

Developing and Delivering the Interdisciplinary Course: Shaping Your Ideas into Usable Curriculum Tools

Interdisciplinary courses employ a *systems approach* for both teaching and learning. The practical idea behind this approach is: If university students understand a whole system—what influences shape it, what reasons are behind its creation and sustainability, and what relationships exist among its constituent parts that keep it together—they will be able to work within that system or work to change it.

Interdisciplinary courses do not limit students or professors to a set of points-of-view within one academic discipline, but rather explore different *contexts* and *impacts* of one issue, problem, or idea across multiple academic disciplines. The key to successful development of an interdisciplinary course is to promote the understanding that politics, economic conditions, and intercultural or interreligious conflicts do not take place in a vacuum, and neither should their academic study. The professor's interdisciplinary method reinforces this message.

Designing Assignments

In what ways does each assignment require use of interdisciplinary sources and research methods?

- *Sought outcomes*: Students will refine their way of thinking about an issue once interdisciplinary sources and methods are incorporated into the students' research processes. Students will expand their academic horizons by thinking through interdisciplinary issues of context and impact.
 - Course application: In a course entitled, "Crisis, Conflict, and Terror in the Middle East," the primary framework for analysis was derived from the political science field. However, theories and supportive data used to augment and round out the students' understanding of crisis, conflict, and terrorism political theory in the specific context of Mid-East relations came from the fields of: business psychology (deriving from Western, Arab, Jewish, and Muslim cultural roots—used for discussing relative negotiation strategies in international conflict management), history (used for exploring the genesis of particular sub-regional conflicts), religion (used for conceptualizing the intractable nature of Mid-East conflict), anthropology (used to highlight the tribal nature that still persists in many Mid-East conflicts today, as well as for looking at things like the life and times of suicide bombers), sociology (used to examine societal impacts of war, peace, and terrorism vis-à-vis specific populations), and law (used for the international perspective on conducting war and maintaining peace). *All of these theories and data worked together to explain everything else, and the students' sense of this interdisciplinary usage in class helped them understand the professor's expectations for completing their assignments outside of class. Students were not expected to incorporate all secondary frameworks—just the ones relevant to the individual assignment.*

What intellectual tools will help students place the issue in a series of new contexts, illuminating the lasting significance of the issue?

- *Sought outcomes:* Students will explore fields that are out of their normal “box” of inquiry, with professorial guidance. Students will broaden their overall understanding of their degree field by connecting it to other disciplines.
 - Course application: During previous coursework in political science fundamentals (e.g., reading Kant, Wollstonecraft, Locke, et al for a theory class; learning about the principles upon which the international system is based; etc.), students obtained the basis on which to understand and formulate analysis on more advanced political science-oriented courses (e.g., area studies, focused public policy topics, etc.). The next natural step is to connect the students’ evolving political science understanding to other academic fields of inquiry. Interdisciplinary education exercises knowledge by purposefully “putting it through the paces” of multiple fields of inquiry. *Telling the students directly that this is your aim is important for setting their expectations of the learning experience overall and the research experience in particular.*

What common analytical thread runs through each assignment? How does using a “framework for analysis” approach clearly interdisciplinary?

- *Sought outcome:* Students will connect diverse points-of-view within a primary discipline to related contexts and outcomes from other disciplines.
 - Course application: For a course entitled, “Food Supply, Hunger, and Health: Frameworks for Understanding Human Security Issues,” the primary discipline is political science. However, as the title suggests, grasping the political science concepts are just the beginning of understanding these complex global public policy issues. The corollary: *Thinking about the contexts and impacts of global issues and positing comprehensive solutions—the whole point of the assigned student research paper—can only be fully realized using multiple prisms through which raw data is viewed and political theory is partnered.*

How will students link the perspectives of different disciplines within each assignment while keeping a narrow topic focus? How will students assert and justify their own judgment while taking stock of interdisciplinary perspectives?

- *Sought outcomes:* Students will apply what they learn about a narrow area of inquiry to a broader set of contexts and find deeper meaning or understanding in their overall course study. Students will use the opportunity for more well-rounded analysis to reveal a greater, more universal, or unique truth about the researched issue. Students will ground themselves by using frameworks for analysis and theories from secondary disciplines; but, as with any traditional research paper, students will pursue the truth in accordance with the personal observations and studies that led them to assert their assignment theses in the first place.

- Course application: When crafting a political science research proposal, students often submit a thesis for approval that will lead to superficial content overall and be a non-starter for solutions-generating analysis. For example, looking at political issues holding back peace “breaking out” between Israel and Syria (e.g., third-party mediation efforts, domestic political concerns, political role of Palestinian refugee issue, etc.) without investigating legal frameworks for transboundary water resources and military history of the Jordan River Basin and Golan Heights will never come to anything meaningful for the student. *Injecting an interdisciplinary approach helps the student avoid these pitfalls because it necessitates the students’ thoughtful approach to context and impacts.*

When will the students learn how to use those sources and methods: before the course, early on in the course, or on their own?

- *Sought outcomes:* Students will seek out targeted, yet diverse, academic materials when sourcing their research papers. Students will learn to use a variety of search engines and indices to identify these diverse sources.
 - Course application: *Before the course*, students will be introduced more tacitly to interdisciplinary research methods by reviewing your reading list and general course plan, as outlined in the syllabus. *Early on in the course*, have your research librarian prepare a 30-minute presentation explaining access to and usage of research tools related to your course topic—tailoring it to the tools that aid the student in finding materials within the primary discipline and specific secondary disciplines you are incorporating. *On their own throughout the course*, students will use individual performance exercises (i.e., graded assignments and class activities) to cement their understanding of interdisciplinary approaches to research and learning.

What grading rubrics are most effective in soliciting a complete student response to the challenge of an interdisciplinary research paper?

- *Sought outcomes:* Students will use the opportunity to research issues that are interesting to them individually from a variety of academic disciplines, so the professor must allocate specific points for a good effort made by the students to think outside of their normal degree field “boxes.”
 - Course application: Lay out the specific alternative frameworks for analysis you wish to see covered by the student in the grading rubric you publish in your “contract” with the students, your syllabus. Use the opportunity of approving student thesis statements and research plans to comment specifically on the interdisciplinary nature of their individual efforts to complete the assignment with their particular thesis. Allocate class time for students to read their thesis statements out to their colleagues while you facilitate a peer review of the students’ research plans, emphasizing the interdisciplinary research process and its tools. *All*

of these steps will work to enhance the credibility and completeness of your interdisciplinary approach through the eyes of your students.

Planning the Content for Lectures, Discussions, & Student Activities

During a lecture, how do I broaden the students' horizons by integrating interdisciplinary content without losing sight of the fundamentals?

- Technique: Focus the lecture using the structure of the primary discipline. Pick the lecture topic by highlighting a theory (or part of a theory, if it is a multi-part lecture series) from the primary discipline, explaining it through application to the course topic. Then, expand upon it by applying this primary theory to outside disciplines—placing that primary theory within other contexts or comparing and contrasting it with other theoretical approaches to the same course topic. The juxtaposition itself—the very fact that you brought it up this way during the lecture—helps students put the interdisciplinary “big picture” together in ways they might not have done while reading the individual materials assigned for class. A lecture featuring different contexts and/or applications for the same primary-discipline theory will guide them in taking the next step: using the students' own analytical abilities to make assessments of possible alternative outcomes for their primary study data. This broadens both the scope of learning during the lecture and the learning opportunity of the course itself.
- Course application: For a course lecture on terrorism, we start out covering terrorism theory, which is innately part of the political science field; this inquiry answers the compound question, “What is terrorism, and to what ends is it used?” Then, we explore the psychology behind terrorism, both for the perpetrator and the victim; this inquiry answers the questions, “Why does a terrorist do what s/he does? How do various motivations come about? How is the victim affected?” Next, we look at the sociology of terrorism; this inquiry answers the questions, “What is the societal impact of terror, at that moment and over time? Is there an evolution to this impact or a cycle we can identify?” Finally, we go back to the original political science framework and apply it to the course topic, an area study of Middle East politics—in tandem with the application of Middle East-specific data—to answer remaining questions. [Alternatively, I have integrated the data into the initial run-through of the questions, using Middle East data to illustrate the theory as I go along. It really depends on the general feel I have for the class aggregate learning style.]

How can I use interactive exercises to enhance interdisciplinary teaching methods?

- Techniques: Because teaching and learning are related reflexive exercises, facilitate student learning by calling upon them to teach the class. Use these techniques to incorporate an interdisciplinary approach:

- 1) Assign individual (or small groups of) students different ways of looking at the same issue, exploring the material by employing alternative frameworks for analysis from other disciplines; then, have everyone present their take on the material, generating discussion through your questioning. [Context-focused exercise]
- 2) Stage a debate about well-traveled primary discipline material, telling the students to think about outside influencing systems of thought. [Impacts-focused exercise]
- 3) Dissect case studies from within the primary discipline, but require interpretive methods from outside of the central discipline. [Context- and impacts-focused, combined]
 - Course application: When we studied the Hamas victory in Gaza, the data and core theories pertaining to the electoral win were generated from political science (the primary discipline). However, those facts and theories were greatly influenced on the ground by non-political factors—including economic, sociological, and anthropological factors. We reasoned through the raw political data and the political science theories at work, but we also rounded out our discussion with data and theories gleaned from those systems of thought that could best explain the full meaning behind the political data and theories. The students had been prepared for this because they had read the assigned materials prior to class.

When I do not have all the answers, from which available resources can I draw?

- Techniques: Part-time students, the general student body for graduate liberal studies degree programs, lack a feeling of connection to the larger university community, its faculty, and the research being conducted therein. One way to ameliorate this situation and thoughtfully add to your course is to employ resources from the larger campus community in order to supplement your personal knowledge base. Look at your university's website for links to special student or faculty programs, especially ones focused on outreach. Contact faculty members—adjunct or tenured—at other schools across the campus to be guest lecturers for an hour at one of your class meetings; for instance, if you are in the Liberal Arts College, check out the Business School or the Law School for experts. Seek out expertise housed at university-affiliated institutes. *The upshot: Doing these kinds of things will make your course more interesting, make new connections for you and your students, and make interdisciplinary course material work better for everyone.*
- Course application: For a course on international public policy issues, I contacted the director of our university's renowned "International Service Learning Program" to identify students that might be able to come in to speak to my students about what it is really like to work for an international organization on the ground in a humanitarian role or state-building effort. I was able to secure the help of two full-time graduate

students who had recently returned from extensive service learning trips to Bosnia-Herzegovina, one working for an intergovernmental organization (IO) and one for a non-governmental organization (NGO). I had never worked abroad for either an IO or an NGO, nor had I ever been to Bosnia-Herzegovina or garnered expertise about that part of the world. While I was able to explain IO and NGO involvement in state-building abstractly (using a lot of theory from our primary field of political science), they were able to illuminate public policy from “real world” economic and psychological perspectives.

Compiling Reading Lists & Finding Multimedia Presentations

How do I determine the scope and interdisciplinary balance of the reading list?

- Inputs: There are two types of readings in an interdisciplinary course: readings that are themselves interdisciplinary (i.e., using a primary and one or more secondary frameworks for analysis) and readings that examine some fundamental aspect of either your course’s primary or secondary frameworks for analysis. The former is likely found in an interdisciplinary academic journal or a “360 degree” study of a particular issue in a book where each subtopic’s associated field expert writes a chapter. The latter is likely found in a single-subject academic journal or book.
- Rule of thumb: The outcome of the balancing act really depends on how many class meetings you have allotted to explore ideas that are outside of the primary discipline. One rule I like to use is to divide the body of course readings into thirds: one third devoted to theory (doing a survey of the academic field), one third devoted to case studies (looking at past applications of the theory in practice), and one third devoted to “the future of the system” (energizing the students about the possible and analyzing why some outcomes are improbable). Each third must address all the interdisciplinary needs you plan to fulfill. Therefore, the third devoted to theory must cover all relevant theory that you plan to apply from the primary and secondary disciplines. The third devoted to case study must either contain readings that you can ask the students to interpret using multiple frameworks for analysis or readings that already include such analysis. The final third must tackle the future using (most likely) a variety of single-discipline sources that you put together to create the “big picture,” as no one has probably written anything about the future with an exact mix of the elements you want to emphasize.
 - Course application: See “Starosta Sample Syllabus,” downloadable from the AGLSP website.

How do I find suitable reading materials?

- Inputs:
 - 1) Using search engines like “Academic Search Complete,” keyword searches have become an easy way to find interdisciplinary source materials. I tend to set up the

syllabus first, identifying the full arc of inquiry for the course and the individual lecture topics that form it. The keywords suggest themselves by how I configure the topics—the more focused, the better. Then, I can type in each topic keyword in conjunction with the framework for analysis I want to emphasize (e.g., “media” and “freedom” and “Arab” would clearly bring up academic journal articles in the *political science, media studies, and international business fields* about free press, media access, etc., in the Arab world). Alternatively, I can go to several more narrowly tailored databases and type in the key words for a more singular approach (e.g., “CIAO” will only bring up journal articles compiled by Columbia University on specific international relations issues).

2) Although academic journals and books by subject matter experts are always the most important component of any course reading list, I find that investigative journalists often dig up stories that shed light on our interdisciplinary studies. Therefore, I include a smattering of articles from major newspapers (e.g., a link to a 5-part series on economic, social, and health factors impacting global hunger from the *Washington Post*) and magazines (e.g., a behind-the-scenes look at a part of the Mid-East peace process or a profile of the U.N. Envoy to Iraq from *The New Yorker*).

3) Checking with other university professors in fields outside of the one you teach may provide a shortcut to identifying suitable reading materials when you truly have a basic lack of knowledge about an area that you feel is vital to include in your interdisciplinary course.

- Course application: Many universities house specialized institutes, some of which are interdisciplinary by nature and others that specialize in a secondary field that you would find helpful to your course plan. For example, our university’s Graduate School for International Studies has institutes geared toward strengthening the U.S.-China relationship, constructing models to forecast international futures markets, and teaching methods to better teach international relations to K-12 students. These institutes often produce reading lists that can be useful jumping-off points for designing components of your own reading list, as they identify experts in a field. Alternatively, faculty housed at these institutes or within regular university departments routinely publish scholarship that you can review easily; you can use these writings themselves, or you can choose to mine the footnotes contained therein for other research pieces more relevant to your students’ course of study.

How do I find suitable multimedia presentations?

- Inputs: *To illuminate complex subject matter from outside of the primary discipline*, I like to show the students a film—a taped debate or lecture, a documentary film or interview, or a dramatization of a concept we are studying (although this last one is rare). After the film, I hand out a sheet with questions for a roundtable discussion; these questions frame the themes of the film within the academic discipline(s) I want to emphasize.

- 1) Debates, panel discussions, and lectures on all kinds of interesting interdisciplinary topics are available from many universities now, all on the Internet. Using the same search words you used for finding reading list materials, a basic search engine like “Google” will help you identify those kinds of multimedia sources.
- 2) Professionally produced interviews are often now available as podcasts but more rarely as DVDs. The History Channel, Discovery Channel, and PBS still produce DVDs for sale at their online stores, and keyword searches often yield good results. Many media outlets (like CNN) now rely on third parties to distribute their material via DVD.
 - Course application: Various seminars given by judges, prosecutors, etc., visiting University College London Law School have been collected at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/laws/cict/index.shtml?videos> for classroom use. I found these seminars taped in 2002 when I was doing a Google search on “European Court of Justice” for an international public policy course. I did not end up using it because I felt it was too legalistic for my Liberal Studies graduate students—which was an important judgment to make when deciding on subject matter presentations from outside of our primary discipline.

Structuring the Syllabus to Create a Meaningful Arc of Inquiry

How is the arc of inquiry different in an interdisciplinary course as compared to a fundamentals-focused course?

- Sought outcome: Students will not go off on tangents, but rather they will stay on track with various integrated interpretations of the raw data generated by the primary discipline.
 - Course application: A fundamentals course in international public policy emphasizes the core theories regarding how states, nongovernmental organizations, and international organizations relate to each other in the area of public policymaking on issues that cross national and/or cultural boundaries. An interdisciplinary course in international public policy will build on the fundamentals learned previously through new applications of comparative politics (i.e., states’ differing public policymaking approaches because of differing national political cultures and histories) and economics (i.e., North-South debate, effects of globalization, etc.)—emphasizing the contexts and impacts of public policy decision making on global challenges, as well as the contexts and impacts of those ideas on policymaking process itself.

Why is explicit use of interdisciplinary methods constructive?

- Sought outcomes: Students will recognize concrete relationships between disciplines and be able to apply their knowledge of fundamentals in “real world” situations. When confronted with a challenge in their field, graduates will be able to rethink the challenge in other terms, promoting creative solution building.
 - Programmatic application: Students taking all of their course work in the fundamentals mode are called upon to make their own connections all the time, looking for “signposts” along the way in each of their courses and bringing these academic experiences to bear when crafting their capstones at the end of their degree. They may see all of the “signposts” and be adept at integrating their knowledge; they may not. However, students who first get a firm academic understanding of the fundamentals but then have the opportunity to take explicitly interdisciplinary course work are aided in this process. The effective interdisciplinary professor facilitates the students’ connection-making processes without killing the students’ own analytical impulses or creativity.

How are interdisciplinary methods expressed within a syllabus?

- Sought outcomes: Students will see interdisciplinary educational objectives transparently, raising their awareness of the connections they will be making throughout the course and in everything they do to complete the course. Students will have the expectation of interdisciplinary learning from the outset. Although the syllabus makes the educational objectives explicit, the professor’s interdisciplinary tools—classroom creativity and teaching methods—that will lead to meeting those objectives are not explicitly identified.
 - Course application: See “Starosta Sample Syllabus,” downloadable from the AGLSP website. Note the following:
 - Course objectives specifically state the interdisciplinary nature of the course.
 - Required texts clearly relay interdisciplinary content.
 - Grading rubric for the final research paper emphasizes interdisciplinary learning.