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What makes a good interdisciplinary teacher?

Interdisciplinary teachers need four tools and traits in their toolkits to ensure that students are getting the most from these experiences, writes Jillian Terry

Interdisciplinarity is often seen as a key way to address the complex challenges of the 21st century, with its focus on crossing **disciplinary boundaries** and integrating insights from multiple disciplines to arrive at more comprehensive understandings. At the same time, the increasing importance of **AI literacy** across a wide range of industries is steering employers away from domain-specific knowledge and towards more diverse skills in critical thinking, communication, and synthesis. These skills are often emphasised in interdisciplinary learning. Not surprisingly, interdisciplinary courses and degree programmes are **growing** in popularity.

Having led the teaching team on a large, undergraduate **interdisciplinary course** for the last five years, there are two traits and two skills I've observed which have been essential to teaching in interdisciplinary contexts: intellectual humility, open-mindedness, depth and breadth, and synthesis.

Intellectual humility

The practice of intellectual humility can be understood in two **main categories**: recognising intellectual limitations, and open-mindedness. Recognising intellectual limitations means acknowledging the boundaries of your own perspectives, approaches, and knowledge, especially when taking on the role of interdisciplinary teacher. This can be nerve-racking for academics who tend to stay within their specialised fields. Despite a growth in interdisciplinary research, much academic work, both in research and teaching, remains stubbornly bounded within disciplines. This starts at the beginning of most academic careers, with PhD researchers often **lacking training** in how to collaborate in cross-disciplinary teams and most evaluation of their ability still tied to a single-authored dissertation scrutinised by examiners in their chosen field.

It's therefore no surprise that an academic's comfort zone is often squarely within disciplinary boundaries, with their authority as a scholar of a discipline being what brings them confidence to step in front of a room full of students. In interdisciplinary teaching, however, recognising your own intellectual limitations and stepping back from a sage on the stage mentality to instead act as the guide on the side often results in more fruitful interventions. Rob Carpenter, who teaches argumentation at UCLA, highlights **the value** in spotlighting disciplinary biases and knowledge gaps for students and modelling intellectual humility. Acknowledging the boundaries of your own knowledge offers space to balance disciplinary expertise with opportunities for students to actively bring their perspectives and approaches to classroom activities and discussions.

Open-mindedness

The second layer of intellectual humility is open-mindedness. **Recent research** refers to the "willingness to reconsider one's beliefs and assumptions when confronted with new or competing perspectives". More broadly, we can think about open-mindedness in interdisciplinary teaching as an openness to teaching about perspectives that may differ widely from those you typically espouse in more disciplinary contexts or in your own research. This can mean gaining familiarity with concepts, terminology, and assumptions in other disciplines. Crucially, open-mindedness prioritises an open mindset with students – a flexibility to accept other perspectives raised in the classroom, rather than holding on to **disciplinary biases** or foundations.

Three questions every interdisciplinary educator needs to ask

- What novel understandings might arise from the insights offered by different disciplines?
- How can those understandings be applied to tackle a problem or challenge?
- Rather than only comparing and contrasting different disciplinary perspectives, how can students be encouraged to bring together new modes of thinking, diverse methodological approaches, or theoretical frameworks?

In **LSE100**, we embrace open-mindedness by inviting students to approach the same problem through different disciplinary lenses – to "think like a sociologist/historian/economist" about a particular topic or challenge. These activities require not only our students, but also our teaching team to genuinely engage with perspectives outside their comfort zone.

This approach extends to ideas of curiosity, whereby interdisciplinary teachers must embrace risk-taking, ambiguity, and uncertainty as they explore complex issues. By being **curious ourselves**, we can model for our students how they can pursue new forms of knowledge and understanding beyond the confines of a single discipline. While curiosity is not always easy to foster, particularly

among students whose primary learning goal is utilitarian or performance-oriented, focusing on students' own interests and knowledge is a way in.

Depth and breadth

Another useful addition to an interdisciplinary teacher's toolkit is pedagogical adaptability. The ability to move beyond one-size-fits-all teaching is crucial in interdisciplinary contexts, especially where your students themselves hail from a wide range of disciplinary traditions and backgrounds. Using diverse effective **interdisciplinary communication** styles is important, as is avoiding disciplinary jargon that may put students off. Checking your own assumptions about what counts as foundational knowledge is essential – interdisciplinary learning challenges the very idea of prerequisite knowledge, especially when engaging diverse groups of students in a single course or programme.

Balancing depth versus breadth is an **eternal challenge** of interdisciplinary learning. If students are not experts in even one discipline, how can we expect them to achieve interdisciplinarity? In some cases, researchers have even argued that interdisciplinary teaching can be seen as a threat to the development of a **disciplinary identity**. Navigating the tension between academic depth and rigour alongside cross-cutting and broad curricula is a key skill for interdisciplinary teachers. One way that we have navigated this in LSE100 is by introducing students to a wheel of disciplines – a visual representation of the different disciplines they'll engage with throughout the course. In a range of activities, we invite students to use the wheel to identify contributions to the discussion from their home discipline, and then connect these to ideas from other disciplines across the social sciences. Students can draw on their nascent disciplinary knowledge as first-year undergraduates while learning to identify broader trends and ideas which cut across disciplinary boundaries.



Wheel of Disciplines. Credit: Chris Blunt, LSE100

While deep, specialist knowledge remains incredibly important to tackling the world's most urgent challenges, it is often difficult to know exactly how to **apply this knowledge** in complex and interconnected systems. Here, interdisciplinary education which embraces innovative pedagogies such as problem-based learning, systems thinking approaches, and complexity will best equip students to make the most of the disciplinary knowledge they acquire at university and develop the skills they need to apply such knowledge in the real world.

Synthesis

A fourth, but not final, component of an interdisciplinary teacher's toolkit comes in the form of thinking seriously about practices of synthesis and integration. We can draw on the work of leading **interdisciplinary scholars**, such as Allen Repko's definition of synthesis, which highlights drawing on different disciplines to generate a more comprehensive understanding. We can see Rick Szostak's

ideas of integration in his efforts to define interdisciplinary studies as a process whereby “individuals or groups draw on disciplinary perspectives and integrate their insights and modes of thinking to advance their understanding of a complex problem with the goal of applying the understanding to a real-world problem”.

We can look to today’s most complex challenges, such as pandemics or the goal of reducing global carbon emissions, to see where gaps exist between different forms of knowledge (scientific, policy, statistical, public opinion) that are deserving of such synthesis and integration.

It is insufficient to simply add disciplines and stir – rather, interdisciplinary teachers should **design curricula and assessments** to make space for synthesising and integrative tasks. **Team-teaching** interdisciplinary courses can enable the practice of integration through collaboration such as the *Globalization* course at Murray State University. By bringing together their diverse expertise, educators worked to design a course that truly integrated a range of perspectives rather than creating something multidisciplinary – a result that students benefited from and commented on in feedback.

Teaching across disciplines is a collaborative, challenging, and hugely rewarding project. In my decade of teaching in interdisciplinary classrooms, I have found meaningful spaces to hone curiosity and humility in my practice, learning from and with students from across the social sciences. The outcome of genuine interdisciplinary learning for the next generation of leaders is essential for tackling the increasingly uncertain and multifaceted challenges that lie ahead.

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