INTERDISCIPLINARY GENERAL EDUCATION

QUESTIONING OUTSIDE THE LINES

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“HOW CAN WE MANAGE ALL THIS?”

This essay draws on the Romanticism in the Arts course discussed in the previous chapter but applies to other interdisciplinary courses as well. As a member of the teaching team for the Romanticism course, I have found that before grappling with the complex question “What is Romanticism?” students often struggle with a more basic question: “In this course we’re supposed to talk about a symphony, a painting, and a poem, with some history and philosophy thrown in too?”

Such concern recurs in a wide variety of interdisciplinary courses, as students feel they must master several unfamiliar modes of discourse for a single class. Assuring students that the multiple perspectives will focus on a single course theme and repeatedly drawing connections between works may not suffice to counter their discipline-based thinking: if a course involves three disciplines it must be triply difficult to understand. Instructors can assign a reasonable workload and explain that the course deals with only a fraction of the material from each discipline that is included in a traditionally structured course, but these efforts may pale in the light of students’ sense that they will be overworked by having to learn several new languages at once. The history of our Romanticism course as well as others in the curriculum justifies this concern. Many teaching teams have found their assigned workload overly ambitious the
first time they offered the course as they enthusiastically included the myriad fruits of their collaboration. Subsequent semesters have typically entailed progressive trimming, but student concerns persist.

The interdisciplinary site and these concerns may exacerbate familiar problems in student thinking and writing. When one has to produce in a new language, one may grope desperately for the appropriate vocabulary. Students who feel they are required to learn three new languages simultaneously may grope all the more desperately. They want to learn the languages fast, display fluency fast; thus they latch onto words they have heard bandied about in class or have underlined in their study materials and sprinkle them liberally throughout their essays, apparently the route toward sounding like their instructors and their texts. These are usually high-level abstractions: in the Romanticism course, such terms as nature, the individual, imagination, limits, the exotic. Students pick up the terms more readily than the structure of thinking that relates those terms to the works under discussion, the thinking that renders the terms meaningful. Asking for comparisons across disciplines may speed the rush toward high-level abstractions and generalizations, as students try to combine multiple new languages in a single essay; thus they look for any words the languages have in common—here nature, there nature, everywhere nature. Despite instructors’ admonitions to “be specific,” to “look closely at the individual works,” students do what they think is expected of them, reaching up into the clouds for the “artist’s meaning” and for vast, weighty generalizations about Romanticism, not coincidentally leaving the works far behind. Even professionals engaged in interdisciplinary projects typically spend time “wallowing in abstractions” as they seek “to find a common ground,” notes Klein (1990, 71–72), citing a study by Sverre Sjölander. As Elbow puts it, “The interdisciplinary enterprise, in this sense, is in danger of beginning to rise from the earth and float impotently because of not being grounded in the concrete and unique. It seeks connections by moving as it were upward,” in an extension of the disciplinary process of abstraction (1986, 32).

Another familiar problem of thinking and writing that may become all the more acute in an interdisciplinary setting occurs at the level of detail rather than generality. Many diligent students try to absorb as many details as possible from each new language and then recite them by mouthfuls without the contexts, the conclusions that could give the details meaning. If an exam grade is low after they studied so hard and wrote so much that was accurate, anxiety about inerutable modes of discourse and resistance to the interdisciplinary curriculum itself can build. Indeed that curriculum challenges many students’ high school habit of dealing with disconnected facts and details from discrete classes.

Increasing our understanding of these student concerns and difficulties is of course an important first step. The next, obvious step of plunging in to deal with them may not be so obvious in practice. Some faculty, after years of reading essays written by nonmajors, have concluded that trying to deal with multiple disciplines plus develop the designated essential skill of writing is too much; perhaps the writing component should be dropped. Underlying this view are assumptions familiar to writing-across-the-curriculum advocates but intensified in an interdisciplinary course: not just that assigning writing means marking an endless stream of grammar and spelling errors or that reading frequently assigned essays or multiple drafts takes too much time, but more fundamentally that writing is an add-on, a separable “component” in an already over-busy course agenda. Thus despite enthusiastic beginnings and continued lip service, active learning through writing in interdisciplinary curricula may face an acute version of the threats cited by White in “Shallow Roots or Taproots for Writing across the Curriculum” (1991) and by the many others concerned about the future of cross-college commitment to writing.

Especially in light of all the recent research on learning through writing, it is important not only to keep writing central in interdisciplinary courses but to develop ways to improve it. We would do well to base our approaches on the assumption, developed by Bizzell (e.g., 1982a) and illustrated in the classroom examples above, that students’ anxieties and difficulties often stem not from cognitive deficiencies but from their situation as newcomers to academic discourse in general and to particular discourse communities.

Modeling this discourse does not suffice, as one notices vividly when team teaching—sitting in on colleagues’ presentations, trying to understand the processes of thought in unfamiliar disciplines in order to plan discussion sections, watching students’ reactions, and reviewing
class notes with them. Even when a class session is well constructed, informative, and thought provoking, students may gain little conscious awareness of the processes of thought practiced so that they can use these processes on their own. Many students take copious notes, others take none because, as they tell us later, they “understand what’s going on.” But then comes an assignment asking them to discuss a new work using techniques learned in class, and students all along the spectrum often have no idea where to begin. Walvoord and McCarthy’s classroom research supports these observations: in a wide variety of courses students are asked to apply learned “categories, concepts, or methods to new data and new situations,” but “verbal descriptions of a process, whether presented in class or in a textbook, were difficult for students to translate into action.” They conclude that “procedural knowledge often needs to be taught procedurally—by concrete experiences under the guidance of the teacher, who leads students physically and directly through the procedure” (1991, 7, 238).

LEARNING TO VISUALIZE LANGUAGE

One among many directions worth pursuing is to make more explicit and visual the processes of thought under study. Hayakawa (1939) offers the useful image of the abstraction ladder, based on the work of Alfred Korzybski. In brief, Hayakawa suggests that words can be seen as situated at varying positions along a ladder of abstraction, from the more concrete and specific lower down—for example Bessie the cow—on up through the more abstract and general: cow, livestock, farm assets, asset, wealth. Sentences likewise operate at varying levels of abstraction and generalization, from a lower-level sentence such as “Mrs. Levin makes good potato pancakes” on up through “Mrs. Levin is a good cook,” “Chicago women are good cooks,” and “The culinary art has reached a high state in America” (153, 159–60). To move up the ladder one abstracts, or selects, particular characteristics—what Bessie has in common with Daisy and Rosie or what potato pancakes have in common with roasts and pickles—and ignores differences. Abstracted characteristics make possible increasingly general terms and statements that refer to greater numbers of specific instances.

Hayakawa notes that good thinking involves movement on the ladder, the “constant interplay of higher-level and lower-level abstractions, and the constant interplay of the verbal levels with the nonverbal (‘object’) levels” (162). Perry (1970, 32), Shaughnessy (1977, 240–41, 246), and numerous other educators emphasize the centrality of connected movement among levels of abstraction in academic discourse. Moffett in fact comments that “a very large measure of what educators mean by ‘teaching students to think’ is in reality making them conscious of abstracting but is, unfortunately, seldom viewed this way” (1968, 27).

In a simple classroom application, one can jot faculty and student comments on the board at varying vertical levels to help students visualize and keep in mind the levels of abstraction in a discussion. Drawing on a discussion and handout by our art historian teammate, for example, the students and I have diagrammed some ways to talk about the subject, form, and content of the first paintings presented in the semester (e.g., form—line, color, composition, space, light, texture), with some rough notes underneath (color—many or few? bright or subdued? any striking objects or contrasts?) and below these notes, details from a painting on the screen. When students later attempted to analyze art on their own, they had an approach to try out. Such diagrams are helpful whether we are discussing the effects of iconography and formal devices or the social and political functions of art. Faculty can explicitly present such diagrams as “part of the picture,” with other important parts undrawn for the moment. They suggest “some ways to talk about . . .” rather than “the ways.” Students can be asked to generate examples of other kinds of categories and evidence.

Such board notes can likewise suggest ways of talking across disciplinary boundaries. If breaking with decorum is the topic of discussion, the instructor can jot students’ comments on the board to illustrate varying levels of specificity: up high, the hypothesis; below, kinds of conventional “limits” such as appropriate subject matter, size, audience; below that, ways that Romantics pushed these limits; and, still lower, examples of each. Romantics brought the intensely personal into their art? Witness the portrayals of Berlioz’s love for Harriet Smithson, Gericault’s private obsessions, or the mind of the poet Wordsworth, with examples below that students can compare and contrast. The Romantics
crossed the limits of the art form itself? Witness the program symphonies of Beethoven and Berlioz, Turner’s attachment of long titles and explanations to his paintings, or Blake’s merging of poem and image, again with examples below. We can talk about connections across disciplines, but such visualizing helps students think more clearly about them. The latter set of comparisons enables students to appreciate that an interdisciplinary approach to the arts, while useful in studying any period and culture, is particularly appropriate for Romanticism because so many Romantics crossed boundaries between artistic media in their works.

As a natural follow-up, students can practice discussing new works in section meetings, smaller groups, or pairs. Discussions need not be forced into rigid, linear structures, for as Mahala emphasizes, processes of inquiry are “inherently messy” (1992, 734). But the approach illustrated here, applied flexibly, serves as both a means of discovery and a means of supporting ideas. Paying close attention in a new field of study does not come naturally; ask any music instructor in general education what students try to do at the back of the room as the CD player runs. This approach helps students learn to observe, which “is central to all disciplines; learning to look and look again is learning to question” (Berthoff 1981, 116). And students who have differing viewpoints learn to argue using specifics.

Class discussion of photocopied student writing before a quiz or exam can be a next step. This general procedure has a long track record. In the late fifties, Harvard and Radcliffe asked students at orientation to grade sample essay exams (Perry 1963, 134). Bringing this type of exercise into the interdisciplinary classroom and focusing the discussion on how ideas are supported yields good results. A short handout might contain three excerpts from past exams: one filled with high-level generalizations, one with detail upon detail, and one with effective movement. In discussions with students, each of these writing examples may have its advocates, and a student’s observation that one offers better analysis may not be enough to help other students see the difference and catch themselves when they are writing like the less effective examples. Together, we attempt informally to visualize the writings. Does the second sentence move up, down, or stay on about the same level as the first? What about the third? Students see that it is the movement that “answers the question” and “gets some depth”—we note the before-unexplored metaphor of height in this wording. They can see that the other examples contain “dead-level abstracting,” a term Hayakawa borrows from Wcndell Johnson’s People in Quandaries to discuss such stasis at either higher or lower levels (1939, 161). Shaughnessy notes that “the problem in most BW [basic writers’] papers lies in the absence of movement between abstract and concrete statements” (1977, 240). These examples reveal that the problem resurfaces in more experienced writers’ papers as they work in new contexts. We then try as a group to compose sample answers to a similar essay question.

Conferences with students can follow up on class discussions. One diligent but anxious student, responding to a question about how works from different fields of art use specific means to create an expressive, emotionally powerful transformation of historical events, began with The Death of Marat (1793). She noted that David uses several striking visual means to present the death, and then cited the blank background and the basically horizontal composition, with a downward slope of one arm. Her analysis of Wordsworth’s “To Toussaint L’Ouverture” was similar in its rephrasing of the question, a learned exam-taking skill, followed by a basket of useful details. She was proud of herself for noticing so much in the works and thus unhappy with her grade. In conference our discussion helped her see for herself that she offered details but they did not connect to any mid-level comments about the specific effects of the artist’s choices. Good high-level generalization plus good data equals wobbly thinking when the connecting links are absent. The student commented, “I’ve never seen it that way before”; note the literal and figurative “seeing.” And she exhibited a sudden decrease in frustration. Our subsequent look at her writing in other courses revealed that such disconnected thinking had been a recurring problem but she had never understood what professors wanted with comments like “explain” (“I did!”), “vague” (“but I used lots of details!”), or “so?” (“so what?”). She wrote far better on later occasions by concentrating on the connecting rungs, which then allowed her to develop comparisons across the arts more effectively.

In another representative conference, a business student objected that in an arts discussion, “students just BS. I see a shadow there, I
hearing a drum there.” Her mood was not bolstered by the feedback she had just received on an assignment—where, she reported, she didn’t feel like writing “a lot of BS.” What she did write was indeed that, unfocused and unsupported. One might hear such objections in any required course, but they took on added intensity because this was a second-semester senior who had avoided taking her arts course and now felt she had to learn many different kinds of BS at once to get through. Our sketches of the kinds of categories and evidence used in different disciplines helped her understand that some of those apparently BS’ing students were drawing on evidence to build an argument with as much rigor as she had come to expect in her own field. What she saw enabled her on the next exam to make and support her own points with greatly increased effectiveness. She could respect her own thinking in the arts as well as in accounting.

The approach suggested here helps students that they are already users of language at varying levels of abstraction and generalization, in their everyday lives as well as across the disciplines. At issue then are not processes and tools they lack and need to acquire to become “initiates” but rather varying and more conscious uses of tools they already possess and apply in a wide variety of situations. Disciplinary ladders enable us to see more even as they limit the kinds of things we see. Students can learn to understand the kinds of ladders frequently used in different disciplines but also realize that each is a socially constructed way of seeing, not the way and not the reality itself. To “understand and remain conscious of the process of abstracting” helps us to “realize fully that words never ‘say all’ about anything” (Hayakawa 176, 175).

ONGOING CHALLENGES

The approach suggested in this essay is of course no panacea. A main ongoing challenge I and my Romanticism teammates face, implicit in the previous chapter, is maintaining a creative balance in class and in assignments between the artistic works and interdisciplinary thinking. Just as good thinking involves movement among levels of abstraction, so does a good course. Drawing connections across disciplines, while possible at varying levels of abstraction and generalization, necessarily entails “ascendant thinking,” as van Leer discusses in an essay aptly entitled “Upwards and Across” (1987). Without sufficient attention to ascendant thinking, an interdisciplinary course remains multidisciplinary, juxtaposing works but not bringing them into meaningful relationship with each other. But without vigilance, ascendant thinking can lose the ongoing connection with the concrete that gives it vitality and validity.

Theorists of interdisciplinary studies typically express concern about the former limitation: that in many supposedly interdisciplinary courses faculty and students do not stretch upwards and across to interdisciplinary connections. To encourage this movement, the useful “Guide to Interdisciplinary Syllabus Preparation” poses questions that push toward quite abstract thinking: “Does the synthesis result in a larger, more holistic understanding of the issue?” “Have the perspective of each discipline and some of its key underlying assumptions been brought to light and made explicit?” and so on (Association for Integrative Studies and Institute in Integrative Studies 1996).

But faculty in interdisciplinary courses are likely to express more concern about too much of the upwards and across. Students in class discussions as well as essays may more readily hypothesize about the Romantics with a “holistic perspective” or compare the communicative potential of the various arts than discuss what they have heard in the Pastoral Symphony, which first of all entails actually sitting and listening to it. When critics of interdisciplinary courses worry that such courses may be “shallow”—the image of shallowness accords well with that of dead-level abstracting—it is indeed this level of abstracting and generalizing they have in mind. And theorists not of interdisciplinary studies in general but specifically of interarts comparisons also share this concern.

Scher, for example, notes that literature-music parallels have been accused of holding “a fatal attraction for the dilettante, the faddist and the crackpot” (Calvin Brown’s phrase) because we enter the “interarts borderland... on too high a level of generalization” (1982, 226).

Awareness of this tendency only reinforces my own teaching team’s already-strong commitment, noted in the previous chapter, to immediate experiences with the arts. In addition to introducing students to new environments, we bring the new into class in forms students are not predisposed to disdain: for example, musicians they know as peers...
in their own dormitories, even if it is to demonstrate why they are not able to perform Romantic virtuoso works such as Paganini’s *Caprices.*

We continue to experiment with the wording of assignments to encourage connected thinking. We may require a museum or concert visit and then an inductive essay structure so that instead of launching into a string of generalities, students begin by looking or listening closely and describing what they have seen or heard before moving on to guided analysis and comparison. Counteracting the here nature, there nature, everywhere nature tendency noted above—as if artistic medium is irrelevant, all the Romantics are similar, and they are all completely different from artists in the period before—we have altered our wordings by asking students to debunk syntheses as well as build them. An exam question may ask students to work with concepts but not blur the differences and tensions within them: “Your friend has not had this course. Explain to her some of what she is missing in her notion that the Romantics . . . “ As Hayakawa points out in a chapter entitled “The Little Man Who Wasn’t There” (he discusses Jew and Arab, we might add Romantic), our constructed abstractions and generalizations are necessary for thought but also can blind us (1939).

We continue to work on progressions of assignments over the semester (as Haynes [1996] pursues further over an entire four-year span). Betanzos finds that “students needed to be trained first to listen, to look, and to hear/read carefully and skillfully; only then should one ask them to entertain probing questions into the meaning of what they had heard, seen, or read” (1989, 18). Clément adds that the study of inter-relations should be similarly postponed (1990, 17). These recommendations should encourage students to follow Weistein’s advice for interarts work: be wary of “vast syntheses and brilliant generalizations” but rather “proceed discreetly and with measured pace from the small to the large and from the particular to the general” (1982, 267). But progression from the more concrete to the more abstract, in class and from assignment to assignment, may not make sense pedagogically. Many students simply may not care enough at first to bother learning to listen, look, and read carefully: “I never listen to this kind of stuff.” Our students are also comparing, contrasting, exploring connections with themselves and their world in class and in assignments from day one. They meet certain kinds of challenges again and again but with increasing ability to handle them.

The personal connections evolve, the analyses evolve, whether of the beginnings and structure of Romantic works, the possibilities of conveying through different media a sense of nature as a living organism, or “the artist’s cultural role as image maker” (Lauter 1990).

To allow for these opportunities, we have found frequent short writings essential. Increasingly common across the disciplines under the influence of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement, they take on particular importance in an interdisciplinary course because they allow students to experiment with and bring together words and ideas in a variety of ways. It took us some time to escape captivity to the long papers that would supposedly allow students sufficient scope for creative integrative thinking but that often yielded less than optimal results.

MOVING TOWARD AND AWAY FROM SYNTHESIS

Our classroom struggles to encourage students’ active movement among levels of abstraction and generalization, including ongoing “interplay of the verbal levels with the nonverbal” (Hayakawa 1939), may suggest a useful caution about interdisciplinary studies. Newell argues that “disciplines and not substantive facts are the raw materials of interdisciplinary courses” (1994, 44). But as Beethoven reportedly said, “There have been many princes [and, we might add, musicologists, music historians, interarts scholars] and there will be thousands more. But there is only one Beethoven.” We need to stay in close touch with the “raw material” of his music as well—to value the creative motion.

Synthesis is often discussed as the high point of interdisciplinary studies (see surveys of the literature in Richards 1996 and Newell 1998). In terms of levels of abstraction and generalization, it may often be. But key for Hayakawa and many scholars since his time is the motion of the mind. Listen to the action words: Rorty discusses

“the hermeneutic circle”—the fact that we cannot understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language, or whatever, unless we know something about how the whole thing works, whereas we cannot get a grasp on how the whole works until we have some understanding of its parts. . . . we play back and forth between guesses about how to characterize particular statements
or other events, and guesses about the point of the whole situation, until gradually we feel at ease with what was hitherto strange. (1979, 319, italics added)

And Geertz, noting the importance of the hermeneutic circle across the disciplines as well as in everyday experience, speaks of “characteristic intellectual movement, the inward conceptual rhythm . . . a continuous dialectical tacking”; “one oscillates restlessly . . . hopping back and forth . . . [in] a sort of intellectual perpetual motion” among specifics and generalizations (1983, 69).

In an interdisciplinary course, then, some of the important motion is toward integration, synthesis. It is also away from integration and synthesis toward specifics and toward the nonverbal level of event, object, and person, bringing to them a greater understanding gained from the more abstract thought. Interdisciplinary study entails bringing together data, tools, methods, concepts, and theories from multiple disciplines. It “draws on different disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective” (Klein and Newell 1997, 393–94). Such study also entails moving in the opposite direction. It continually tests that comprehensive perspective, rejects syntheses and tries out others, sees of what value they might be for dealing with the more concrete. In the Romanticism course, interdisciplinary study yields both interarts comparisons and an enriched experience of particular works of Berlioz, Delacroix, and Mary Shelley. Much of the power of interdisciplinary study, for professionals and students alike, lies not at a particular point within the intellectual action it entails—not just the integration—but in the enriched action among levels of abstraction and generalization. The action words cited above suggest a particular sense in which interdisciplinary study indeed calls for active student learning.

NOTES

1. See Perry’s description of “cow” writing, the product of hard work but mingled in raw data without evidence of the understanding that is the key to liberal learning: “The student who merely cows robs himself, without knowing it, of his education and his soul” (1963, 129–33; Perry leaves unexplored the gender stereotypes in his cow/bull terminology, the “masculine context” and the “feminine particular”). Williams and Colombe comment on the “tyranny of the concrete” repeatedly experienced by writers entering unfamiliar disciplines (1990, 107).

2. Cf. Berthoff’s warning about “the hazards of thinking of writing in the core courses as ‘the composition component,’” and her emphasis that “one of the best ways to teach your subject is by teaching writing,” “the chief means of making meanings and thus of laying hold on the speculative instruments of one discipline or another” (1981, 114, 113, 123).

3. McCarthy similarly recommends that faculty emphasize a discipline offers “one way of looking at reality and not reality itself” (1987, 262)—better amended to “ways of looking” to acknowledge the heterogeneity, the openness of the discourses. Also see Bizzell’s caution that we not treat “conventions as if they simply mirrored reality” (1982a, 238; cf. 1982b, 203). For further analysis of the approach discussed in this essay in relation to recent writing-across-the-curriculum scholarship, including possible objections, see Seabury (1996, 45–50).

4. For comments on both the dangers and the possibilities of interarts comparisons and of periodization, see Wellek (1942), Steiner (1982, 1990), Green (1990), and other essays in Barricelli, Gibaldi, and Lauter (1990), especially the introduction. That collection offers various approaches to teaching interdisciplinary courses in the arts and a useful bibliography. While concerns continue among scholars, the editors note that recent theorizing about texts and contexts has increased interest in interarts comparisons, especially those that move beyond formal concerns (1990, 5). Steiner, for example, affirms that “interart loci classicorum may unlock doors to the very structure of cultural thought” (1990, 40).

5. Helen Vendler argued in her 1989 Modern Language Association presidential address that “a general interdisciplinary Poloniuslike religious-historical-philosophical-cultural overview will never reproduce that taste on the tongue . . . of an individual style” to which Graff rightly adds, “recent experience shows that bare, unmediated contact with the work does not necessarily inculcate that taste either” (1987, 254). Obviously, à la Hayakawa, stasis in either direction is less effective in generating active student learning.

REFERENCES


(For sample syllabus, see previous chapter.)