

# Interdisciplinarity

*Essays From the Literature*

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## Guide to Interdisciplinary Syllabus Preparation

Association for Integrative Studies and Institute  
in Integrative Studies

### A. Relation to the Disciplines

1. Is the course issue-based (e.g., societal problem, historical moment, text, geographical region, or a key concept)? What question about the issue is the course designed to explore? What makes that question appropriate to interdisciplinary inquiry?
2. Is the issue focused enough? Are there few enough sub-issues, for instance, for students to develop an understanding of the various perspectives on the issue (and facility with the concepts, theories, and methods introduced)?
3. Are the perspectives of disciplines or schools of thought explicit? Are their respective contributions to the issue explicit?
4. How dominant is one discipline? Do the less-dominant disciplines provide more than subject matter?

### B. Course Structure

5. Is there a "hook" or "grabber" at the beginning that draws students into the issue, motivating them to learn about it, and that serves as touchstone for the course (e.g., movie, newspaper article)?
6. Is the structure of the course clear? Does the syllabus serve as a map of, or orientation to, the course? Do the tools, readings, and subtext for each week reinforce each other and advance the understanding of the issue? (Note: Starting with a conceptual map or flowchart may help in thinking about the structure and facilitate connections.)
7. Does the instructor have an explicit subtext (the "real" educational agenda—e.g., exposure to disciplines, development of skills/values/sensitivities—of which the substantive topic is a particular embodiment)?
8. Is integration on-going, or does it appear only at the end of the course (following serial presentation of disciplinary perspectives, insight, or methods)?
9. Is the level of the course (introductory, more advanced, senior) consistent with the depth in which disciplinary perspectives are presented, the explicitness with which their assumptions are probed, the sophistication of the

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disciplinary tools and their use by students, the explicitness about interdisciplinary method, and the overall balance between breadth and depth?

10. Does more than one discipline contribute to the depth in the course?
11. If the course is multi-sectioned, is there a common syllabus and readings? Do faculty consult weekly to determine what should be discussed in sections? Are there common paper assignments and exams and explicit agreement on a common set of grading standards?
12. Have connections been explored to complementary pedagogies or concerns reflecting other institutional objectives such as collaborative learning, critical thinking, learning styles and stages, or multiculturalism?

### C. Level of Integration Attempted

#### *Multidisciplinary?*

- Do contributing faculty tend to work on their separate parts of the course?
- Do they tend to see the topic only from the perspective of their discipline?
- Has their disciplinary perspective remained unaltered while developing the course?
- Is the contact among disciplines limited to sharing data?
- Is there not even a section at the end of the course reserved for integration?
- Are students expected to undertake any integration without faculty assistance?
- Are disciplinary methodologies and epistemologies unexamined or unstated?

#### *Pluridisciplinary?*

- Is there a section of the course that is “ours” instead of “mine” or “yours,” where faculty can talk to each other even if no integration occurs?
- Do faculty begin to understand each other’s perspective, though their own remains unaltered?
- Does the contact among disciplines include recognizing similarities and differences in their interpretations of data, methodologies, or assumptions?
- Is methodology or epistemology implicit in discussion at the end of the course?

#### *Cross-disciplinary?*

- Is there a dominant-subordinate pattern to faculty interactions, where one faculty member tends to prevail?
- Does the practice of one discipline become the subject matter of the another discipline?
- Is there a conclusion resulting from new insights but no integration because only one disciplinary perspective is evident?

#### *Interdisciplinary?*

- Do faculty tend to work together as much as alone?
- Do they interact instead of merely working jointly?
- Did the issue of the course shift as the course evolved?
- Have faculty perspectives on that issue been altered in the process?
- Is there collaboration between students and faculty in forging a synthesis/integration?
- Does the synthesis result in a larger, more holistic understanding of the issue? Has a new metaphor been created?
- Have the perspective of each discipline and some of its key underlying assumptions been brought to light and made explicit?
- Does the contact among disciplines include: reasoning by analogy from the data, theory, methods, or models of another discipline? revising hypotheses or principles in light of evidence uncovered by another discipline? redefining or extending definitions of key concepts from each discipline to form a common ground on which to integrate their insights? replacing conflicting assumptions with new variables (e.g., assumptions that people are free or determined are replaced by looking at the extent of influence)?