

Interdisciplinarity in the Liberal Arts: A model for creative collaborative teaching

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Abstract

My presentation provides practical ideas on teaching collaboratively across disciplines. Collaborative teaching can take many forms. A guest lecturer might visit a colleague's classroom to cover a single specialized topic, or a semester-long course might be co-taught by two or more faculty from different disciplines, etc. I will discuss my experience in creating such a class as a jumping-off point for discussion.

*The course I co-taught with a member of the music faculty, *The Union of Music and Dance*, illustrates one model of interdisciplinary teaching. This class sought to integrate the study of music and dance by focusing on work that included historic collaborations between composers and choreographers, such as Igor Stravinsky & Vaslav Nijinsky in *Sacre du Printemps*, among others. Many choreographers have challenged themselves to confront this seminal score, so we included other versions of *Sacre*, including those by Pina Bausch, Maurice Béjart and Angelin Preljocaj.*

My colleague and I found that interdisciplinary teaching brings to light deeper, broader, and more thoughtful connections. Allowing our students to see professors in dialogue—teaching each other something about their respective fields—successfully modeled the creative collaborations we sought to bring to life. I hope to share what I learned with conference participants and to learn from them as well. I am convinced that co-teaching across department lines can broaden a student's sense of the world, revealing how deeply inter-related most fields of study really are and thus contextualizing their learning in a more holistic and comprehensive way.

Why Teach Collaboratively?

Interdisciplinary teaching can bring to light both deep and broad connections between fields of study. Students are allowed to see their professors in dialogue as each scholar/artist teaches the other something about his or her field. This broadens a student's sense of the world, revealing how deeply inter-related most fields of study really are and some of the ways in which professional scholars and/or artists think and make connections. Such dialogue can also serve to contextualize a given subject allowing students to see it in a more holistic and comprehensive way. Faculty working together model creative learning & teaching simultaneously

A Prototype

What follows is the text my colleague and I submitted for creation of a new course titled *The Union of Music and Dance*. We applied for and received funds to develop this collaboratively taught "Special Topics" course:

Music and dance are inexorably linked. At times music composition and choreography happened *simultaneously*, as was the case with Aaron Copland and Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*. An exploration of Copland's piece would not be complete without also understanding Graham's choreography, and vice versa. At other times the dance came *after* the music had been composed,

as when Nijinsky choreographed a ballet to Debussy's *Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun*, which had originally been written to precede a reading of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "The Afternoon of a Faun." The identity of Debussy's work has become so bound up with the ballet that to study the music without the dance is meaningful but not artistically satisfying. Similarly, although there are many aspects of Nijinsky's choreography to consider, an understanding of this ballet is not complete without an understanding of Debussy's music.



Our Research

Our background work included attending live performances of the works to be taught in our course. These performances served as the basis for how I, a professor of dance, taught a musician about dance history and choreographic devices. My colleague, a professor of music, taught me about music history and compositional approaches. We went on to create a "Music/Dance Rubric" for each work to systematize our approach to teaching and discussing the work. Our "Music/Dance Rubric" provided a framework of questions to guide us. Various questions included, such as: was the music composed for this dance? Does the music exist outside of the context of this dance? How does this choreographer fit into the trajectory of dance history? The rubric helped focus our discussions.

We learned much about designing and teaching such a class-- finding ways to best leverage our expertise and interests to provide an educational experience that was more than simply two views of the same work.

Sample Topics

What follows are two examples of subject matter that, when taught from an interdisciplinary point of view, provides an especially rich and full learning opportunity:

My colleague and I developed a section based on Mark Morris's 1988 dance *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*. Morris' choreographic inspirations in creating *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* were three-fold: The poems written by John Milton in 1631, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"; the 1740 score by George Frideric Handel, in which Handel added the third section "Il Moderato"; and the 1816 watercolors poet William Blake painted to serve as illustrations for an edition of the Milton poems. This topic provided a rich reservoir for interdisciplinary teaching. We were able to lecture on the music, the dance, the paintings, and include guest lectures from an English department faculty member whose specialty is John Milton, as well as discussing ideas of Postmodernism.

Another sample topic, one that mirrors the interdisciplinary nature of the Ballets Russes itself, is discussion of the 1913 Ballet Russes production of *Sacre du Printemps/Rite of Spring*. The teaching of *Sacre du Printemps* could easily constitute a single-topic semester long course. When teaching about the original

1913 production, the only way to truly do it justice is to devote equal parts to the choreography and background of Vaslav Nijinsky, the impact made by Igor Stravinsky's ground-breaking music score, the libretto and designs by Nikolais Roerich and the system of Eurhythmics and contributions by Marie Rambert in deciphering Stravinsky's challenging musical score. Guest lectures by colleagues in music history, Russian art, Eurhythmics made this a very rich learning and teaching experience.

Since there are countless choreographies to *Sacre du Printemps*, one can also choose to teach other versions of *Sacre du Printemps* from a similar interdisciplinary lens in order to more fully contextualize the factors that helped create each version. For example, when teaching Pina Bausch's 1975 *Rite of Spring*, lectures on the history of Tanztheater, German expressionism, Weimar Germany, and guest lectures from specialists in gender studies can all paint a fuller picture of the context in which Pina Baush created her seminal work.

Final section: Discussion and conclusions

The power of a college or university is that it brings together scholars in various disciplines, people with widely divergent viewpoints to create a collective "mind" that is more than the sum of its parts. Interdisciplinary teaching leverages this strength more effectively than keeping each department discreet from every other.

Interdisciplinary teaching can bring together various groups of students who might otherwise spend little time together and might never consider taking a course outside their own majors even though they share common interests and passions.

The research and teaching of this class enabled my colleague and me to acquire extensive knowledge of the other's field—gaining a deeper understanding of the works to be studied in the course. We created a truly memorable experience for our students and achieved or exceeded our goals for the course.

We discovered the seemingly limitless possibilities of artistic and interdisciplinary collaboration. Students learned to think critically about a collaborative/interdisciplinary work.

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