivation to attend a liberal arts university. For example, the vocational school path where there is usually a two-year commitment to study specifically the material that will prepare them for their line of work compared to a liberal arts' four/five/six-year commitment to take classes in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, which may or may not be necessary for their career choice, makes the vocational path very appealing. In response, there has been a general push to make the traditional college more utilitarian, a movement that is packaged as Liberal Education. Liberal education, defined by focusing more on general processes that are necessary in students' lives after college, certainly has its benefits; however, the authors argue that it should still be grounded in the content-focus of a tradition liberal arts approach. Such a liberal arts approach is critical because it provides a deep, broad, and well-rounded education that results in students who are civic-minded, socially conscious, and, ultimately, better leaders. While liberal education appears to be a necessary and useful path, the liberal arts connection need not be lost. This paper introduces a class project that utilizes both for a sophomore-level core-curriculum course. In 2006, Dr. Judy Harrington and I began what turned out to be a capstone project for our Life Span Development course – the Civil Discourse Project. Originally, the project started as a means to develop critical thinking and intrinsic motivation for student learning. However, after refining the project over the last three years, the project has evolved into a multifaceted teaching and learning tool that embodies the characteristics of both liberal education and content-dependent qualities consistent with the liberal arts tradition. This paper will outline changes in education over the last decade that have affected liberal arts education in the U.S., the distinctions between liberal arts and liberal education, and the evolution and key elements of the civil discourse project.

Keywords: Civil Discourse, Liberal Arts, Liberal Education,

Introduction

Changes in recent years have influenced how the liberal arts are incorporated into higher education. Different educational options in higher education, legislative mandates, and economic factors have all negatively affected the presentation/engagement/promulgation of the liberal arts. At the same time, a new concept has been conceptualized that is commonly linked with liberal arts – Liberal Education; however, the connection between the two is not as implicit as it appears. These two concepts are not the same, and some have argued that the latter is not a

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good addition, but these authors feel both are necessary, and they can be used together successfully to achieve the best of both. A liberal arts curriculum should be designed to develop the content, and each specific class and projects should be used to deliver both the content and process. While doing so can take effort, it is currently being done. The liberal arts element need not be neglected. General Education (Gen Ed) courses, which are typically the vehicle to deliver the liberal arts content to every major in a four-year university, need to be carefully adhered to and ensured to give that general, necessary knowledge. It is within each class, whether it be Gen Ed or major-specific, that course projects can be assigned that test content knowledge and also develop process skills. It is in this thinking that the idea of the Civil Discourse was born for the authors' Life Span Development classes. This paper will discuss a few of the factors that have influenced liberal arts education over the last decade or so. It will then discuss the distinctions between liberal arts and liberal education. Lastly, it will highlight the development of a capstone project in a class that is part of a two year, content-focused, core-curriculum that marries both the concepts.

Factors that Influence a Liberal Arts Education

While this is certainly not a comprehensive list, there are four factors that have had the largest effect on the direction of higher education, and liberal arts education specifically. Note, these factors are not presented in any specific order, and in most cases they overlap. Having said that, one factor that has affected liberal arts universities is the rise in vocational institutions. Vocational colleges are not new, but the focus on marketable work skills that eschews the "unnecessary" classes has appeal to many recent high school graduates because it appears to be parsimonious. Vocational colleges that shorten the education process have utility. The average eighteen year old would probably see this as an enticing option.

Legislative changes have also influenced how liberal arts are utilized in our educational system. The most prominent of the legislation is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), which essentially rewarded/punished school districts based on their students' proficiency in reading and math. So, naturally, schools focused more in those specific areas, to the detriment of the liberal arts classes (Finn et al., 2007). The Obama administration is currently calling for reform in the NCLBA because of the unintended consequences of the law. Proposed changes will allow for other academic foci that will be geared to preparing students for college, expanding from the limited focus of just math and reading. It wasn't just legislation, however, that directed the focus away from liberal arts content.

Over the last 20 years, there have been unprecedented advances in technology. As exciting as it has been, the boon has had an interesting impact on liberal arts education. First, we have access to information in an instant. Before the internet, books and teachers were the bastions of information. Now, students have laptops and cell phones that leave them a few keystrokes away from Wikipedia. The information that is accessed is unfiltered, and accuracy and ownership of knowledge seem to be secondary concerns. Second, there are so many new industries and jobs that have blossomed from the technological advancements. While it is difficult for companies to keep up with identifying what is needed now and in the future, it is particularly difficult for colleges. This is part of the lure of the vocational colleges that can focus on such changes and cater to the IT-gifted, who as a group tend to favor the trade off of liberal arts classes for

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industry-specific classes. Lastly, the technology disconnect has changed how we communicate with each other. It is common when waiting at a stop light to see someone in the next car talking on a cellular phone or texting a message. While the technology is changing, the need to communicate with each other will not go away. Research has shown that people communicate differently when they are not face to face (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Spears & Lea, 1992). The skills necessary to expresses one's opinions and attitudes, and engage in a civil manner over email or through blogging are quite different than doing so in person. The potential deterioration of the ability to effectively communicate may be a sad result of technology, and there is a clear need to address its inherent drawbacks.

The last factor, which is interconnected with the previously mentioned factors, is the slumping economy. When jobs are scarce and money is tight, some decisions seem to be clearer. Although vocational schools are typically expensive, the direct payoff is evident – and the dangling carrot of a paycheck in two years is very enticing. Furthermore, when federal and state budgets are constricted, everyone feels the pinch, including school systems. So, already under-funded schools found themselves with even smaller budgets (Ferrero, 2007). The lack of money encouraged schools to focus more on reading and math, the main benchmarks used to assess funding for K-12.

Liberal Arts and Liberal Education

The changes mentioned above have resulted in a narrowing of career education. This is particularly troubling considering that often the students who decide on the narrower career options will be among groups already marginalized in society. That is, students who are more likely to choose a vocational or community college are demographically more likely to be ethnic minorities and have low socioeconomic statuses. Furthermore, it is believed that success in any profession may be more likely for students who have a liberal arts education, which contributes to a broad and deep general education that prepares them to engage in all the dialogues of life (Baratz-Snowden, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2009).

In the spirit of the liberal arts, a new approach has developed that is intended to promote broad intellectual and personal development – liberal education. While there are some similarities, liberal arts and liberal education are different concepts. Liberal arts describes content, where the focus is to give students a base of general knowledge in a variety of fields so that they can better analyze, evaluate, and integrate the broad education (O'Sullivan, 2009). Historically, the content of the liberal arts is the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) (Greater Expectations, 2002). Liberal education, on the other hand, characterizes a process: the development of fundamental and generalizable skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skill, and the ability to apply knowledge in a real-world setting (Ferrero, 2007; Greater Expectations, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2009; Walsh & Cuba, 2009).

There has been some momentum behind the liberal education approach. The biggest push has come from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the largest organization in the United States devoted to undergraduate education. In 2005, AAC&U started

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a major liberal education initiative, LEAP, an optimistically titled acronym that stands for Liberal Education and America's Promise. According to a presentation by Carol Geary Schneider, AACU President, on March 2, 2010, at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, college graduates do not lack knowledge, they lack real-world skills (e.g., communication, ethics, social responsibility, etc.). This deficit leads to an emphasis on short-term goals. A study conducted by Hart Research Associates (Raising the Bar, 2010) for the AAC&U indicated that 89% of employers want employees with improved written and oral communication skills, 75% wanted employees with greater ethical decision-making, and 79% wanted employees with the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings. Schneider argues that more of a focus on liberal education will empower students and prepare them for life after school by developing the processes that lead to strong intellectual and practical skills that can be used across different milieu.

Despite its clear benefits, there is controversy that suggests that liberal education takes some of the focus away from the critical elements of the liberal arts. To focus on the process but not the content waters down the meaning that should be associated with a liberal arts college (O'Sullivan, 2009). However, it is the assertion of this paper that it is possible to have the best of both of these approaches. It is possible to have common content-based curricula, where faculty organize courses into a coherent pattern that will provide depth and breadth of knowledge, and to have a liberal education-based focus that cultivates the process of integrating what students learn. In fact, we feel that a quality university education requires that both are put together. The last part of this paper will outline our efforts to fit a liberal education into an already established content-focused program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Civil Discourse Capstone Project – Delivering content AND process

For the marriage of content and process to work, a shared content-based curriculum is mandatory. Fortunately, this is the case for traditional liberal arts universities, and it was true of the university for which this project was born, the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). The class for which the civil discourse was designed had the extra benefit of being a part of the Goodrich Scholarship Program (GSP) that had its own curriculum designed to supplement the general education delivered by UNO. So, before discussing the class project used to bring the liberal arts and education together, it is prudent to discuss the general, shared education our students receive as being part of the GSP.

GSP was started in 1972 and is a state-funded, merit-based scholarship program that provides essentially a full-ride scholarship for applicants who meet financial need requirements and are Nebraska residents who have fewer than 31 earned college credits. Each year, GSP selects approximately 70 scholars. The program consists of seven faculty, two staff members, and three graduate teaching assistants. As a condition of accepting the scholarship, Goodrich Scholars are required to take five Goodrich courses that are taught by Goodrich faculty in which only Goodrich Scholars can enroll. This curriculum is designed with a specific purpose, which follows a coherent, systematic approach to a body of knowledge that supplements the liberal arts focus of the university. In the liberal arts tradition, the curriculum is designed to give Goodrich

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scholars depth and breadth in areas that are important for them as students and as citizens in a larger community, regardless of their formal major.

In addition to having small classes that promote frequent student-student and student-professor interaction, GSP classes are tiered in terms of content (Appendix A). The first semester classes are designed to acclimate students to college life, to build on their necessary academic skills (Writing Intensive), and to start them on a journey of perspective taking. The first perspective that is explored is through their own eyes. The assignments that are given in the English courses (1150 and 1160) allow students to compose papers that develop and refine their writing skills, but the topics they write on are designed to allow them self-description/exploration. This focus is continued in Autobiographical Reading and Writing, where students write about and read to others their own stories. The second semester in Goodrich continues the theme of a personal perspective, but through the lens of their cultural experiences as shown in a six-hour humanities class. The third and fourth semesters in Goodrich result in a change in perspective once more. In Social Issues, students explore issues that impact them arising from interactions in society. In Life Span Development, students explore their own life journey through study of developmental theory and life span concepts.

This curriculum is designed to give each student the same basic, general knowledge we feel is necessary for all citizens, all students who will someday earn a bachelor's degree. In this way, in our program, the liberal arts is very much alive, very much a critical part of our students education. However, we feel that the key elements in liberal education outlined above are critical too, which is why we take efforts to develop and utilize class assignments that develop those process skills necessary in a post-academic life. One new project that we developed for Life Span Development is the focus of this article, the Civil Discourse.

Civil discourse is essentially an engaged conversation where the purpose is to enhance understanding. Civil discourse is our ability to have conversations about topics upon which we disagree as well as our ability to listen to each others' perspective. Although using civil discourse as a project was new for our class, the concept of civil dialogue as an important skill in society, which if used correctly can hone knowledge and broaden perspectives, is not new. In fact, this is one of the oldest activities utilized by scholars. The Socratic Method, which dates back to before 400 BC, used dialogue and strategic questioning to explore and identify the weakness or ignorance of interlocutors' positions on abstract concepts (Benson, 2000; Brickhouse, 2000; Guthrie, 1968). This method is still used by teachers today, particularly in graduate law programs. In a similar vein, the concept of deliberation, particularly with regard to politics, is a critical tool to achieve a more refined and knowledgeable viewpoint (Dewey, 1927; Habermas, 1983). Deliberation relies on rational and voluntary discussions of informed citizens (Min, 2007), and the discussions require egalitarianism, critical reasoning, and active listening (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). By whatever name, the process of engaging in a civil conversation on compelling and abstract topics has become a tried and true practice in the real world, and it improves our ability to refine and make arguments, ultimately improving the quality of our opinions (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2002; Cooper, 2007). Thus, the implementation of such a project is certainly in line with the liberal education paradigm.

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The main impetus of the Civil Discourse Project occurred during a conversation between Dr. Judy Harrington and myself in 2006. We were both teaching Life Span Development and were brainstorming new ways to engage our students while continuing to cultivate their critical reasoning and the bond they had with each other. We noticed that within our respective classes our students knew each other well, but they tended to be less familiar with the Goodrich Scholars in the other classes. So, instead of creating a learning community among the entire entering class, sometimes smaller pockets of student networks would form. Overall, this is not problematic, but Dr. Harrington and I decided to take advantage of the fact that we were offering the same course during the same semester to bring both classes together. The result of that 2006 discussion was to assign a "class vs. class" debate, where her class and my class would debate each other on a controversial life span topic.

We chose to incorporate a debate for three main reasons. First, a debate allowed our classes to prepare independently of each other. Because our classes met at different times on the same day, we had to maximize the amount of time each class could work independently and minimize the amount of time we would have to bring the two classes together. The debate allowed us to prepare our classes independently and arrange a one-time debate day that was agreed upon by each class early in the semester. Second, a debate lent itself to several of the key themes in the life span course. As with any social science, there are several issues that don't have a clear right or wrong option. Thus, a more thorough understanding of the topic could be developed through looking at the topic from more than one perspective. Third, we felt the debate format would be engaging for our students. We designed the debate so that students could vote on the topic they were to debate from a list of appropriate topics. While the topic was open to vote, the side each team would argue would be decided by a coin flip. This reinforced the concept of perspective, which the Goodrich curriculum cultivated. Originally, we felt that setting up a debate would increase the motivation for the project. That is, the competition that is inherent in a debate on a topic of their own choice seemed to be a formula for increasing students' intrinsic motivation.

In order to incorporate debate into a class that was traditionally based on lecture and small group discussion, we designed several mini-debates among teams within the classroom. Through the mini-debates, we were able to teach the students the basic paradigm of debates, develop their skills in that format, and get them prepared for the capstone project for the course, the class versus class debate. As expected, the inaugural debate in 2006 engaged students. They were very motivated for the project and reported satisfaction with the change to the curriculum. Thus, one of the goals of the project, to engage students, was successful. Also, it was clear based on the reports that were required before the actual debate and the arguments that were posed in the debates that students composed and developed critical reasoning in the process of preparing for the debate. Lastly, it also appeared that the students were given a lesson in "perspective-taking." This was concluded from both the performance in the debate and the qualitative feedback collected from the students after the debates were over. Remember, the students voted on the topic they were going to debate, but the actual side they had to defend was selected by chance. Thus, while students may have picked a topic they were excited about, many had to defend a side that they did not agree with. This was purposeful; oftentimes people do not look for confirmatory evidence or arguments against their own beliefs. The process of having to argue a side for which is one does not agree was intended to broaden perspective. The feedback we

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collected, pointed in this direction. So, naturally, Dr. Harrington and I were very pleased with the new project. However, as we soon discovered, change was coming.

The following year, in 2007, we continued with the debate design. Students continued to be engaged, and results indicated that critical reasoning continued to be used. However, we began to notice that students were overwhelmingly focused on the need to win. The class discussion following each debate typically revolved around students asking, "Who won?" Initially, we thought this interest in the process was evidence towards its effect. But, we found that students became increasingly dogmatic, and strangely they found their side more compelling after having debated even if not so strongly before the debate; the goal of the debate was to open their minds, but we weren't sure this is what was happening. It was in 2008 that we both noticed that all of the goals we were trying to cultivate from the debate were not being met.

The onset of 2008 proved promising for our debate project. Since moving to a debate for a capstone project, we incorporated the Presidential and Vice Presidential debates into the semester. Because we typically used contemporary issues to illustrate the importance of their learning in our classes, linking our nation's tradition of having the candidates meet in a public forum to discuss the most pressing issues in a debate seemed natural. However, after watching each of the debates, Dr. Harrington and I realized that the status quo we had established in 2006 needed refinement. Just as what happened in our classes, it was apparent that the national debates resulted less in actual learning and more in pundits deciding who won; with the criterion often being "the person didn't do as badly as expected." Despite the connection between the course project and real life, it was clear that the third goal, and probably the most important, was not being met. Students were not opening their minds and evaluating a topic from many perspectives. Instead, they began to focus on the artificial dichotomy that a debate creates. Just as the presidential debates had done, we allowed our students to focus on winning and less on the process of exploring various perspectives; American politics perhaps best exemplifies what happens when people have little knowledge in common, share few values, and have scant interest in what others think. It was at this point, after realizing that the debate was falling short from cultivating real and applicable perspective taking, that the idea of a Civil Discourse was born.

As mentioned earlier, the motivation was to create a project that engaged students, stimulated critical reasoning, and developed perspective-taking. Ultimately, we wanted to continue to build on the common content provided by the curriculum with a project that fully reinforced a liberal education – we wanted to refine the project so that it would be an effective aid to learning in the class and generalized to their everyday life. The debate, while engaging, wasn't real-world – at least it wasn't what we felt real-world should be. In a debate, there are two sides and someone is supposed to win – but in life, there usually are not always clear "sides" and winning comes from a better understanding of the topic for all involved. The answer seemed to be civil discourse, where everyone is given a voice AND the skill of listening to others is encouraged for learning to take place.

The civil discourse, more so than the debate, allows students to, in many ways, take the role of the teachers of a certain perspective by self-report. Similar to the design described for the class debate, students are given a list of relevant and relatively controversial topics from which they

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will vote to use as the topic for the discussion. Unlike the debate, students are not divided into teams in the discourse. Instead, students are encouraged to learn about and be prepared to discuss all aspects of the topic.

There are two main elements to the discourse. First, students are expected develop and use the skill that is associated with discussing a complex and sometimes controversial topic. This requires the ability to listen, identify a premise and the following arguments, quickly and critically identify how information they know relates to the topic, and then retain all this information while waiting to add their information to the discussion. These are obvious skills that should accompany any educated person, and these are the skills that are required in this project.

The second main element to the discourse is to be able to deliver and demonstrate a strong grasp of class-specific content. The topics that are used in the discourse are, oftentimes, very familiar topics – this sometimes adds to the students' motivation to discuss them. However, just because the topics are familiar, the research that should accompany them usually is not. Outside of an academic environment this can be a big issue because of the tendency to form opinions without knowing the issues completely. So, the civil discourse design requires students to research a topic thoroughly, specifically through the lens of Life Span Development. Students are required to associate theories, scientific concepts, and formative and contemporary research to engage the other students.

On the day of the discourse, students are charged with introducing the topic, identifying the critical issues associated with the topic, and discussing the merit of each of the issues.
The first part is more structured so as to provide the necessary background information for students and guests who watch the presentation. A moderator (typically the professor) will introduce the students and the topic to be discussed. Then, the students will give an overview of the topic and key issues that are associated. The last part of the discourse is less structured and follows a "Meet the Press" format; students in the discourse begin discussing the key points. In order to ensure that students are ready for the project, they are required to hand in an outline of critical discussion points on their topic before the actual discourse takes place. It is the role of the moderator to know the major points of the topic and ask questions of the civil discourse panel to test their knowledge of a topic and to ensure as much of the topic is addressed as is pertinent. In many cases, the role of the moderator is to also ensure that the Life Span content directly connected to the discourse.

The evaluation of student performance in the civil discourse takes two forms. First, they are evaluated on the civil discourse itself, which includes the concise and clear display of their knowledge of the topic, the use of Life Span content in the discourse, the civility of the discussion, and the display of critical reasoning. The second form of evaluation is from a paper they turn in prior to the discourse. As alluded to above, each participant is required to turn in a paper that outlines the topic and each main issue associated with the topic. Each student is also asked to identify and discuss their position on the topic. While each student is evaluated individually on both of these elements, they are all encouraged to collaborate on the project.

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Future Directions

The Civil Discourse Project has continued to evolve since it first began to take form in 2006. While we like the direction it has taken, we understand that it still requires refinement. Originally, the motivation of the project was to engage students, stimulate critical reasoning, and develop perspective-taking. Preliminary analyses from students and from informal discussions with each other have indicated that the most refinement in the coming semesters should be placed on making the discourse a bit more engaging. Critical reasoning and perspective taking appear to be at high levels, but the discourse has proven to be less exciting than the debate design from which it was developed. One way we have addressed this up to now is by compiling a list of potential topics that are intrinsically compelling, and we always try to include topics that incorporate current events so as to keep students interest. Related to this, we also allow the students to choose the topic they will discuss. The ownership of the topic has proven to be a means to get student interest in the project. Having said that, we feel that the more we can engage the students in the project, the more they will benefit.

One way we plan to improve engagement is to involve the audience more in the discourse itself. As mentioned before, the original model followed a "Meet the Press" format. While the students indicated that they found it very informative, it could be a bit dry. So, instead of simply having the moderator ask questions, future iterations of the discourse will have discourse participants field questions from the audience. In fact, this technique was implement for the spring 2010 session and proved to be very effective.

Further, the authors are considering having students who compose the "audience" take a quiz on the topic addressed directly after the discourse. In this way, the discourse substitutes a class lecture where the students in the discourse act as the teachers, so to speak. By having a quiz at the end of the session, everyone is still responsible for the material. We expect that this should keep the audience tuned into the discourse. In fact, we may pass out the quiz before the discourse begins, which should facilitate questions throughout the discourse. While the quiz itself will not be extensive, it will serve as a litmus test for the information that is supposed to be delivered during the discourse. After we implement these changes, we will compare feedback that we collect from students to see which refinements need to be made afterwards.

Regardless of the refinements we make, the civil discourse will continue to be a work in progress. But, ultimately, this is how it should be. As has been discussed in this paper, higher education has changed, so it should follow that how we deliver education should change as well. According to Walsh and Cuba (2009), experiential learning opportunities enrich college students' education, and they are needed to prepare them with skills that they will need after they graduate. Recall earlier the report for the Colleges and Universities (AACU): 89% of employers want improved written and oral communication skills, 79% wanted ability to apply knowledge in real world setting, and 75% wanted better ethical decision making, (Schneider, C. G. talk). While there are many tools that are needed in this area, we feel that civil discourse is certainly one. A civil discourse can develop these skills because it avoids the trappings of "winning" on potentially heated topics among knowledgeable individuals and focuses on developing problem solving, critical reasoning, and ultimately a heightened understanding of the topic. These are skills needed in real world topics, where there isn't always a right and a wrong side. Further, because there is an emphasis on specific course content that needs to be displayed in the civil discourse, this model

allows the depth and breadth of content knowledge. Thus, the civil discourse demonstrates how a liberal education and a liberal arts focus can coexist.

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Appendix A

Summer (if required):
English Comp Prep (no credit), Reading Improvement (2 credit hours)

1st Semester:
Academic Resource Seminar (no credit); Autobiographical Reading & Writing (3 credit hours); English Comp 1150 or 1160 (3 credit hours)

2nd Semester:
Perspectives in Modern U.S. American Culture (Humanities) (6 credit hours)

3rd Semester:
Social Issues (Social Science) (3 credit hours)

4th Semester:
Life Span Development (Social Science) (3 credit hours)