

## **A Social-Cultural Theoretical Basis of Inter-disciplinary Teaching for English Majors in China**

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**Abstract:** An inter-disciplinary teaching approach is on the rise in China. The basic rationality is that only by this approach can the students be versatile and be better prepared to meet the needs of the market. But the theoretical basis for such an educational reform is a less concern for Chinese educators. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the social-cultural theoretical basis for inter-disciplinarian teaching so that this approach can better be understood and more widely accepted. The theoretical basis can be found in its definition, in researchers and theorists who proposed theories of learning that highlight the social and contextualized nature of learning. In the end, the interdisciplinary approach is important and meaningful for students as well as for teachers.

**Key word:** *interdisciplinary, theoretical basis, English majors*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

An inter-disciplinary teaching approach is on the rise in China. The basic rationality is that only by this approach can the students be versatile and be better prepared to meet the needs of the market and thus they will be placed in a better position in the process of job hunting. As a teacher of English majors, I have witnessed and took part in the process of educational reforms for English majors to foster versatile students who not only masters English well, but also knows the knowledge of other relevant disciplines, mainly including other English-related subjects like economics, laws and other practical subjects in China. On the whole, the ground for such a teaching approach reform has always been the requirement and need of the market. However, the theoretical basis for such an educational reform is a less concern for Chinese educators. My paper is an attempt to illustrate the social-cultural theoretical basis for inter-disciplinarian teaching so that this approach can better be understood and more widely accepted.

### **II. THE DEFINITION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY**

Speaking of the theoretical basis, it is important to make a clear understanding of the definition of interdisciplinary. The first definitions of it were advanced in the 1930s. It has been defined in numerous ways, and there is little consensus on its exact meaning. The definition that has been adopted by this paper and has been widely accepted is by Center for Educational Research and Innovation. This definition specifies a range of potential interdisciplinary interactions and it reads like this:

Interdisciplinary-An adjective describing the interaction among two or more different disciplines. This interaction may range from simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organization of research and education in a fairly large field. An interdisciplinary group consists of persons trained in different fields of knowledge (disciplines) with different concepts, methods, and data and terms organized into a common effort on a common problem with continuous intercommunication among the participants from the different disciplines. (OECD, 1972, pp. 25-26)

This definition suggests that interdisciplinarity exists on a continuum. On one end of this continuum is the informal communication of ideas, such as might occur in a conversation between colleagues from different disciplines; on the other end is formal collaboration, such as research or teaching teams comprised of one or more faculty from different disciplines. So from this definition we can see that from the beginning, interdisciplinarity can only be achieved with a teaching staff of different fields of knowledge and coordinated efforts. For teachers of English majors in China, we need a staff not only master English well but also know other relevant fields such as international law, economics and other fields which can coordinate with English so that students can meet the needs of market in the backdrop of China's further opening up. For students, interdisciplinary learning doesn't mean the more subjects to learn, the better it is for the students. The subjects to be added to the schedule have to be

more diversified but coordinated so that students can digest them and put them all together to meet the needs of market. This definition provides an easy insight to understand the different models for fostering multi-talented students among English majors. The popular models in present China can be found in three categories. The first one is English skills plus a relevant field for English study, like linguistics, translation, and English literature. The second one is English skills plus economics or international law or other fields which can combine well with the study of English to meet the market needs. The third one is the combination of English with other languages. For example, the universities in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China have the model of combining English language learning with the Mongolian language and Han language to meet the local needs. At present, with China's rapid development and further opening up, different models for fostering multi-talented students are still on the rise and under discussion. But within each model, I think the system of knowledge has to be coordinated to achieve "a common effort" for the future development of students.

### **III. THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL THEORETICAL BASIS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

Since language learning is not just about the learning of language skills but also about learning its culture, it is important to find the social-cultural theoretical basis for Interdisciplinary approach. Actually a number of researchers and theorists have proposed theories of learning that highlight the social and contextualized nature of learning. Various described as situated cognition, situated learning, situativity, or sociocultural theories, these proposals rest on the claim that learning cannot be understood apart from its historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. These perspectives cast learning as a fundamentally social and cultural activity and contrast sharply with behavioral and cognitive models in which learning is conceptualized as an individual activity and as an artifact that can be easily separated from the contexts in which it takes place. Learning, then, is shaped not only by what happens between individuals in interaction, but by the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which their interaction is embedded. This sociocultural approach highlights the importance of interpersonal relationship on learning. So interdisciplinary is achieved by others in their work environments-colleagues who share relationships on learning and the way of learning rests on meetings, colloquia, collegueship, and collaboration. And the work and material for the learner are to be texts and tools intended for interdisciplinary. The result of such effort is going to be new ideas, new projects and new futures. This is especially meaningful for English majors. One important reason for English majors to have a low employment rate is the critique that apart from language skills, English majors are incapable of creative and dialectical thinking. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, it is helpful for students to be multi-talented and foster new and creative ideas in the process of interpersonal learning.

### **IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**

Sociocultural perspectives encourage researchers to look beyond individual motivations and interests. Contexts, however, do not provide the whole picture. Studies that ignore individual interests and motivations run the risk of not providing a complex understanding of faculty work, and a more balanced view for a sociocultural perspective is the recognition that persons and contexts are inseparable and they are equally important. This also helps to explain the schedule of English majors is one divided of compulsory and selective courses. The purpose of it is to let students have more autonomy so that they can learn with their own interests to become multi-talented. .

The interdisciplinary approach is equally important and meaningful for teachers. Recently, the climate of accountability in higher education has focused attention on faculty productivity. Faculty are assessed in terms of their tangible products: publications, grants, numbers of students, or courses taught. But teachers of English Majors are facing a dilemma because of the heavy teaching loads. Generally speaking English departments in China are still teaching-oriented institutions. This often prevent the faculty from engaging in significant research and studies. In the atmosphere of interdisciplinary, faculty member may development activities such as travel to conferences, institutional and inter-institutional colloquia and seminars. Teachers may make use of the opportunities that presented themselves in the form of interdisciplinary, team-taught courses. These courses created a facilitating context for interdisciplinary thinking, which later may find expression in conference papers, journal articles, and books. So teachers may find inspiration in the process of teaching which in turn may facilitate their academic development. Interdisciplinary teaching may original intend for the fostering multi-talents among the students. But it does have the effect of facilitating the academic developments for the teachers.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

All in all, from the perspective of social-cultural theory, inter-disciplinary teaching is not only helpful for students but also meaningful for teachers. With the further development and opening up of China, inter-disciplinary teaching will sure be of great help to foster versatile students who not only master English well but also knows other relevant skills and knowledge to meet the needs of markets. That is why the educational

reform for interdisciplinarity is still under way in China. To understand the social-cultural theoretical basis is helpful for a better understanding of the present reform and benefit the reform by reflecting it with profound theoretical basis.

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