An Interdisciplinary Model for Connecting Writing, Psychology, and Printmaking

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Although the value of interdisciplinary study is now more likely to be acknowledged, at many universities the institutional structure is hostile toward interdisciplinary teaching. Departmental boundaries, lack of support for interdisciplinarity, and institutional demands (such as faculty workload, faculty courseload, enrollment by class) keep many professors isolated in the classroom. An effective strategy for a single professor to achieve interdisciplinarity—in order to assist students with gaining skills necessary for survival, much less success, in today's global world—is to include interdisciplinary assignments in a discipline-specific course. This article presents the evolution of an art/English project used and refined four times. The result is a manageable interdisciplinary project that shows students the connections among art, English, and other disciplines; gives composition students an external audience for their writing; and emphasizes the importance of research in the process of creating arguments and art. This interdisciplinary project model provides the opportunity for interested faculty to engage in interdisciplinary teaching without directly challenging institutional structures.

Embracing interdisciplinarity seems to be on the rise because such programs and approaches are being hailed as an answer to several challenges. One such challenge is preparing

students for this global society with myriad problems. For example, in 2014, Brown University piloted a new interdisciplinary graduate program that, according to university administrators, "expands the breadth of students' education, allows them to forge new ways of thinking about major problems, and makes them more employable in an increasingly interconnected world" (Patel). For 2015-2016, the university is providing funding specifically for graduate students pursuing interdisciplinary research (Interdisciplinary Opportunities). Using such interdisciplinary training to face new challenges has also been recommended by Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester, who state in *Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide for Campus Leaders* that

> We do not need a research study to illuminate how having more than one faculty member design a course can enhance the quality or complexity of ideas. We see the benefits of scientists working together in labs, creating breakthroughs that are unimaginable without cross-disciplinary work. These examples have become accepted wisdom on many campuses across the country. In fact, collaboration has moved from an intuitively good idea to an imperative because of the overwhelming evidence of its benefits (4).

At some institutions, using collaboration among units has even helped weather the financial turmoil of slashed budgets. However, the emphasis on generated student credit hours by professor and number of majors, as well as a university's departmental structure, creates obstacles to interdisciplinary teaching.

In addition to institutional structure as a barrier, students' attitudes can be an obstacle to championing interdisciplinary initiatives. Students typically understand the seemingly self-contained disciplines as majors, and they tend to resist seeing the connections among subjects. Even more problematic for a professor, students often avoid using the knowledge gained in one class to make sense of content presented in another class. For example, students may balk at having papers in a social science course evaluated "as though it were an English class." Other times, students seem to be baffled by the historical context for a literary work, when that era is included in a history class required of all university students. Medical schools' recent preference for well-balanced students, who have the requisite foundation in science and math, as well as knowledge of (perhaps a major in) the humanities, reflects the growing importance of the ability to make connections among diverse subjects[1]. As Veronica Boix Mansilla, the principal investigator of the Interdisciplinary Studies Project at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has pointed out, higher education's response to the demands of contemporary life, which require "knowledge and thinking skills that transcend the traditional disciplines," should be to help prepare our students by fostering "their capacity to draw on multiple sources of knowledge to build deep understanding" (14).

Educators at all levels have embraced interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. For example, more and more middle schools in the United States are adopting a team-teaching approach in order to integrate curriculum in meaningful ways (Lounsbury). The new Common Core, adopted by 46 states, features the reading of nonfiction texts across the curriculum. Perhaps this shift at lower levels will help college students with transference of

skills, as will new interdisciplinary programs, degrees, and courses.

The trend of interdisciplinarity in higher education probably dates from the 1940s, when American Studies programs were established. Since the 1960s and 1970s, when Women's Studies, Environmental Studies, and Urban Studies became programs in universities, the number of interdisciplinary majors and minors has exploded. Some institutions, such as Miami University in Ohio, have added entire colleges or schools devoted to interdisciplinary studies (Klein 24; Newell 211).

Many scholars researching and teaching in interdisciplinary ways assume that readers understand the meaning of "interdisciplinary." Several neglect to define the term, while others use "interdisciplinary" interchangeably with "cross-disciplinary" and "multidisciplinary." Definitions, when provided, range from product-focused, such as defining "Interdisciplinary understanding" as the "capacity to integrate knowledge and modes of thinking drawn from two or more disciplines to produce a cognitive advancement—for example, explaining a phenomenon, solving a problem, creating a product, or raising a new question—in ways that would have been unlikely through single disciplinary means" (Mansilla 16) to an obscure "working definition" that "embraces notions of the porosity of disciplinary boundaries and the combination and synthesis of methodologies and techniques" (Lau and Pasquini 50). I favor a broad definition of "interdisciplinary," such as the one suggested by William H. Newell, who is at Miami University's School of Interdisciplinary Studies, where there is "no formal consensus about the definition of interdisciplinary studies," but he adds that interdisciplinary courses "draw from the disciplines" and "make use of concepts, theories, methods, and factual knowledge from

various disciplines" (213). This article uses "interdisciplinary" rather than "cross-disciplinary" or "multidisciplinary" because "inter" places emphasis on the ways that disciplines can be combined or connected.

The Project

This interdisciplinary project bridged art, psychology, and writing.[2] Although the course was labeled "ENG," I refer to it as "writing" rather than "English" because, as David Hamilton pointed out in 1980, "writing is recognized as a discipline, itself," so "interdisciplinary writing" is the "juncture of writing and" another discipline, be it physics, anthropology, or art history (780). According to his definition, my project is interdisciplinary writing that combines writing and psychology, with a later stage that connected the assignment to art.

The context for this project was a 3-credit hour Honors Composition course with the theme "Monstrous Fear," which was not defined for the students. Instead, they arrived at their own definitions of the theme through readings and assignments. Readings included articles, such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture" and Edward J. Ingebretsen's "Monster Making: A Politics of Persuasion," and literature, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Paper assignments included a literary analysis essay, a film analysis of a horror film or otherwise "scary" movie not classified in that genre, and the interdisciplinary project called "Research Project Assignment" on the syllabus and assignment sheet. Basically, composition students researched a specific phobia and wrote a brief research report (See Appendix 1), which was evaluated by the composition professor and was given to a printmaking

student. Although this composition course focuses on teaching students to write argument-based essays, this "report" was a scaffolded assignment. With this assignment, students learned library skills, synthesized research materials, and practiced MLA citation style in preparation for their longer, researched argument paper at the end of the term. To prepare for the phobia assignment, students experienced two lectures by non-English faculty: a librarian and a psychology professor. The psychology professor provided a discipline-specific introduction to phobias, so that students would have a basic understanding of the disorder. In the next class session, students visited the library, where a reference librarian taught them how to use resources specific to the topic.

The reports submitted were varied. A few students managed to organize information around a thesis, but many simply reported their findings. Some organized by concept, while others organized by source. Some were excellent, while others needed improvement. This report assignment allowed me to suggest the benefits of more complex organizational structures, correct citation errors, and explain the differences among various sources. Having the students' reports read by another student outside of class motivated some students to be more concerned with the quality of their writing. In future uses of this assignment, I plan to have the writing students complete an additional revision before submission to their art partners and have the art students provide brief feedback to the writing students.

The second stage of this project focused on printmaking. The composition students toured the printmaking studio on campus, where they had the opportunity to meet a visiting artist and see the students at work pulling a print for her. The students saw the tools, ink, and presses, as well as the prints by the visiting artist. So, the composition students gained a better

understanding of the work that went into the phobia prints they later received. (See Appendix 3) Each printmaking student created a print about the phobia, using the reports as the first step in their own research. The composition students appreciated the prints they received at the end of term, when all prints were exhibited, and students attempted to match the prints to the phobias. A few of the writing students used the phobia report as the basis for the longer researched argument essay. For example, one student researched fear of cats, discovered the use of cats in films, and wrote a longer essay about Disney villains and evil cats.

Observations and Recommendations

In addition to having art students provide a response to the reports by the writing students, I would make the following changes:

- Select phobias for the sign-up list more carefully by not choosing such obscure ones (See list in Appendix 2.)
- Have art and printmaking students meet together for the exchanges
- Have writing students evaluate the project

This project, like other interdisciplinary projects I have used (in a Women's Literature course and an Introduction to Gender and Diversity Studies course), allows me to encourage students to make connections across disciplinary boundaries without encountering the problem of assessment of an interdisciplinary project by more than one faculty member, variation in the usual faculty load, and extra time. However, such projects do require time devoted to planning, meeting other faculty, and presenting/lecturing outside of class. Such

projects allow faculty to surmount the "structures that make" interdisciplinarity "difficult—

time barriers and personal barriers" (Brandt 24). As a leading interdisciplinary scholar,

Heidi Hayes Jacobs has noted, for successful interdisciplinary teaching, those involved must

volunteer and be interested (Brandt 26). This interdisciplinary project model seems to allow

teachers to avoid the negative pressures that often prevent interdisciplinary work, while

engaging students and faculty in meaningful ways.

[Appendix 1](): Research Project Assignment

Description from Syllabus

You will sign up for a topic, conduct research on that topic, and prepare a report with a bibliography to be shared with a Printmaking student, who will use the information as the basis for a print. Your report will also be submitted to your professor for evaluation. (150 points)

Assignment

Select a phobia from the list circulated in class. Using library resources, research that phobia as your topic. When conducting research, usually you are trying to find answers to questions. The most general question may be "has anything been written on this topic?" To conduct this research, you will need a guiding question, which may begin with defining the phobia. However, your report, which must be 3-4 pages, will need to contain more than a dictionary or encyclopedia definition. Some possible secondary topics might include symptoms, rate of occurrence, treatment, pop culture references, famous people with the phobia, etc.

The bibliography for this report must contain at least seven sources, including 2 books, 3 articles (at least one must be in an academic journal), and 2 Internet sites/articles. You should also consider whether another important source (given your topic) should be included. The bibliography is in addition to the 3-4 pages of text. Use MLA style for citation of sources.

Late Papers

Late papers will be penalized, so turn in this assignment on time. Late reports submitted to me will be penalized one letter grade for each day late.

Academic Honesty Policy

Plagiarism is cheating and is taken very seriously by the university. Plagiarism is the undocumented use of another's ideas or words. This includes not only published works, such as books, newspapers, or magazines, and papers on the Internet, but also other students' papers and papers written for you by someone else. Students who plagiarize will be penalized according to university policy. Plagiarism is cause for an E in the course and may lead to expulsion from the university. See "Policy on Academic Honesty" in the Undergraduate Bulletin.

Evaluation

The 150 points will be based on the following criteria:

Content: Interesting, informed report that defines the phobia and provides additional information. (30%)

Organization: The sequencing of information is clear. Ideas flow logically from introduction to conclusion. (25%)

Research: The report demonstrates a significant depth of research, clearly relying on books, articles, and Internet sources. The bibliography is clear and helpful. (Adheres to requirements in assignment above.) (30%)

Conventions of academic writing: Correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation. (15%)

Appendix 2: PHOBIAS

Topics for Research Report

(Sign up for one, signing only one blank)

1. Anthrophobia   _____   _____

2. Arithmophobia   _____   _____

3. Automatonophobia   _____   _____

4. Chrometophobia   _____   _____

5. Coulrophobia   _____   _____

6. Elurophobia   _____   _____

7. Iophobia   _____   _____

8. Keraunophobia   _____   _____

9. Prosophobia   _____   _____

10. Pteronophobia   _____   _____

11. Siderodromophobia   _____   _____

12. Sinophobia   _____   _____

13. Taphephobia   _____   _____

14. Teratophobia   _____   _____

15. Xenophobia   _____   _____

Appendix 3: The Prints

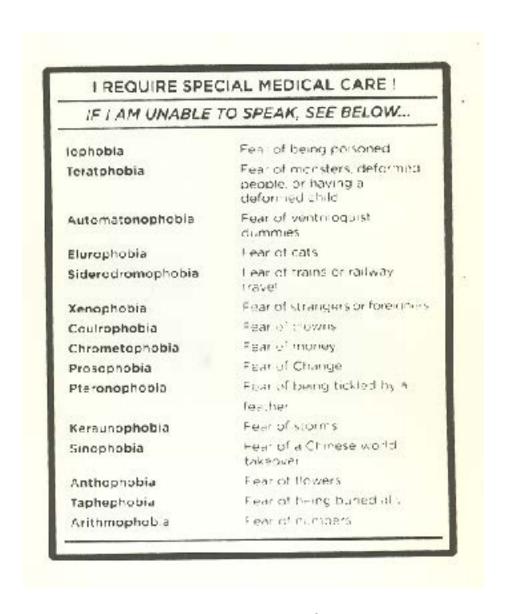*Figure 1: Hand, Nicole. *title page* front. Silkscreen.*

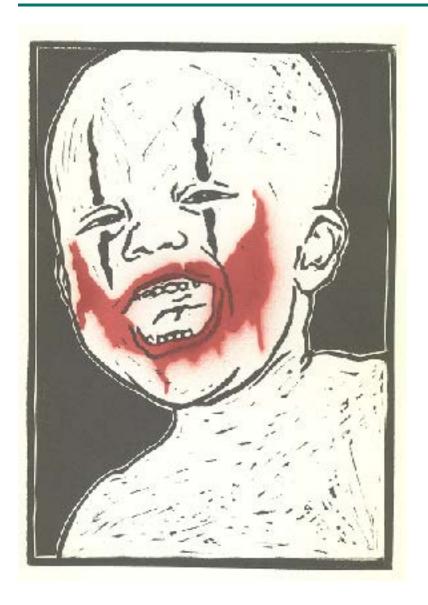*Figure 2: Hand, Nicole. *title card* back. Silkscreen.*

*Figure 3: Griendling, Alex. *Gacy at 18 Months*. Relief.*

Figure 4: Meier, Jenny. *Tickled to Death*. Lithograph.

*Figure 5: Gianulis, Joanna. *Stranger Danger". Silkscreen.*

Notes

[1] At Harvard Medical School, faculty and students involved in "Arts&Humanities@HMS"

actively encourage appreciation and study of the fine arts and the humanities as part of medical

school training (Campbell).

[2] I appreciate the work of Dr. Laura Liljequist, Professor of Psychology, and Nicole Hand,

Professor of Art; their willingness to collaborate on this project and others made this opportunity

available for students.

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