

Editors' Introduction

An interrelated collection of questions has always animated *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*: What is interdisciplinarity? How do we know it when we see it? Can we identify an inter- or trans-disciplinary process that helps us to navigate difficulties that may arise when individuals from different intellectual traditions work together, or when an individual with deep training in one tradition is drawn to work in a different tradition? What are the potential benefits or limitations to working in inter- or trans-disciplinary ways? How might we nurture communities and institutions that support such work? Can we demonstrate that the benefits of interdisciplinarity are worth the risk and investment? How do we teach others, both colleagues and students, to employ interdisciplinary techniques? Is interdisciplinarity primarily a phenomenon of academic institutions, with their long disciplinary traditions and infrastructures? Or is inter- or trans-disciplinarity a response to and approach for engaging complex problems in an increasingly interdependent world? Are there regional variants of interdisciplinarity, and if so what are their characteristics or significance?

Broadly, these are questions of interdisciplinary theory and practice, and the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies (AIS), this journal's parent organization, has brought forward a great many insights into these questions since its founding in 1979. Due to our origins in the United States, the journal's initial focus was on interdisciplinary research, practice, and teaching in the English-speaking world. Over time, however, AIS has become far more international in focus, as recounted in Julie Thompson Klein's conclusion to this issue's Special Section and attested to by the wide variety of countries of origin of the authors in this volume. As Klein points out in her conclusion, these efforts have "informed the English-speaking audience about scholarship in other languages and, in doing so, helped establish a foundation for international dialogue."

Therefore, it is with great excitement and interest that this volume offers a Special Section focused on Interdisciplinarity in Latin America. Guest edited by Bianca Vienni Baptista, of Universidad de la República, in Uruguay, the section brings together articles written by scholars from Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, and Argentina. It is fascinating to learn, through these articles as well as through Vienni's introduction and Klein's conclusion to the Section, how many of the same collection of interrelated questions about inter- and trans-disciplinarity animate the work of our Latin American colleagues, and to learn about the decades-long traditions and current status of interdisciplinary work across Latin America, and also what might be unique about the practice of interdisciplinarity in their different countries given the

layered social and political histories of that region. As Klein observes in her conclusion,

a number of possibilities for widening dialogue about interdisciplinarity in Latin America emerged from this Special Section. The most overriding is Vienni's proposal for "regionalism". . . . Moreover, she shifts the lens of interdisciplinarity from the negative connotation of intervention to overcome obstacles to the positive lens of generating novel approaches that also foster collective identity.

We trust you will share our interest in and excitement about this Special Section.

The other four articles in this edition of *Issues* divide between two articles focusing on theory and two on aspects of practice. The volume leads with an article by William Condee, the J. Richard Hamilton/Baker and Hostetler Professor of Humanities at Ohio University, where he works in the department of Interdisciplinary Arts and specializes in Theater History. His article, "The Interdisciplinary Turn in the Arts and Humanities," starts with Condee wearing his historian's hat and giving an account of the evolution, strengths, problems of academic disciplines, and the appearance of earlier versions of interdisciplinarity, as well as the ways that "the transformation of universities in the twenty-first century and the challenges posed by postmodernism" have led to an "interdisciplinary turn." He examines the sometimes arbitrary and external constructions of disciplines by comparing the cases of dance and mime, and the at times hegemonic consequences of such institutional distinctions. He then focuses on examining the nature of the "interdisciplinary turn," borrowing an idea from the philosopher Richard Rorty, who asserted that change happens not when we respond in new ways to old problems, but rather when a new set of problems comes to the fore. Condee asserts,

Two problems have confronted academic institutions and scholarly inquiry: the challenges to universities posed by budgets and demographics, and the challenges to scholarship from postmodernism. The current interdisciplinary turn is in response to these problems: a turn toward critical interdisciplinarity in scholarship, and a turn toward critical thinking in teaching and learning.

This, he feels, has created real opportunities, and he devotes the remainder of his article to examining what those opportunities are, as well as to what may lie ahead.

Our second theoretical piece is titled "Interdisciplinary Research and Phenomenology as Parallel Processes of Consciousness." It is by P. Sven Arvidson, who has contributed two other excellent articles to this journal over the past several years. As with his previous articles in *Issues* he focusses

on the mental processes and psychological attitudes that underlie our work as interdisciplinarians. In this article Arvidson observes significant parallels between the processes of interdisciplinarity and phenomenology. His article's "overall purpose is to reveal striking similarities in the demands of interdisciplinarity and phenomenology as human conscious processes." He observes that both interdisciplinarity and phenomenology are ways of thinking that have arisen in response to engaging complexity. He writes,

in both cases of trying to understand the complex problem, it pays to have humility, playfulness in imagination, and tolerance for ambiguity. But [interdisciplinarity and phenomenology,] two ways of directing consciousness to deal with a complex problem, also have in common certain transformations or activities of consciousness.

His article is devoted to a detailed examination of these parallel processes of consciousness, their similarities and differences. His aim, beyond bringing these similarities to our attention, is "to encourage communication between contemporary practitioners of both approaches to phenomena."

If both Condee and Arvidson are concerned with questions about what interdisciplinarity is, bringing to the fore some interesting aspects of interdisciplinary thinking, our last two articles are concerned with questions of how best to introduce students to interdisciplinarity, and to documenting the positive effects of so doing, purposes that make them both excellent examples of the Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning (or SOITL). The third article in this edition of *Issues* "reports on the efforts of a political science professor teaching a multidisciplinary course focused on New York City to develop an interdisciplinary class project designed to lead students to an appreciation of the immigrant experience in the United States." The course described by Robert Pecorella in his article, "From Michel Foucault to Mario Puzo: Using an Interdisciplinary Approach to Understand Urban Immigration Then and Now," is part of the Core Studies program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St John's University. The course is "an effort to help students grasp more fully the often contentious and always complex process of immigrant acculturation from traditional cultures to life in a modern capitalist society." His article provides detailed information about this particular course, its design, readings, and learning projects, and examines the many ways in which the design of the course consciously works to integrate many different disciplinary perspectives on the immigrant experience. In Pecorella's course,

students approach the immigration issue with Foucault's social discourse ideas as the philosophical background; evaluate these ideas in light of the cultural differences between modern and traditional societies as understood by sociologists and

anthropologists; consider the cumulative impact of these first two components of the exercise to the sociological and political science literature on intergenerational cultural adaptation among immigrants; and reflect on the entire process of understanding that results through the lens of a mid-20th century novel.

The course aims to integrate as well the experiences of the students themselves: Pecorella observes that St John's is an institution that has had as part of its larger mission for 150 years the education of first-generation college students. This is a particularly telling point in a classroom peopled with first-generation Muslim immigrants as well as fifth or sixth generation descendants of the southern and eastern European immigrants of the turn of the last century.

While Pecorella's article describes the design of a specific core course, the fourth article reports the results of a qualitative case study in the context of an entire interdisciplinary curriculum. Ria van der Lecq's report on her research examines a series of four reflective essays collected in an e-portfolio over the course of students' undergraduate careers within the Liberal Arts and Sciences program at Utrecht University – a large Dutch research university. Using the framework of self-authorship, first proposed by developmental psychologist Robert Kegan and developed by education researcher Marcia Baxter Magolda, van der Lecq's aim is to test assertions by Carolyn Haynes and Jeannie Brown Leonard, scholars of interdisciplinary teaching and learning well known to us in AIS, "that interdisciplinary programs offer students an environment that stimulates the development of self-authorship." According to Baxter Magolda, self-authorship is the "capacity to internally define a coherent belief system and identity that coordinates engagement in mutual relations with the larger world." Using many wonderful and often inspiring quotes from the students' reflective essays to illustrate her points, van der Lecq

conclude[s] that various program characteristics reinforce one another. The development of the students in this interdisciplinary program appears to be supported by two factors: the complexity of the interdisciplinary projects, tackled in collaboration with one another, and the responsibility the students have for their own education. The complexity of the interdisciplinary projects results in openness to other perspectives, seeing the bigger picture, and appreciation of each other's qualities. The responsibility for their own education leads to an increasing sense of agency and autonomy.

We close this year's publication of *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies* with "Further Conversation: A Forum for Interdisciplinaryians," the first of what we hope will be an occasional forum in which dialogue might follow upon

an article published earlier in the journal. In this case it's another example of AIS's reach across generations and international boundaries, a conversation between a Past-President of AIS and a former Editor of *Issues*, Rick Szostak, from the University of Alberta, in Canada, and Zachary Piso, a graduate student in philosophy from Michigan State University, in the United States. We hope this forum provides possibilities for future conversations about any of the many interrelated questions concerning interdisciplinarity that this journal has always explored.

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