

An Interview with Jay Mechling, the Godfather of IS

by Kelsey Skaggs

Jay Mechling has long been an important figure in Integrated Studies Honors Program. He has had a key role not only as one of the Program's professors, but also as an organizing force and faculty coordinator. On February 17, 2008, I spoke with Professor Mechling about his involvement in the Program. I have combined that interview with some of Professor Mechling's written thoughts on Integrated Studies.

How long have you been involved in IS?

I began teaching in the program around 1991. We were running the program with the American Studies staff, but I had known the program for a long time as it was one of the Interdepartmental Programs in the College of Letters and Science. I've had a very long relationship with the program, and am always watching out for it.

What motivated you to become involved with the Program?

I knew about the high-achieving students and the small classes, which appealed to me. Another factor is that I went to a small, liberal arts university, and although I teach at a very large public university, I see Integrated Studies as a place where I can reproduce the individual attention and "community" that exists at a small school. I take very seriously the learning-living element of IS.

What do you hope IS students gain from their involvement?

You can tell that my number one rule is to have fun, and I apply that to all my research and teaching. I want my students to have fun, to discover that there is real pleasure in studying things that lead us to see the bigger picture of culture. I want the students to begin to use writing as a way of thinking about things, rather than as an account of the ideas and conclusions drawn before writing.

How did "Integrated Studies" get its name?

It was called Integrated Studies because there were a number of faculty members who had attended the University of Wisconsin, where there was an Integrated Studies Program. They found each other at Davis in the late 1960s. Integrated Studies got its name purely because it was cooked up by people who had been involved in a Program of the same name at the University of Wisconsin. This included people from different departments, who got together and taught some integrated courses in which, for example, an English professor, a history professor, and an art professor would team-teach a class.

Integrated Studies was “hippy” in the seventies. It had a counter-cultural feel to it because, at the time, it was an unusual type of learning community for the campus. It was not an honours Program; it was just the Integrated Studies Program. The entrance requirements became more and more stringent, though, and it was clear that you had to be a high achiever to get into the Program. However, it wasn’t until the eighties that the Dean decided to call it an honours Program.

For many years, Integrated Studies was an inter-departmental Program within the College of Letters and Science, but as the Dean eventually pointed out, students from all the other colleges were also in Integrated Studies. At that point, it became a campus Program in the charge of the Provost’s office.

So the word “integrated” is not particularly significant?

It was in the beginning. By the late eighties, the Program’s name was Integrated Studies, but there was no integration. When I started getting involved, I wanted to see more integration. We tried “integrating” IS in the late nineties by “theming” all of the courses with the idea that a well-chosen theme could be the occasion for showing how the arts/humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences connect. For example, we chose themes like HIV/AIDS. This proved to be hard logistically, because it excluded some good teachers who were ready to teach in IS but not on the theme. We tried to find a theme for which there would be people on campus from math and science, the social sciences, and arts and humanities to teach classes all around that theme, but a lot of people would have loved to teach in Integrated Studies but didn’t want to work up a new course around a theme. That ended the attempt, which is still a good idea, but has logistical problems.

What classes have you taught? Do you have a favourite? What has been ‘IS-y’ about your classes?

I research and teach topics where several disciplines come together. I have created a good many Integrated Studies classes, and I tend not to repeat them (with one exception.) The first I taught was on "The Lives of American Scientists." I have taught Integrated Studies courses on "American Cultural Responses to AIDS/HIV," the 1950s, the 1890s, "Region and Place—The Sacramento Valley," "Food in American Culture," Religion in American Culture," and "War and American Memory." The one I repeat every few years is "Americans Debate Their Rights," which I teach as an actual debate course, where teams of students research and debate topics such as gun control, medical marijuana, physician-assisted suicide, human cloning, privacy, and so on. Formal debate was a very important part of my education and life in high school and college, and I know that debate was where I learned the skills of critical thinking. Most of the students in that class did not do debate in high school, but they throw themselves into it, as I expect of Integrated Studies students. I suppose that class is my favorite, though I have loved teaching them all.

Are there any differences between how you teach IS classes and non-IS classes?

I can give students group work that requires them to spend time together outside of class. If I'm working with non-IS students, they have all kinds of logistical problems. It really is a treat to know that everyone lives together and you can assign group work to be done outside of class time. I make sure there is group work in each class. The joy of teaching bright, talented students who live together and form a community among themselves is that the teacher can create an interesting assignment and then send the students off to do with, with confidence that they'll do it, and do it well.

Do you find that your work in Integrated Studies complements or enhances the other work you do?

There's a degree to which the University of California thinks of itself as a research University in which the graduate students are an important component. There is supposed to be a flow between teaching graduate students and your own research; the graduate students who you've mentored come to work in your area. There's thought to be a natural relationship between the graduate teaching and the professor's research. We still don't have a graduate Program in American Studies. That's one of the unusual things about my place in the University. I mainly teach undergraduates, and I bring some of my research into the classroom. I've written some articles on books that I was teaching.

A lot of my work is ethnographic. I often use student research, because students do fieldwork that I can't do. I'll have students write ethnographies of their fraternities or sororities. I had some really good senior theses in American Studies on sport teams such as women's crew. I obviously can't sit in with the women's team and talk to them, so students become my field workers. Sometimes I use their work in my scholarship: in that way, student research feeds my research.

What are your hopes for the future of IS?

I hope we can build a bench of great teachers. I also like the addition of courses beyond the first year.

Do you think IS moving towards that?

Yes. It's a slow process that involves getting people to think about teaching in Integrated Studies, finding a year that they can do it, and talking department chairs into letting them go. Department chairs are always willing to give you a bad teacher, but if you're talking about the people we'd like to have in the Integrated Studies classroom, the department chair may not be as willing to let them go.

Do you find that Integrated Studies differ in any significant way from non-IS students?

Integrated Studies students are very bright, very motivated, and in most cases very disciplined. Integrated Studies attracts and nurtures these qualities and fosters a sense of community. In some ways, we teach Integrated Studies students less than we create a space for them to blossom. We do teach some things, but you'll remember the community and the feel of a living-learning experience beyond any one course.