

Interdisciplinarity is Important

The Department of English Language and Literature of Hong Kong Shue Yan University stands out from all the other universities because of its focus on interdisciplinarity. The four streams of English Department Cultural Studies, Literature, Linguistics and Translation intertwine and compose the department. Therefore, I feel the urge to write about interdisciplinarity once I heard news that Professor Peter Roland George Storey is going to dwindle the four streams of English Department into just Literature and Linguistics and diminish the interdisciplinarity in our department. As a student who has savored interdisciplinarity, I care about the future of the department as well as the whole school. And that is the motivation of this writing. Interdisciplinarity not only is the approach scholars shall desire for, but also a valuable key for the development and reach purpose of a university. The four streams of English department demonstrate these advantages of interdisciplinarity. In the following content, this writing attempts to expand the above ideas by first commenting on what universities shall be achieving, listing out the benefits of interdisciplinarity, followed by briefly discussing each streams of the department, as well as providing examples of interdisciplinarity to illustrate the potentials of interdisciplinarity. Potential readers can view this writing as a causal essay discussing the approach of interdisciplinarity whereas I personally view this as a reflection paper concluding my four years of study, as well as an academic protest against the exclusion of interdisciplinarity the department head rumored to be making.

To begin with, I would like to share my understanding of what universities are for. As a tertiary education, universities are generally what individuals decide to further inquire after compulsory secondary schools. With choice given to which area does one determine to learn more, universities have a huge need to be extraordinary. Students are learning focused theories and equip themselves with specific ability for

the future career regardless of them deciding to be a scholar deciding to study inspiring and deserving issues or to be a practitioner utilizing skills they have acquired. We should look no further than Shue Yan University's motto “敦仁博物”. “仁” is arguably difficult to locate an equivalence in English. My interpretation for “敦仁” would be enlightening learners to be kind, sympathetic and overall a good person and be a constructive member of our society. “博物” is to educate future members of society to be knowledgeable in a wide range of studies. In other words, “敦仁” is the attitude and quality; and “博物” is the academic aspect of knowledge both aim to foster a useful person. In Chinese, that is to prepare a student to be 見多識廣, 具備仁德. It shall be noted here that when learning theories can achieve “博物”, not all knowledge can lead to “敦仁”. And this is where interdisciplinarity enters the picture.

On an academic level, interdisciplinarity is advantageous for University in the inquiry of theories. Scholars have been suggesting and applying theories to describe and explain how the world generally works as well as providing insights when necessary. It is universal across all disciplines. Yet theories as relative static explanations can be limited. The world is constantly changing and there shall be constant discovery of theories and concepts. Ten years ago, is different from ten years later, and 2019 is so dissimilar compared to 2020 and 2021 when online mode is adopted across various occasions due to COVID-19. Take language teaching as an example, scholars have been studying different pedagogies and materials, but the context is physical classrooms. Now that Zoom and Online learning is the issue as the world progresses, one can foresee online teaching mode will be the focus of study at least in language teaching. As the world is constantly changing, concepts may not attend to the research focus. Since interdisciplinarity is about intersecting disciplines so that new common grounds can be explored upon, interdisciplinarity is the best

chance for publishing new works for the ever-changing world. Interdisciplinarity is practical on how we utilize our concepts to make sense out of it with relation to another area of study. Intersecting gender study with marketing on females would react to particular advertisements or intersecting literary work with environmental protection to see how texts promote environmental awareness can be inspiring ideas having research values.

Interdisciplinarity can also reach the goal of “敦仁博物”, specifically in the context of English department. In the Department of English, we have Cultural Studies and Literature. The content of the streams will be expanded later in this paper. In one aspect, we study humans in our courses, discussing the unfairness of how the have-nots such as females and black are oppressed. It is through studying humanities and their tales we develop recognition of the issues in our society and develop sympathy. The study of texts in conjunction of Cultural Studies we reach the goal of “敦仁” and develop desirable personality. Interdisciplinarity has a more salient impact that is to reach the goal of “博物”, when we don’t just study our own disciplinary, but many other disciplinary as well. Knowing knowledge of other areas of study and we can accumulate a wide range of ideas. Interdisciplinarity is necessary if “敦仁博物” is our goal.

On an instrumental level specific to Shue Yan University, interdisciplinarity is also the key to developing our school. Interdisciplinarity is only found in Hong Kong Shue Yan University thus far in Hong Kong and it is how we differentiate from other universities. Happy is the news that the ranking of Shue Yan University had just risen by a hundred. And the publishing of paper guides us to that achievement. To reach further rankings, not only we need to publish more works, but we also need to stand out from others as well. We need new rims of studies to go further. It is a solid path of victory for us to publish papers with Translation, Linguistics, Literature and Cultural

Studies intertwining in our topics when other universities can only publish works based on only one or two disciplines. As seen in the later parts of this paper our courses integrate streams and it results in exciting ideas that deserve further studies. If the Department of English alone can achieve those, we are hitting the jackpot when we intertwine any departments of our university. Now with the plan of keeping only Literature and Linguistics, we are turning our school into a school no different than other universities in Hong Kong. One is truly baffled and asks what is the point of evolving our school into something no different than any other universities? What would be the reason for future students to apply for our school if we are identical to other universities? Interdisciplinarity is essential to us and it is a treasure we cannot afford losing.

In the following part I would like to discuss the four streams of our department and how they intertwine with other disciplines. Leading the charge are Literature and Cultural Studies. Despite Literature being a common area of study in English departments, it can go beyond what it is worth with Cultural Studies. The definition of Literature is broad being anything written. Generally, it is in the form of novels, poems, drama, and texts like those. Traditionally apart from discussion of the plot, writing styles and symbolisms are also a favourite focus among scholars. Yet in my personal understanding (you can agree or disagree), Literature is more than mere writings. They are stories, stories that shall be a reflection and protest for our reality, featuring gender issues, the unfairness and villainess of reality and humans in general. It is not difficult to find characters in the tales that readers have emotions upon or find certain scenes relatable as a stereotype. Most of the cases being women or minorities being oppressed and controlled by men. This is the widely seen gender issue of feminism also focused on Cultural Studies. One main idea constantly mentioned in Cultural Studies is the binary classification, the hierarchy of men (particularly white

men) and the other. There are white men on one side of the power, they are stereotypically superior and they are the haves in most cases. On the opposite side of this classification, we have females (gender), black (race) and many nonhumans such as robots and nature. Men control all the items in the otherness. In many literary texts, it is the men who manipulate everything. That is the depiction of reality where white men seem to manipulate everything as well: controlling women, discriminating against Blacks and Asians, devastating natural resources and more. It is these issues that can be found in many literary works. Cultural Studies in extension also studies cultural texts such as games and movies which might depict cultural issues as well. We read texts in Literature to gain awareness that such issues happen in reality too. Thus, when we see unfortunate incidents presented in News such as poverty, domestic abuses, Asians attacked in America, immigrants in Europe, we can sympathize with them since we know similar stories in Literature. That by the way, is also how Cultural Studies lead to “敦仁”. We study the hierarchy alongside gender issues, race issues, class issues, and the other-than-human-species. They are the have-nots, the abused, the powerless. Through studying Literature through Cultural Studies, we develop sympathy of the not-haves in the world, and voice out for them when possible. As a result, Cultural Studies not just expand our horizon of knowledge, but also accomplish us to have good qualities as a person to reach “敦仁博物”.

Linguistics is another significant stream. To me, there are two types of Linguistics, the mechanical linguistics focusing on components of language such as phonology, syntax, morphemes and semantics. The other type is applied Linguistics where language is intersected with various areas of study such as with sociology to form sociolinguistics, with psychology to form psycholinguistics, and with pedagogy as well as cognitive linguistics to form Second Language Acquisition. To put it simply as: Sociolinguistic intersects with sociology to see how language develops in a

society and how speakers view language as an attitude. Psycholinguistics intersects with psychology and systematically discusses how the human mind works and relates it to language in the issues of language processing and aphasia. Second Language Acquisition further extends the psychology part and examines how speakers learn language. Even Pragmatics featuring language in use originates from psychology. Applied Linguistics has always been my favourite because it can relate to other disciplines and uncover new ground scholars and teachers are interested in. Yes, it is difficult to pass the course without passing a Psychology or Sociology course first, but these are favoured by students who want to be scholars or desire to be a language teacher. It is again the interdisciplinarity which makes the department unique and opens potentials for discussions.

Last but not least there is Translation. Translation is not only the interplay between two languages, say Chinese and English, it is a wide area of study. In the second year, there is a course of Literary Translation where one discusses how to translate literary works, how to perceive rhymes, whether to retain certain content or not. It is a translation with literary awareness as well as the awareness of linguistic features. In the third year we learn Gender, Language and Translation interplay with gender issues. That course will be focused later. In the final year we have Globalization and Translation. We learn about the history of translation, the power and position of English in a globalized world and the issues of translation under globalization. These courses are exclusive to our department due to our emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Besides, Hong Kong is a bilingual society, and we often mix codes. It is in translation courses where we truly use English or to study its equivalence in Chinese. Translation Studies not only interplay with other areas, but it is also possibly the best way to learn a language. Therefore, it would not be a wise choice to omit it in future curriculums.

On top of that, I would like to give two examples of interdisciplinarity courses to further demonstrate what interdisciplinarity can achieve. Science Fiction is an inspiring course. Its name alone is interdisciplinary. Science and fiction seem contrasting at first glance. Science is relatively quantitative and accountable, where fictions are imaginative. Deemed as the two cultures Science and Humanities, the two don't seem to get along to each other. In science fiction, we combine both, science inspires fiction. We integrate technologies and scientific theories into constructing a story. Applying some concepts learnt in Technoscience Culture, there are AI, robots, time travelling, terminal identity, space travelling and more, we have our imagination. Technoscience Culture itself also focuses on technologies and most importantly, to discuss what is human when technology can physically and cognitively construct a human. Science Fiction not only focuses on the notion of humanity when technology is becoming us, but also how contemporary technologies would impact humans. Hundreds of years ago there is alchemy and chemistry, and we have the fiction *Frankenstein* as an early science fiction. In the 1980s we have computers and the Internet, hence movies such as *Matrix* are popular. In the same period since the Internet is invented, Artificial Intelligence is made possible to imitate humans cognitively, leading to movies such as *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*. The future may even be Singularity combining humans with AI. Science Fiction might be the most exciting and inspiring interdisciplinary course as it combines technology, science and human all in one package. Interesting is that fiction in return inspires science when certain scientific discoveries and inventions are inspired by Science Fiction, forming a recursive loop. Science Fiction is interdisciplinary as we integrate the technologies and science we are having or will have in the future, imagine its impact on humans and demonstrate it in cultural texts. That is the interdisciplinarity that is desired by scholars and the general public.

Another example is the translation course Gender, Language and Translation mentioned earlier. This course inquires how is female speech different, what are the feminist movement that might change translation. But the most important is how changes in the target text can be related to gender issues. Like many areas of study, translation is patriarchal. Male translators taking up most of the translator population would oftentimes omit the content where females are significant in translated works. Female translation activists wishing to gain fairness and break out of such oppression translate works and favor female characters, to the extent of altering content of source texts to express a message. Through intersecting translation and gender issues in Cultural Studies, one can realize that we have been being unfair to the other genders and motivate ourselves to voice out for the have-nots. Such interdisciplinarity is crucial not only to university study, but also to the human race as whole, using translation as case study with cultural awareness to promote equality in our own ways. The world could not be a better place without interdisciplinarity.

Prior to concluding this writing, I would like to address the diminishing of the Department of English into merely Literature and Linguistics. The explanation I overheard is to improve students' English and to equip undergraduates to be teachers. On the issue of improving English, one shall note that this is the Department of English, our goal is not simply to polish English, we use English to learn various things. If one insists on actually learning English, this would be the most fruitful way. We are not learning English bottom-up and strictly stick to certain grammar books, we are practicing English top-down when discussing and writing on various issues. This happens to the way native English speakers pick up their language through usage. And no one is going to doubt that English native speakers are not proficient. Besides, the so-called standard English is dependent on the time and space we are living in. We follow the mainstream grammar because certain guidebooks exist. In

that case standard English in Shakespearean plays and Bible must have been different from ours. That is not the excuse not to study them. Therefore, the usage shall outweigh the form of English. Additionally, if polishing English is the goal, then what is the reason to enroll in The Department of English if all undergraduates have to take English Writing and English Usage? As for the issue of equipping teachers, interdisciplinarity is beneficial because it is versatile to all areas of professions. Potential teachers can benefit from interdisciplinary courses such as Psycholinguistics and Second Language Acquisition, alongside all inspiring ideas we have learnt in the interdisciplinary courses. Why restrain the department into serving only future teachers when interdisciplinarity benefits everyone including both future scholars and potential language teachers?

Interdisciplinarity stresses on the inter-ness between disciplines, intersecting different areas of studies. In a world that is never static, we need to refurbish our ideas with the ever-changing world. It is also an irreplaceable element unique to English Department where we can reach the goal of “敦仁博物” to expand our scope of knowledge and cultivate us to be a better person. Since interdisciplinarity is so versatile no matter which path graduates take to be a scholar or a practitioner, we can all be constructive members of society because we know more than the surface level of knowledge. I am no experienced scholar or intelligent individual when it comes to the academic world. Hence the above shall only be treated as my personal views and understanding of interdisciplinarity. To close this writing, I hereby sincerely encourage peers, alumni, scholars, lecturers and readers with similar ideas to act and express their views in various ways. Because interdisciplinarity, is the valuable approach the world needs.

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