

**Electives: what are they and why do we need them?**  
**A personal view on the introduction of Elective modules**  
**as part of Curriculum 2013.**

Heather Barrett (University of Worcester)

[h.barrett@worc.ac.uk](mailto:h.barrett@worc.ac.uk)

Whilst I have worked at the University of Worcester for a number of years now, I am increasingly becoming known to many as ‘that woman in Science dealing with Worcester Weeks and Electives’! From September 2013, single honours students at Level 4, in those courses outside of professional nursing and teaching courses, will be able to select from a number of Elective modules as an option to add breadth to their studies if they wish. In addition to Language module options, five 30 credit interdisciplinary Elective modules will be available to choose; Business and Social Enterprise, Explorations in Education, Healthier Lifestyles, Sustainability and World Cultures. During 2012/13 the Sustainability Elective has been running as a pilot and this has provided some very valuable insights into how the Elective modules can be delivered. Elective modules have been introduced in order to continue to provide the option for students to study beyond their main subject, as had been available with ‘free modules’ within the UMS system, but in a way which provides a more focussed set of choices than had been the case in the past, linked to topics of wider social relevance. So why do I think Elective modules are a good idea and why, therefore, did I take on the cross-University role of driving forward their introduction? Was it because I have nothing better to do – hardly, the marking has been piling up! A prime motivation for me was a long-standing commitment to the educational ideas and benefits of interdisciplinarity and a belief that we need to provide ‘spaces’ within Universities and our course curricula to encourage interdisciplinary ways of teaching and learning which offer great benefits to both staff and students. My hope is that the new Elective modules can provide this important physical and intellectual ‘space’ where creative interdisciplinarity and collegiality can flourish.

In reviewing the development of interdisciplinarity, Klein (1990) notes that it has been associated both with the long-standing quest for unified knowledge and also with developments at the ‘frontiers’ of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity is seen as different

to multidisciplinary – I like Lederman and Niess' (1997) metaphor of the difference between a bowl of chicken noodle soup where separate ingredients are identifiable (multidisciplinary), and a bowl of tomato soup where the ingredients are all blended together into a homogeneous whole (interdisciplinarity). Interdisciplinarity is therefore integrative rather than merely additive, where integration goes beyond the linking of different disciplinary contributions (Petrie, 1992). More recently, transdisciplinary studies have emerged which have applied interdisciplinary approaches to addressing social problems, but have also sought to integrate academic researchers and non-academic participants to effect real-world change (Tress et al., 2005).

My experiences as a lecturer here at Worcester have been profoundly shaped by my involvement in interdisciplinary teaching that has dealt with important 'real world' problems and intellectual challenges. My main role on being appointed at Worcester in the early 1990s was to provide the geographical input into the Urban Studies course, working with colleagues in History and Sociology. Urban Studies had developed as an interdisciplinary area of study in the 1960s and 70s as global populations became increasingly urban and researchers in different disciplines looked to examine important problems facing urban societies. At the same time I also became involved in the development of the Women's Studies course at the University, which drew on the wide-ranging research and teaching interests of colleagues into gender issues. This development reflected wider academic debates that contended that previous research and theoretical ideas in a range of disciplinary areas had been 'gender blind'. It also linked to wider political movements focussing on issues of gender equality, and for many students taking the course it provided an empowering personal experience. For a young lecturer, these academic encounters were a thoroughly enriching and creative experience and impressed on me the benefits of thinking creatively across disciplinary boundaries, thinking reflexively about one's own knowledge and practice and the importance of learning **with** students in exploring key issues and topics (a community of learning). Colleagues introduced me to different authors, theories and ways of thinking and our conversations in designing curricula and teaching sessions led to the development of innovative and exciting learning activities for students and links to a variety of external experts and organisations which enriched the learning experience. Equally,

working with students from different academic and disciplinary backgrounds on topics and issues of personal concern to them highlighted the importance of learning from and building upon the experiences and knowledge of students, through to research and theoretical reflection in order to develop deeper understanding of these topics and issues in the classic 'cycle of learning' (Kolb, 1984). This experiential and reflexive approach to learning is an important foundation for interdisciplinary studies which 'fundamentally entail a movement away from an absolutist conception of truth to a conception of truth that is situated, perspectival, and discursive and that informs and is informed by the investigator's own sense of self-authorship.' (Haynes, 2002: xiv).

Whilst academic hot-topics and fashions have come and gone, interest in interdisciplinary working has been sustained as it is seen to offer many intellectual benefits, including fostering creative thinking and new ideas, exploration of new relationships, tackling big intellectual issues and global concerns and guarding against the dangers of intellectual fragmentation and overt-specialisation (see for example Nissani, 1997). However, recently it has become something of a buzzword in academic research and education (Dzeng, 2013). Many funded research projects now specifically look to foster interdisciplinary teams to tackle important global issues, such as climate change or global health concerns. Equally, after a period decline in the availability of interdisciplinary courses (Chettiparamb, 2007), many Universities are again developing interdisciplinary programmes which, it is argued, will equip students for the challenges and demands of the twenty-first century, give them an employability 'edge' and help develop the 'leaders of tomorrow'. Within the UK, University College London has recently begun to offer arts and sciences programmes which give the opportunity for its students to develop 'bespoke' interdisciplinary degrees from a series of core modules and optional pathways. Also, the University of Manchester has just launched its University College for Interdisciplinary Learning (UCIL), which aims to provide the 'opportunity for students at The University of Manchester to broaden their educational horizons' (UCIL website, 2013). Therefore, the development of the Elective modules here at Worcester should be seen as an important development for the University that keeps our curricula current, in step with wider academic developments, appealing and relevant for our students and which provide a physical and intellectual 'space' for

creative and collegiate working amongst staff which can take us beyond our Institute 'silos'.

Yet, as Chettiparamb (2007: 31) notes in her review of the literature on interdisciplinarity, '...finding the idea appealing is one thing, but transferring the idea into pedagogy and teaching requires much more than an understanding of the concept.' From my own reflections on teaching interdisciplinary courses at Worcester, as noted above, I would concur that whilst highly desirable, successful interdisciplinary working presents many challenges for both students and staff. In my experience, it can be a challenge for students to get to grips with material and ideas developed in disciplines very different from those with which they are familiar and to move beyond traditional ways of thinking and learning. Equally staff have a challenge in being able to move outside of their own disciplinary comfort zones, think divergently and embrace a range of experiences and ideas. So, for me, a key goal of my cross-University role in supporting the introduction of Elective modules has been to work with the Elective teams to think through the challenges in promoting and teaching these new modules, which will include tutors from different disciplines and which will attract students from a variety of educational backgrounds. The aims and benefits of these new modules need to be clearly articulated and in their delivery they require more than just hearing different perspectives from tutors from different disciplines (multidisciplinarity).

Reflections from the team piloting the Sustainability Elective this year have been important in highlighting key issues for the other Elective teams to consider in designing their new modules (Raghubansie et al., 2013). In developing and delivering the new Sustainability Elective staff highlighted some of the challenges they had to embrace; the challenge of 'disorganising' and breaking down established ways of thinking and doing, the challenge of 'ignorance' and not always being the knowing expert and looking to learn from others (students, external speakers, other staff) and the challenge of developing 'self-efficacy' for themselves and the students to embrace challenging tasks and gain experience. Key to the development and delivery of the module has been thinking beyond content alone to consider the pedagogic approaches to be used in addressing a complex and contested topic such as sustainability at Level 4 (Raghubansie et al., 2013). The team moved beyond

traditional lecture/seminar models to adopt an enquiry-based learning approach, including experiential and group working exploring personal views and perceptions, progressing to consider theories and conceptual ideas, linked to 'witness' sessions where various external contributors have provided differing perspectives on sustainability, so looking to bridge the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar. However, the team have highlighted the importance of careful thinking about the nature of the support, or scaffolding, required to assist learners in navigating this 'unfamiliar' context. These approaches have been central to the overall ethos of the module which has sought to promote wider community engagement and also to develop a community of learning and practice, which is seen as key to education for sustainability (Raghubansie et al., 2013). In this respect, the module can be seen as transdisciplinary in its approach.

Certainly, the experience of the Sustainability Elective module pilot has offered a tantalising insight into what can be achieved in seeking to cross institutional and disciplinary boundaries and work with communities beyond the university, providing new spaces for innovative and inspiring learning and teaching. The Elective teams are working hard to develop their modules for September 2013. There are, as always, still many logistical issues in terms of delivery to be sorted out before then, but hopefully the vision of what can be achieved by the introduction of Elective modules is clear. If we get this right then we will be doing our students a great service and providing them with an enriching and potentially transformative academic experience that will open up many pathways and opportunities for them in the future and provide a foundation for further pedagogic innovation at Worcester.

## **References**

Chettiparamb, A. (2007) *Interdisciplinarity: A Literature Review*, Southampton: The Higher Education Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching Group.

Dzeng, E. (2013) How to inspire interdisciplinarity: lessons from the collegiate system, *The Guardian Higher Education Network Blog*, [Available at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education->

[network/blog/2013/mar/15/interdisciplinary-academic-universities-research](http://network.blog/2013/mar/15/interdisciplinary-academic-universities-research)], Date accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2013.

Haynes, C. (2002) Introduction: Laying a Foundation for Interdisciplinary Teaching, In C. Haynes (ed.) *Innovations in Interdisciplinary Teaching*, Washington: American Council on Education / Oryx Press, xi –xxii.

Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning Experience as a Source of Learning and Development*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Lederman, N. G., & Niess, M. L. (1997) Integrated, interdisciplinary, or thematic instruction? Is this a question or is it questionable semantics? *School Science and Mathematics*, Vol. 97(2), pp. 57–58.

Nissani, M. (1997) Ten Cheers for Interdisciplinarity: The Case for Interdisciplinary Knowledge and Research, *The Social Science Journal*, Vol. 34 (2), pp. 201-216.

Petrie, H. G. (1992) Interdisciplinary Education: are we faced with insurmountable opportunities? *Review of Research in Education*, Vol.18, pp. 299-333.

Raghubansie, A., Weaver, L., Boom, K. and Peters, J. (2013) *Interim Review of Sustainability Elective Pilot*, University of Worcester.

Tress, B., Tress, G. and Fry, G. (2005) Integrative studies on rural landscapes: policy expectations and research practice. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, Vol. 70(1), pp. 177-191.

## **Biographies**

**Heather Barrett** is a Principal Lecturer in the Institute of Science and the Environment. She has teaching and research interests that relate to urban geography and planning. Heather is particularly interested in urban conservation and the tensions that exist between the desire to preserve urban heritage and the impulses for change and regeneration in cities. She has recently co-authored a key

urban geography textbook, which has been informed by her undergraduate teaching at Worcester. As a University of Worcester Teaching Fellow, Heather also has research interests that focus on the development of graduate employability in higher education curricula. She is a committee member of the Higher Education Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society. Heather also has a substantive management role within the Institute of Science and the Environment and is responsible for the co-ordination of the Institute's work in the areas of learning and teaching and quality enhancement.