

**NILOA Featured Assignment**  
**Assessing Integrative Learning in the Senior Capstone**  
**Commentary: Emily Lardner**

*“Your task is to identify a significant real-world question, and reflect on how the Mount’s liberal arts (Core Curriculum) courses have helped you to understand that question more thoroughly. Think in terms of questions that are important for people of all ages—overarching questions that are national or global in scope—this might involve a current or historical issue like genocide, immigration, climate change, voting rights, LGBT rights, racial/ethnic or religious tensions, human trafficking, access to education or healthcare, etc. The only requirement in choosing a ‘big question’ is that it be significant, universal in scope, and related to the common good.”*

At first glance, the assignment featured here seems straightforward: choose a big question and reflect on how your course-work has helped you understand that question more thoroughly. But the two part focus of this prompt is worth mulling over.

In his 1995 *Change* magazine article, “The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology,” Donald Schon describes two kinds of reflection. The first is reflection-in-action, which occurs in the midst of an activity, as for example when a teacher pauses to make sense of a student’s question in order to determine what move to make next. The second kind of reflection is reflection about reflection-in-action. Schon gives the example of a basketball player watching recordings of the game played the previous evening, and then he frames this two-part process as a version of “Deweyian inquiry and action research”:

In the domain of practice, we see what John Dewey called inquiry: thought intertwined with action—reflection in and on action—which proceeds from doubt to the resolution of doubt, to the generation of new doubt. For Dewey, doubt lies not in the mind but in the situation. Inquiry begins with situations that are problematic—that are confusing, uncertain, or conflicted, and block the free flow of action (p. 32).

The Mount St. Joseph reflective assignment invites students to demonstrate their ability to establish a starting point for inquiry by describing a situation—a big question—in complex ways, grounded in the disciplinary lenses of their course work. An element of humility and an assumption about the value of collaborating with others are embedded in the prompt. Students aren’t asked to solve the problem; they are asked to describe it. In the process of describing it, students are asked to reflect on how they’ve gained the very knowledge and skills they are using to describe it. They are being invited to engage in what Schon describes as “the epistemology of reflective practice.”

Why is this important? The most pressing problems we face, the problems that a liberal arts education is intended to prepare students to address, defy technical solutions. These urgent problems don't grow on what Schon describes as "high, hard ground" but rather they spring from the "swampy lowlands"—and they are confusing, uncertain, and conflicted. They demand responses in which thought intertwines with action. This capstone assignment invites students to rehearse, one more time, how they will take that inquiry process out into the world.

Emily Lardner, 10/19/16