

Confronting Interdisciplinarity as a New Professor

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Though I had worked for several years as an assistant professor before arriving at Washington State University (WSU), entering my new position was—as I think it can be for anyone—an initially disorienting process. I had previously worked at a smaller institution in the South, one in which the community of academics and staff got to know each other much more quickly and extensively (likely owing to a combination of Southern hospitality and the size of the campus). Magnifying my own transition were the changes being undergone by both my new department and university. “Interdisciplinarity” was both a buzzword and a genuine interest. The challenge was finding out when it was which, and how I might fit into either.

Primary Challenges

- Faculty inevitably must adjust to new surroundings, and making valuable contacts *outside* one’s department is not often an immediate goal. Nor is it the focus of the typical “new faculty orientation.”
- Effective interdisciplinarity demands a familiarity with the campus—not just its formal arrangements but its informal mechanisms—that new faculty rarely possess and that can take a significant time to master.
- Interdisciplinarity is often personal, and thus typical mentoring arrangements (if even available) may not enable the best match between a new faculty member and resources outside the department.
- Faculty are often hired primarily for a department, not for a campus. A new professor might well be the perfect fit for a department’s instructional or research needs. These needs, however, are not always themselves oriented to interdisciplinarity. The professor might also match the department, but not the university’s other specialties.
- Faculty are tenured primarily in and by a department. Even as any number of fields become increasingly interdisciplinary, the expectations of the tenure process (internally or externally) are often still conditioned on particular fields. There’s an undeniable safety, especially for an assistant professor, in doing more traditional work than branching out into possibly new territory where the costs of entry (scholarly or otherwise) can be significant.

*presented as part of “Who’s Driving this Bus?” Washington State University
“Faculty Work in the New Academy: Emerging Challenges, Evolving Roles.”
Assoc. of American Colleges and Universities (Chicago, Nov. 2006)*

Course Proposal—English 492 (Fall 2007)

“Writing Disseminated: Manuscript to E-Book”

Instructors: Todd Butler, English; Trevor Bond, WSU Libraries

Course Summary/Rationale

In both this department and the wider profession, increasing attention has been paid to literature as not just texts or narratives but as physical objects, the make-up of which has itself become a subject for serious study and reflection. Recent critical interests in the history and technology of the book, the interplay between word and image, and mechanisms of reading have substantially expanded the range of questions—cultural, intellectual, aesthetic, economic—one might ask when encountering a text.

This course seeks to introduce its students to this burgeoning area of inquiry while simultaneously encouraging them to reflect upon the material that they have examined throughout their studies in English. Though ranging among a wide variety of genres, periods, and materials, its common concern lies with the production of texts, and how the production, circulation, and preservation of texts influences their meaning and impact. For example, a study of illuminated manuscripts (such as Ireland’s *Book of Kells*) might examine the culture of manuscript production and illustration, its relationship to religious and intellectual culture, and how the preservation of such works speaks to contemporary concerns about nationalism and cultural identity. Such considerations lend themselves to cross-temporal and cross-cultural comparisons—in keeping with the department’s revised curriculum a student might then examine how the “illuminated manuscript” is transformed into media diverse as Renaissance martyrologies, Blake’s illustrated texts, contemporary graphic novels, and digital animation.

The course is designed to be team-taught by Todd Butler and Trevor Bond, drawing upon their particular interests and the associated resources of WSU Libraries, in particular the early printed book drawn from the Rare Book collections of Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC). The instructors envision extensive work with library collections, as well as additional resources gathered during Bond’s recent sabbatical working with printed ephemera at the Bodleian Library and Butler’s Mellon institute in paleography. The course is planned as a hands-on approach to the physical nature of texts, with intensive small-group research and collaboration whose final goal is the production and staging of a public exhibition in MASC. (Similar work by a recent “public history” class met with particular success).

Given these goals, the course would best be taught as a one-day a week seminar, and to permit extensive work with rare, non-circulating, collections and avoid conflict with seminar room scheduling would be held in the MASC conference room (rather than the Bundy room). To ensure maximum participation and interaction, as well as to meet the restrictions both of handling rare materials and the location, the course should be capped at 12. This figure is in keeping with previous senior seminars. A small lab fee would also be assessed to pay for specialized course materials. Where possible (and interest exists), guest lectures would be welcomed.

As envisioned, the course fits the goals of the “senior seminar” nicely, serving at once as both a capstone and a window into new and more specialized areas of study. It also engages a variety of texts, permitting students to explore a wide range of personal interests. Students encountering the MASC for the first time often regret they haven’t worked there sooner, and some of them actually decide to pursue further work in conservation, museums, libraries, and rare books. It offers yet another answer to the old chestnut, “What can you do with an English major,” and in mounting an exhibit it might also provide additional publicity and recognition for the good work that both our students and colleagues do.