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**Delivering the (Public) Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Challenge (0251)**

**Research Domain: Learning and Teaching**

Summary : Research conducted by the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences, and the Humanities (DASSH) has found that University Arts education in Australia has undergone a radical change in infrastructure in the past decade. Most institutions are moving away from large departments of dedicated discipline experts to a 'program management model' in which an individual or a small group has oversight of curriculum design, management and academic leadership, in increasingly interdisciplinary contexts. Furthermore, curriculum is now often delivered by sessional teachers on short-term contracts. This paper concerns the challenge inherent in delivering humanities programs in this context as a matter of good teaching practice. We examine the development of a new set of core units in the humanities degree at Edith Cowan University (Western Australia) and the attempt to link introductory interdisciplinary study with outcomes and energies associated with 'Public Humanities'**Delivering the (Public) Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Challenge**

Conference Research Domain: The role of disciplines in shaping teaching is a relatively new focus in higher education research (Neumann). This paper investigates knowledge creation in the context of recent investigations into shifts in the nature and delivery of humanities higher degree courses. The proposed paper examines the development of a new set of core units in the humanities degree at Edith Cowan University (Western Australia) that attempts to link introductory interdisciplinary study with outcomes and energies associated with 'Public Humanities.' For these reasons we submit this proposal under the research domain of teaching and learning.

The Quality Assurance Agency in the UK investigated the recent, negative media coverage of higher education, identifying a significant change in its 'structure and function' since the 1960s (April 2009). The Report states that "massification" of this sector has been 'accompanied by changes in the nature of the student population' and that institutions have 'responded in different ways and at different speeds' to transform 'higher education into an activity suited to a more diverse student body' (4). One emergent area of concern is the reduction and potentially inequitable range of contact time deemed appropriate for student learning across the higher education sector. This shift is concurrent with an apparent pedagogical shift in focus from *teaching* to *learning*, in that universities no longer appear to deliver courses via the 'traditional' high level of formal contact hours of lecturer-directed teaching. Instead, students are expected to

embrace a culture of 'autonomous or self-directed' learning processes.

In Australia this shift in emphasis has been further complicated by a radical change in university infrastructure. Research conducted by the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences, and the Humanities (DASSH) found that 'most institutions' in Australia are moving away from large departments of dedicated discipline experts to a 'program management model' in which an 'individual or a small group has oversight of curriculum design, management and academic leadership' ('Emerging Future Studies,' 2008, p.5). Furthermore, the DASSH research found that curriculum is now often delivered by sessional teachers on short-term contracts. Consequently, across Australia 'a common issue raised in interviews' was the increasing 'casualisation of teaching staff' ('Emerging Future Studies,' 2008, p.5). It would seem that economic imperatives rather than pedagogical innovation are driving the recent trend towards transdisciplinary delivery of university humanities courses, increasingly administered by transient sessional staff.<sup>1</sup>

In short, learning in the Australian humanities degree now occurs in complex fields of disparate School conglomerations with a range of cross-disciplinary combinations where knowledge is no longer mainly produced or taught in the context of deep discipline study. 'English' may operate as a stream in a Communications aggregate while 'Philosophy' has been relegated to the category of 'generic skills,' embedded (perhaps) in individual units of study. While philosophy is not the focus of this paper, we question how, without the support of critical mass, humanities 'disciplines' may be best taught in the future. How do we impart the skills of close analysis associated with degrees in English or the precision of thought and expression in the analysis and formulation of complex and controversial problems associated with philosophy? What is the global relevance of such benchmark statements as 'philosophy ought to be at the heart of the work of any university worthy of its name' in the 2007 benchmark report from the QAA in the UK ([www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk))?

In broad terms, we are concerned with the challenge of delivering humanities programs now as a matter of good teaching practice in a transdisciplinary context that has evolved over the last decade. Core questions include: What is the significance of 'disciplines' for curriculum in the context of 'small group management' of cross-disciplinary courses? How does discipline 'content' relate to notions of academic 'expertise' of academic teaching staff in transdisciplinary contexts? In the United States scholars such as Rebecca S. Nowacek look for a solution not in superseding

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<sup>1</sup> The quality of philosophy research and education at Melbourne University, a flagship institution for Australia in adopting the Bologna model (now called the Melbourne model), remains newsworthy. The 'Higher Education Supplement' of *The Australian* recently reported that the University has lost ground in international standing since six of its thirteen academics took redundancy in 2007 as a 'Faculty wide job of shedding programs to cut costs' (22 July 2009).

(trans-) but in intermingling disciplines. She observes that “interdisciplinary” learning communities, first-year seminars, and senior capstone courses’ are an ‘increasingly common feature’ of undergraduate programs, citing James Ratcliff’s tabulation of education reforms which found that ‘over half of the current general education reforms include interdisciplinary courses’ (2009, 493-4). Thus, whether one agrees with Stanley Fish’s assessment that interdisciplinary learning is virtually impossible (1994), it has become a reality of tertiary infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Academic communities may continue to conceptualise activity and research according to semi-discrete, disciplinary domains, but in practice we are forced to contend with increasingly eclectic allegiances.

Nowacek argues that interdisciplinarity is not simply a desire to ‘slip the yoke of disciplinarity.’ She contends that interdisciplinary learning and thinking operates both on the boundaries and the intersections of disciplines in ways that do not ‘transcend but rather transform our understanding of discipline’ (494). We are proposing to consider how humanities learning may be enhanced by the concept of interdisciplinary work as overlapping and interanimating rather than simply multiple, coexisting and/or oppositional.<sup>3</sup> If the common ground of the disciplinary diversity represented by the Humanities is critical thinking (Franke 2009), how might the activities of articulating questions and gathering evidence to make reasonable judgments be the basis for a new generation of foundational units? Our response uses the development of an interdisciplinary set of core units to facilitate higher-order thinking about disciplines and the role of writing within them. Furthermore, our project tries to bring undergraduate learning into the context of ‘Public Humanities.’

Kathleen Woodward speaks of the blossoming of this new field, Public Humanities, in terms of publicly *engaged* scholarship. She focuses on research and the proliferation of public humanities centres and on the importance of luminaries of the public arena such as Susan Sontag, Edward Said and bell hooks. Underpinned by these premises, we focus on undergraduate learning in a collaborative project that spans the disciplines of English, Writing, History, Politics and Geography. Our intention is to bring special pressure to terms such as public, community and entitlement. We use the humanities as a bridge between University and the broader public culture (art, design, etc.) as well as the realm of public advocacy, to speak to the important relationship between scholarship and advocacy and reclaim a sense of intellectual urgency. Terry Eagleton advocates for the necessity to be ‘fluent in more than one academic discourse.’ (2008, p. 7) Our project will enable, indeed require, that students learn to

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Ayers has noted that an English class may look like a History course – which may in turn look much like an English course’ (28).

<sup>3</sup> Klein and Newell distinguish multidisciplinary from interdisciplinary as the difference between mere juxtaposition and the integration of disciplinary perspectives.

speak and write for more than one discipline, one audience, much like academics are challenged to embrace the potential to write for more than one's own discipline domain (such as Susan Sontag, bell hooks).

The reach of this curriculum development is pragmatic with concrete purpose: to lay the ground work for a future mandated by the recent government inquiry into the status and quality of tertiary learning and teaching in Australia, 'The Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report' (2009, known as the Bradley Report). The Executive Summary stipulates higher education must respond better to the 'rights of all citizens to share' in the 'benefits' of tertiary education. Furthermore, the Report states that because 'humanities education deals with the fabric of community and culture, these discipline areas offer a higher education entry point for all citizens.' Indeed, in promoting a broad (re)engagement with society, existing humanities programs such as 'Catalyst Clemente' have already demonstrated the capacity powerfully to transform disadvantaged lives, with graduates world-wide re-entering the workforce and continuing tertiary study (Shorris, 2000). Thus, the learning experience that our project provides will be enhanced by our work in delivering the first Catalyst Clemente initiative<sup>4</sup> in Western Australia, reaching out to teach bridging programs to disadvantaged students off-campus. Operating only for eighteen months, Edith Cowan University's program, managed, delivered and evaluated by the three of us, has resulted already in students re-entering the work force and/or embarking on mainstream tertiary study.

Our conference presentation will present the specificities and terms of this project.

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<sup>4</sup> Originated in Harlem in New York City in the mid-1990s by Earl Shorris, the Catalyst Clemente program was extended to indigenous peoples across the Americas, and now operates globally in disadvantaged communities.

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