



Final Paper

Interdisciplinarity and its connection to my reality in Education

Each student will write a statement expressing their understanding of the nature and purpose of interdisciplinary research. What role do our assumptions play in defining research problems and determining how they ought to be studied? What is unique about interdisciplinary research and how is it important? The paper should be about 5,000 words and should follow standard APA guidelines. The papers should be submitted in Word and via email to JKane@liu.edu.

The Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines interdisciplinary research as "involving two or more academic, scientific, or artistic areas of knowledge; involving two or more disciplines." While foundationally, this might be the best approach to learning and understanding specific topics, integrating this into curriculum development can sometimes be challenging. I have found this to be one of the hardest things to accomplish collaboratively at the high school level. Since everything is geared toward testing, there is hardly any interdisciplinarity unless it is done by individual teachers within their discipline, without collaboration with others. Imagine, if you will, an English teacher who wants her lesson to be interdisciplinary but cannot rely on her peers in their specific discipline to provide studies supporting what she was teaching in her classrooms. My father used to say, "my heart is willing, but my head and pockets are weak," when we would ask him to do things where he had to spend money. Similarly, my colleagues might have a willing heart to educate our students in their disciplines, but their minds could very rarely see the value of collaborating on developing and then implementing a curriculum that was cohesive and would educate our students for a lifetime. However, in incorporating interdisciplinarity into curriculum, all relevant disciplines should be on board for it to have a full benefit.

When I decided to become an educator over 20 years ago, I knew that I wanted to be a true educator, willing to learn and share the knowledge that I had acquired. My undergraduate studies, coupled with what I had known before, encouraged me to explore. When I decided on a minor and decided on Philosophy, taking those courses made me want to learn more about Theology, which became my second minor. I knew the possibilities were endless, and while I was focused, I relied on my interdisciplinary learning experience to guide my decisions. I did not start my journey in the workforce as a teacher.

Interestingly what I studied informed what I would do in the first career I embarked on while in college. I worked in the mortgage industry, climbing that corporate ladder, educating the people I served on making the right decisions in acquiring mortgages and ensuring financial wellness. I learned mortgages from reading binders of information given to me by my mentor, something no college or university could have done for me. Still, it was a part of my interdisciplinary process. Everything I learned from working in that industry taught me how to serve the needs of the people I worked with,

whether it was guiding them on getting mortgages or saving their homes from foreclosure while ensuring that they were learning good financial habits. In deciding on becoming a teacher, I already knew that I was an educator. I was an avid learner, willing and open to not only share the knowledge I learned but to acquire more knowledge from being taught by my students and colleagues. I remembered the high school I attended when I first came to America. Some great teachers were working in a system hell bent on failing us as students. I wanted to be a part of the solution. Even more, I was intent on opening a school that integrated into its coursework an interdisciplinary approach to learning. I wanted to educate students robustly, giving them the ability to interact with the people in America and the world and make the right career choices without having to start over. I thought about my early years of learning in England and knew that by the time I moved to America, the foundation in interdisciplinary learning that I had received was certainly laid and would help me get through my years of education in America. It certainly did. In my acquiring of knowledge and even later in my teaching, any topic that I would bring to my classroom needed to be connected contextually with other areas of study, including real-world experiences. Learning in this manner allowed me to make career choices where the transition from one to another was more seamless, and I wanted that for my students. I wanted to create an environment for learning that would enable students to learn and understand the world, not limit them to just the places where they lived or the events near home. Interdisciplinary learning was and still is necessary.

About fifteen years ago, I had the honor of creating two courses that I ultimately would teach, Black and Latino Literature. I thought about the students who would benefit from taking both courses. I thought about the impact that I wanted these courses to make and then went about the business of creating what I had hoped would be courses in Black Literature and Latino Literature that were rigorous and fostered "systems thinking and cognitive thinking" (Repko, Szostak & Buchberger, p. 9). I did not want their learning to be limited to just literature but was intent on having them experience and explore literature in a way they had not done before. In creating the interdisciplinary framework I imagined, I wanted to ensure that I incorporated several areas of study: social studies, including geography and civics, math, astronomy, foreign language, and science. My students needed to gain as much contextual knowledge of the cultures and countries they would be reading about and discussing, while finding joy in reading the literature.

In my mind, I imagined my students' intent on learning for a lifetime that it brought me so much joy. I decided to give the courses a sub-title: "It's a Small World." Imagine being able to learn about the world and the people in it through literature, all in one room. It was easy for me to develop the courses to be inclusive of everything my students would need to be an integral part of the world and

become “successfully intelligent people” (Repko, Szostak & Buchberger, p.15). I gathered together the tools and utensils (abacus, atlases, history, math, natural and social science books, and dictionaries) to ensure that my students succeed. I felt that while I would only have them in my room for one period for each class, four days a week, I needed to make the most of that time. I could not do any literature justice without bringing all the moving parts that make literature unique to my classroom.

I remember a student asking me one day why I was teaching latitude and longitude when discussing a narrative by a "slaver" on the middle passage and asked him if he believed everything written in the history books. He let me know that he did. I decided to test his belief. In his narrative, the "slaver" had explained how long it took for them to travel from Africa and was careful to explain the places where they stopped for food and supplies while on their way to the Americas. There was so much about the narrative that did not make sense, but in that lesson, I wanted my students to understand how important it was to understand I had the entire class play "Telephone message." I explained the rules: I would whisper a message in one of my students' ear that would be passed on from one student to the next in a similar manner. The last student would tell us what the message was, and we would verify if the message were the same as when it started. The message was a simple quote from Peter Handke: “If a nation loses its storytellers, it loses its childhood.” In the end, he realized that the message had changed. He thought about what had just happened and said, “There is more to it than that, Miss.” I agreed. We agreed that stories changed over time. There was more to understanding slavery and the literature of that period than just proving that people create their narratives to suit themselves. There was an integration of thoughts, perspectives and disciplines that were crucial to the understanding of this study. As I ELA/Communication Arts Educator, while I wanted them to have a full understanding, I wanted them to learn from educators in other relevant disciplines.

Repko, Szostak & Buchberger suggest that interdisciplinary studies have faced the challenge of full development and integration into American Education while many other countries have practiced it for centuries. While interdisciplinarity ensures an understanding of diverse cultures, we have to ensure that it becomes a common practice in education, as it is beneficial in the workforce. Fraser (2019) describes the snail's pace at which integrated public common and classical education has grown in America. First, having education as an option only given to white males, then over time being afforded to females, yet we saw the struggle to include people of all classes and cultures. Even today, we still see the disparities. I would say that I will not hold my breath for a mandate for an interdisciplinary curriculum across the board. I have learned that the development of this type of curriculum is never the problem. It is implementing it and tying it to the famous "we have no funding"

line, which becomes an issue. Since we do not have a federal mandate requiring that all children be educated, expecting funding for interdisciplinary studies in public schools will continue to be a discussion that never becomes a reality. Think for a moment about tacit knowledge, the knowledge that we are born with yet is frequently hard to articulate. If we search within ourselves, we can admit that everything we have learned is connected to something else. We have the tools to ensure that education is thoroughly interdisciplinary. However, it seems that we are either too slow to act or not reflective enough in our development and expansion of education to see the benefit of ensuring that we are serving the needs of our students in a global way.

H.E. Stocher said that "Research teaches a man to admit he is wrong and to be proud of the fact that he does so, rather than try with all his energy to defend an unsound plan because he is afraid that admission of error is a confession of weakness when rather it is a sign of strength." We all make assumptions about how things should be developed, how they should work, whether one thing is better than another, and/or what the end product should be. What is vital is that we can acknowledge mistakes and correct them to benefit the whole in doing research. Research should never bind us to set ideas but should allow us to learn from others, incorporate the things we know, and work collaboratively. In the end, we must always work in integrity and with authenticity in order for interdisciplinarity is impactful.

References

Fraser, J.W. (2019). *The School in the United States: A Documentary History* (4th ed). Routledge.

Noddings, N. (2005). *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*. Teachers College Columbia University.

Polanyi, M. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension*. University of Chicago Press.

Repko, A.F., Szostak, R., & Buchberger, M.P. (2020). *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies* (3rd Ed.) Sage.