

Subject Specialist versus Interdisciplinary Learning: Balancing the Foundation Year Curriculum

On foundation year programmes in the Arts and Humanities, our inclusive pedagogies include focus on how we support learners on a journey of skills development en route to a specific degree course. Arrival at Level 1 requires students to navigate a broad array of subjects some of which will be unfamiliar to them. As a foundation year practitioner, I am interested in how we can continue to develop these strategies to ensure balance between supporting our learners' intended subject specialism and the inherent interdisciplinarity of what we teach.

I recently came across Virginia Woolf's reflections on the complexities of dealing with multiple meanings of terms and subjects. Woolf (a writer featured in one of the foundation year modules I deliver) discusses this in relation to the concepts of 'women' and 'fiction' in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1928). She states: 'I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer – to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever.' (Woolf, 2004, pp.3-4). This got me thinking further about our expectations of subject learning and our lived experience of studying a topic in the Arts and Humanities.

Importantly, inclusive pedagogy today goes beyond a didactic approach to encourage students to critically engage, revisit and apply ideas. William Condee (2016, p.23), who has identified 'the interdisciplinary turn in the Arts and Humanities', proposes that a learner-centred approach enables student involvement in 'the critical interdisciplinary process.' In interdisciplinary teaching, we work with our students to investigate theoretical parameters, reframe boundaries and destabilise narratives. This is something readily encountered at Level 0 in the teaching of topics such as modernity where Woolf's perspective can be situated. For example, the timelines and features of Modernism as a cultural phenomenon vary across art, literature, architecture and design. Interdisciplinary foundation year learners explore all of these aspects as they build a working definition. An introduction to the complex and contested nature of this term is complicated through disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

An encounter with concepts is a central part of the foundation year as a preparation for future undergraduate contexts. The nature of the discourse taught, how it is delivered and acted upon is, therefore, particularly important for Level 0 as a springboard to success on a specific degree of the learners' choice. In the context in which I teach, learners progress onto a vast array of degrees across nine academic schools. They are supported by varied conceptual, theoretical and historical modules underpinning the breadth of degree outcomes, as well as a Level 1 module based in their future department. A multifaceted curriculum model presents a need to balance support for students to be interdisciplinary, while concurrently enabling them to engage their own individual interests in a meaningful way. Ideas, such as postmodernity, critical theory and semiotics, are approached in a critically informed manner with attention to different disciplinary parameters and understandings. A focus on the transferability of skills and building confidence in critical thinking enables students to flourish across their faculty destinations.

In order to support students who move from an expanded programme of study to one with more narrow parameters, it is important to consider strategies to balance students' dual identities as interdisciplinary and subject specialist learners. It is necessary to demarcate the definitions, distinctions and synergies of these modes. Key questions emerge in relation to further developing inclusive pedagogies for students whose initial journey begins with a focus on breadth before depth of study. For example, how can learning be more inclusive for students taking a subject which is perhaps not their 'cup of tea'? In what ways can students be further supported on a module which takes them out of their comfort zone or grounding of prior experience? How can we enhance support relating to expectations and perceptions of interdisciplinary study?

In her proposal of a notion of 'travelling concepts' (2002), cultural theorist Mieke Bal (2009, p.22) argues that 'working with concepts – discussing them, bringing them to bear on objects, and considering what they help us see – is a democratic way of practising interdisciplinary analysis in the Humanities.' An interdisciplinary approach thus provides us with a methodology for supporting collaborative preparatory study via a discussion of contested concepts and debates across disciplines. It requires us to think about how we understand and apply this methodology, as well as its configuration in a university setting and the wider landscape of scholarship.

A role of the foundation year tutor is to facilitate an encounter with ideas that can be built on incrementally into Level 1 and beyond. Further understanding of the lived experience of interdisciplinary learning as a pathway into subject specialist study offers scope to continue to enhance practice. It requires us to start with the multiple perspectives relating to the concepts we use and further consider: what does it mean to *be interdisciplinary* at Level 0? This is a question I continue to ask myself, and one I would like to do more to ask the students I teach.

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