

A Brief Guide to Thinking About Interdisciplinary Study

Students are often attracted to “interdisciplines” like American and Ethnic Studies because of the “freedom” they offer to pursue a range of interest. Just as often, that freedom can become overwhelming and confusing; the vagueness that seemed so promising can become oppressive and worrying under pressure to settle on a thesis topic, or tell friends, family, and employers what you’ve been doing!

Below is a series of notes on ways to think about interdisciplinary work, with the idea of equipping students with tools for use in moments of feeling lost.

Two Models of Interdisciplinary Work:

A significant component of the attraction of American and Ethnic Studies from the outside is the way they can seem like a kind of intellectual buffet from which students can fill their tray. The problem with buffets is that one tends to overload one’s tray, often with little regard for the sensible shape of a proper meal. Some buffet style sampling is inevitable in an interdisciplinary learning context, but this way of thinking and feeling one’s study also has real limitations. It’s a passive and consumptive way of proceeding, likely to yield superficiality and indigestion!

A better way to think of interdisciplinary work, one that will emerge with time (often after a few trips to the buffet for better or worse!) is to think of it as an opportunity to build bridges. Realistic and responsible interdisciplinary study requires time-intensive engagement with the disciplines. You have to learn the language, modes of thought, and evidentiary procedures of the disciplines you draw on to avoid seeming like too much of an interloper. So the best interdisciplinary work takes the time to build foundations of bridges between 2 or 3 disciplines or fields.

Synopsis or Specificity?

The histories of American Studies and Ethnic Studies provide usefully contrasting models of interdisciplinary work. American Studies first came into focus in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, as a result of collaborations between historians and literary scholars, with the intention of producing a better total picture of American life, what was sometimes referred to as the “national character.” Interdisciplinary work, in this early instantiation, was undertaken with the intent of producing more effective generalizations about U.S. culture and history. The most successful model of this kind of work has been called “myth and symbol” criticism, because it sought out organizing images through which to tell grand narratives of American national development. The problem, which emerged in the 60s, with this kind of work, was that its generalizations were doomed to inadequacy—especially as it had the pestering tendency to leave the experiences of women, people of color, the poor, and otherwise non-normative out of the picture!

Ethnic Studies took up the mantle of interdisciplinary work for directly oppositional reasons. Its earliest advocates understood that the disciplines had long trafficked in exclusively white and male perspectives, and so turned to

interdisciplinary perspectives to build models for the study of people who had so long been ignored by, or cast in a racist light by, traditionally disciplinary methodology. Often the historical racism of the disciplines mirrored racist exclusion in the world—so that to talk about the “political thinking” of groups excluded from full-citizenship status (to take one example), one might have to learn about how political ideas were expressed through religious organizations or musical performances. In Ethnic Studies approaches to interdisciplinary work, the emphasis has often fallen on the specificity of people’s experience, culture, and history, rather than its generalizability. Comparison is undertaken only with the greatest care and respect for that specificity.

Now all that said about the history of these two crucially interlinked interdisciplinary fields, their two models increasingly overlap. More recent attempts at synoptic accounts of American culture and history now attend carefully to the specific experiences of people of color and women and others. Likewise, more recent work in ethnic studies increasingly strives to comparative and systemic accounts of its subjects. Ideas that emerged from Ethnic Studies, such as mass incarceration and settler colonialism, increasingly appear to have the synoptic explanatory power of the myth and symbol critics of half a century ago. By the end of their MA, students should be able to articulate their research both in as a study of a specific topic and as a window onto larger social and historical phenomena.

An Intellectual and Social Problem

In practice, being an interdisciplinary student presents some difficulties along its empowering freedoms. As interdisciplinary researchers, we are almost always latecomers to ongoing disciplinary conversations. When students in American or Ethnic Studies arrive in courses in traditional disciplines, they have to play catch-up quickly to get a sense of the rudiments of how people in that discipline talk about their subject. What are the key conceptual tools? What makes up the shared knowledge? How do people do argument? How do they decide whether proof has been established?

This is both an intellectual and a social problem: often the people in these disciplines know one another already, so interdisciplinary researchers also have to make an effort to get to know the people in the room and the people not in the room that they care about. However, it’s also important to realize that disciplinary competence is hard-won, as is familiarity with identity knowledges (women’s studies, Indigenous studies, etc.), whether it’s your identity or not!

On Taking Risks with Your Intellectual Self-Understanding:

Students who won’t state their interests don’t get as much out of interdisciplinary work—take the risk of imagining a bridge you’d like to build, a project you’d like to take up, and see what people (especially faculty) say in response! It’s not the same as getting a tattoo, and you’ll learn from and revise what you think about what you’re doing based on the response you get! If you avoid the risk of committing periodically to an intellectual identity, you’ll miss out!