

Interdisciplinary pedagogy: a maritime case study

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Abstract

As the challenges faced in today's world are increasingly complex, a large number of specialised individuals now need to collaborate together to combine their expertise. Since the professional world is interdisciplinary, learning and teaching in higher education must adapt and consider the interdisciplinary approach, which is clearly encouraged in the United Kingdom by both the Higher Education Academy and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. Building on the known benefits of interdisciplinary education, an academic exchange between boatbuilding and yacht design students has been conducted to develop and support an interdisciplinary learning pedagogical model. Primarily focused on the maritime field, the proposed model has three bases, learning, reflection, and capabilities. Respectively supporting studies, bridging the skills gap and enhancing employability, these bases answer the contemporary demands from both students and the maritime industry.

Keywords: interdisciplinary pedagogy; maritime education; experiential learning.

Introduction

In every discipline, there is a greater need for specialisation, leading to a larger number of professionals collaborating to solve increasingly complex problems. This has long been identified in the medical field, where specialist health professionals must interact to provide the patients with the best and most appropriate level of care (Hall & Weaver, 2001). As a result of the need for interdisciplinary teams, health care education had to adapt and implement interdisciplinary teaching and learning, becoming over the decades a well-established tradition (Richards & Inglehart, 2006).

The maritime industry is now facing the same challenges. With the development of technologies, professions have become more and more specialised, and a design project now requires a joint effort from all parties to achieve the vessel desired by the client. However, this is not so easily achieved, and communication is often an issue. The stylist, naval architect and builder will all have different views, each with specific concerns that the others may not have identified (Feeley et al., 2016). The success of the design heavily relies on the ability of the multiple stakeholders to interact, thus suggesting an interdisciplinary approach to education should be brought into the maritime industry.

The background and benefits of interdisciplinary education will be presented here and related to the recommended educational practices in the United Kingdom, with an emphasis on applications in the maritime field. Finally, a case study of an interdisciplinary exchange between yacht design and traditional boatbuilding students will be detailed to support the implementation of an interdisciplinary approach to education and the proposed pedagogical model.

Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching

Early instances of interdisciplinary education can be traced back to the curriculum integration concept promoted in the 1930s (Oberholzer, 1937). But interdisciplinary education really emerged in the 1970s (Mathison & Freeman, 1997), with a rich literature and the development of key definitions. Kockelmans (1979) defines interdisciplinary as "to solve a set of problems whose solution can be achieved only by integrating parts of existing disciplines". All later attempts at defining this concept always came back to the need for the

synthesis of two or more disciplines (Klein, 1990), and the idea of a problem that cannot suitably be resolved with a single approach (Stefani, 2009), allowing us to construct new ways of creating knowledge.

The need for interdisciplinary learning arises from the ever increasing complexity of the problems to solve (Klein, 2004), and modern challenges are very much interdisciplinary, or as stated by Dezure (1999), "life is interdisciplinary". It is therefore critical for education, and indeed higher education to consider the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach, and for the maritime industry to implement its practice (Newell, 1998).

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the main, and often neglected benefits of interdisciplinary education is allowing the students to reflect on their specialty and realise what their discipline really is. Indeed, the argument brought forward by Eckert (2007) is that "students really aren't that clear about what the various disciplines do. What students really need to know is what a discipline is." The most encountered benefit is the opportunity for the students to link ideas and concepts across varied disciplines, prompting a constructive paradigm that makes for a deeper understanding.

A non-exhaustive list of the benefits of interdisciplinary learning and teaching as reported by Nissani (1997) and completed by Appleby (2015) includes:

- More meaningful learning experience.
- New opportunities resulting from the cross-overs between two disciplines.
- Demonstrating real life applications.
- Varied perspective.
- Flexibility in problem solving.
- Bridge the communication gap between professionals.
- Critical thinking.
- Building confidence.
- Greater creativity.
- Transferable skills.

In the United Kingdom, interdisciplinary learning and teaching is encouraged at various levels. The UK Professional Standard Framework (UKPSF) specifies that fellows of the Higher Education Academy should engage in "developing interdisciplinary or professional/work-based resources" (The Higher Education Academy, 2015). The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) states that "the challenges facing the world are complex, and increasingly require multi- or inter-disciplinary approaches" (BIS, 2016). Finally, at a local level, it is part of Southampton Solent University's strategic plan for 2015-2020 to "develop cross-institutional research groups based on interdisciplinary areas and addressing real-world issues" (Southampton Solent University, 2015). The interdisciplinary approach is therefore recognised and encouraged at a national level, and its benefits are further promoted by the UKPSF, the TEF and Southampton Solent University.

At the heart of the maritime industry are transferable skills, a major benefit of the interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, most technologies in the relatively small maritime industry directly come from larger industries, such as the automotive or aerospace industry, and there is a large number of highly specialised fields within the maritime industry. This is one of the elements of the skills gap (Desty, 2012), defined as the difference between the employer's expectations and the graduate's capabilities. Answering the call for those specific skills in the maritime sector will result in enhanced employability (Boon, 2012), and will also benefit the industry by bridging the communication and interaction gaps between disciplines that appear to be a current issue faced by the superyacht industry (Feeley et al., 2016).

A strong case can therefore be made in favour of an interdisciplinary approach to education in the maritime industry, which is the primary motivation behind the pilot academic exchange conducted between Southampton Solent University (SSU) and the International Boatbuilding Training College (IBTC) Portsmouth, in order to test the proposed interdisciplinary learning pedagogical model.

Interdisciplinary Exchange Case Study

In order to assess the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach in the maritime industry via a case study, an academic exchange has been initiated between yacht design students from the BEng (Hons) Yacht and Powercraft Design and BEng (Hons) Yacht Design and Production courses at SSU, and traditional boatbuilding students from the Practical Boatbuilding course delivered at the IBTC Portsmouth. The exchange took place over a week in the spring of 2016, and involved 13 SSU students from first (level 4) and second year (level 5), as well as 12 IBTC Portsmouth students (level 3).

IBTC Students

The content of the academic exchange delivered to the IBTC Portsmouth students has been designed to support and extend the syllabus of their Practical Boatbuilding course, as defined by Soupepe (2015), making full use of the specialist facilities at SSU, and revolving around a series of lectures, practical activities, and demonstrations.

The lectures reinforced key elements of the practical boatbuilding course such as timber technology, but also brought new knowledge in basic naval architecture and yacht design, thus allowing a wider understanding and helping future collaboration with designers. The practical activities built on their experience, but pushing the skills outside of their normal comfort zone, moving from traditional timber to modern composite. Figure 1 depicts the manufacturing of a model yacht hull, emulating a representative scaled-down version of the composite boatbuilding industry. In addition, to provide an insight into other specific aspects, advanced composite manufacturing and the use of a towing tank, shown in Figure 2, were demonstrated.



Fig. 1: Composite manufacturing.



Fig. 2: Towing tank demonstration.

As outlined in the student feedback, from the IBTC Portsmouth students' perspective, the interdisciplinary exchange conducted was successful in supporting their studies, helping them acquire new skills and knowledge, and in their opinion enhancing their future employability.

SSU Students

The recent improvements made to both yacht design degrees at Southampton Solent University saw the addition of a stronger emphasis on practical skills, as directly required by the industry (Barkley, 2012). However course improvements are restricted to composite manufacturing. The syllabus designed for the Southampton Solent University students therefore revolved around practical activities focussed on wooden boatbuilding.

Firstly, to introduce the students to the use of hand tools, as well as working with wood, all manufactured a traditional mallet from a given drawing. In contrast to their normal studies where they would draw a plan aimed at the builder, they are now given the plan and need to build from it. This allows them to reflect better on what to provide a builder on construction drawings and will enhance their drafting skills in the future. Students then discovered skills specific to traditional boatbuilding, namely steam bending ribs, and roving, illustrated in Figure 3. While both techniques are taught theoretically, it is an invaluable experience to realise how flexible steamed timber is, and how much labour goes into roving; knowledge that will feed back into future design projects of the students.

Finally, the students were tasked with taking the scantlings (dimensions of structural components) off a WWII lifeboat and drawing plans that would enable a replica to be built. On completion, the existing boat, beyond repair, was entirely deconstructed by the students, providing fantastic opportunities to better understand the assembly process and to see an actual cross-section through a vessel, as shown in Figure 4. From the offcuts, students were given the opportunity to build their own creative project, ranging from a stool to a skateboard.



Fig. 3: Roving a steam-bent rib.



Fig. 4: WWII lifeboat deconstructed.

Through a series of practical tasks, the students were able to apply theoretical knowledge of materials, construction techniques, structural arrangements and design learnt during their course. This was supplemented by practical experiences leading to new skills and deeper understanding, as highlighted by the feedback gathered.

Student Feedback

In order to gauge the value of the exchange for the students, a short survey was conducted. This comprised two sections: a multiple-choice satisfaction survey, and an opportunity for the participants to provide written feedback. The response rate from the IBTC and SSU students was respectively 83% (10 out of 12 students) and 62% (8 out of 13 students).

A primary objective was to support the students' learning through an interdisciplinary exchange, with increased employability as a final outcome. Students were therefore questioned on the academic relevance of the exchange, i.e. how they felt it would benefit their current studies. Furthermore, the professional relevance of the exchange assessed the students' view on how beneficial the exchange would be for their employability. In both cases, all students from both institutions responded positively (either satisfied or very satisfied). In addition, the interdisciplinary approach has allowed the students to develop new practical skills and gain further knowledge. Figures 5 and 6 depict the very strong satisfaction of the IBTC and Southampton Solent University students respectively.

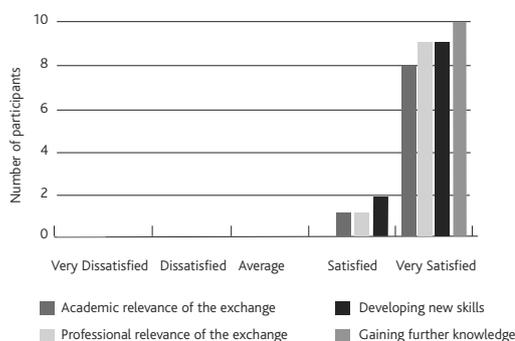


Fig. 5: IBTC students' satisfaction.

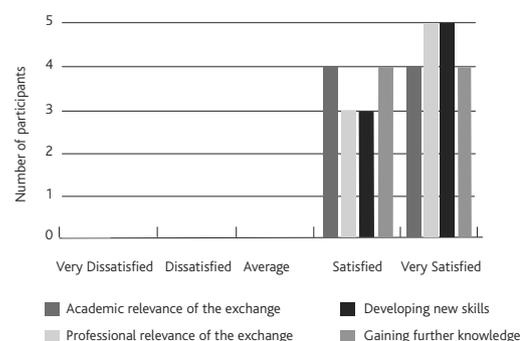


Fig. 6: SSU students' satisfaction.

The students clearly identified the value of the interdisciplinary exchange to support their current studies and future careers. All positively ascertained that new skills were developed and further knowledge gained. Comments from the students all proved to be very positive, revolving around three core values: learning, reflection and capabilities, each respectively contributing to support their studies, bridge the skills gap and enhance employability.

Evidence of the learning benefits, in terms of understanding the discipline, creating a valued learning experience and new opportunities, was strongly indicated in the comments. The ability to now understand the other aspects and the various points of views was highlighted, together with the entertaining and interesting nature of the learning experience. Each group of students also mentioned the new possibilities offered and the new skills gained, as summarised by one student:

Surprisingly fun week and I think the educational outcomes will be shown in the exams at the end of the year. I really enjoyed the exchange to IBTC, it helps me develop skills and gain new ones.

The reflection aspect, looking at real life application of concepts discussed in lectures and offering a varied perspective, is also present in the students' comments despite a lack of direct recognition for the benefits inherent to inter-professional communication. The feedback demonstrated the interest of students for the practical application of concepts they previously considered mostly theoretical. These aspects are encapsulated in the following comment:

The course was overall beneficial to my academic studies as it first was very relevant to one of the six subjects that I currently study of marine materials and so provided a practical platform to what we had studied for example the steam bending of wood was covered in lectures so it was good to see this done outside of the class.

Finally, the capabilities, whether it is critical thinking, confidence, creativity or transferable skills are highlighted in the students' responses. For instance, one student noted that "A great deal of boat knowledge, applicable to all types of boats, was acquired", recognising the transferability of the skills and knowledge gained over a short and very specific course to a much wider range of applications in the maritime industry.

Two negative points emerged through the survey. One was about transport to the different sites. The majority of the students asked for this particular exchange to be run over a longer period of time. However, it is not intended to be extended beyond the current week it has been conducted over. Indeed, as noted by Kanikia (2007) and further supported by Jones (2010), a major focus on interdisciplinary learning can lead to an isolation from the original core of the field of study. Furthermore, issues can arise if interdisciplinary learning itself is considered a primary field of study (Szostak, 2007). This precise exchange programme is therefore to remain relatively short. However, providing students with similar opportunities, with an alternative discipline in another year of their degree would appear a more suitable approach.

The Proposed IDL Pedagogical Triangle

Building on the concept of the work-based learning (WBL) pedagogical triangle developed by Brodie and Irving (2007), as well as the benefits highlighted in the literature and through the case study presented, a pedagogical model of interdisciplinary learning is proposed in Figure 7. The interdisciplinary learning (IDL) triangle is based on the core principles that are learning, reflection and capabilities, respectively supporting a final outcome, namely their studies, bridging the skills gap and enhancing employability.

The case study of the interdisciplinary exchange appears to support the proposed pedagogical model and the benefits of the interdisciplinary learning approach in the maritime field, addressing contemporary challenges faced by the industry.

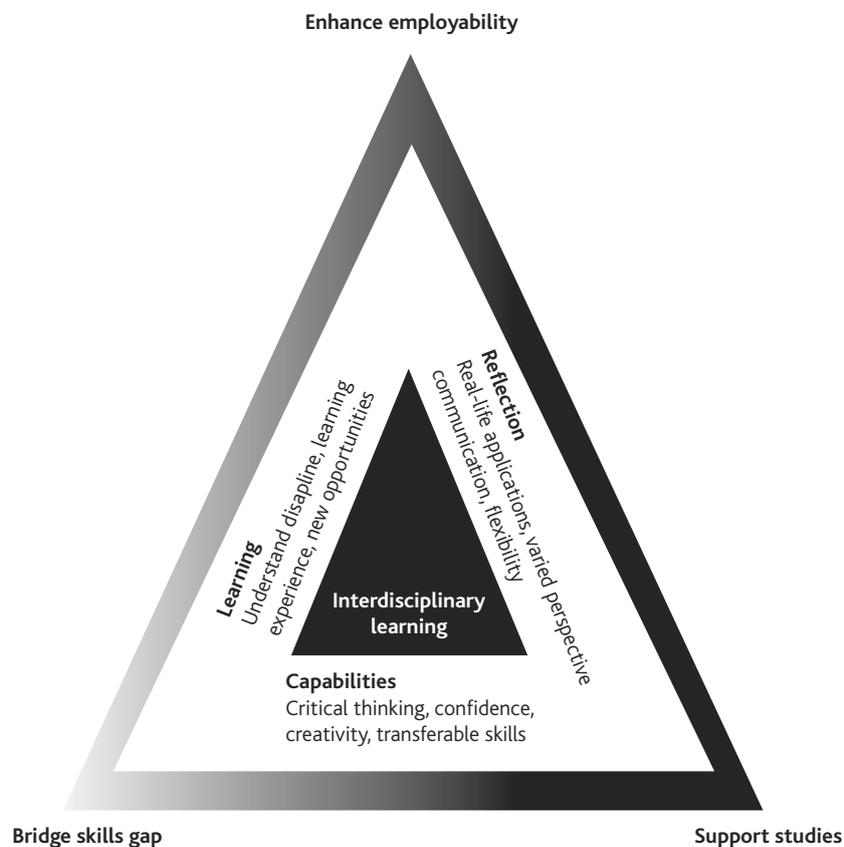


Fig. 7: Proposed interdisciplinary learning (IDL) pedagogical triangle.

This pilot exchange presented is now set to be organised as a yearly event. This will provide a platform to further evaluate the IDL triangle model, and increase the number of participants so that there is more reliable quantitative feedback. Future work includes a new survey questionnaire, better aimed at targeting each aspect of the model for a more precise validation. Looking at the medium term outcomes on students who took part in previous editions of the academic exchange is also planned to assess any significant impact on their studies and early career. Finally, an investigation into other fields and industries would allow to generalise the proposed concept beyond the maritime industry.

Conclusions

An interdisciplinary approach to education has long been praised due to its multiple benefits. In the United Kingdom, its practice is supported at a nationwide level by the UK Professional Standards Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework, as well as locally, for instance through Southampton Solent University's strategy. Moreover, it appears a necessity in the maritime industry to reinforce interdisciplinary learning and teaching to promote employment and better solve issues currently faced by the industry. To ascertain the benefits of this educational approach, a one week exchange has been conducted between the yacht design students of Southampton Solent University and the traditional boatbuilding students of the International Boatbuilding Training College Portsmouth. The exchange revealed very high satisfaction from all students and early data supported the idea of an interdisciplinary learning (IDL) pedagogical triangle. The benefits of interdisciplinary learning leads to three primary bases:

- Learning, which enables the students to better understand their own discipline in contrast to an alternative discipline within the same industry, promoting new and motivating learning experiences as well as new opportunities.
- Reflection, demonstrating the real life applications of a studied theory, promoting varied perspectives on a given topic, which then improves inter-professional communication and gives a higher flexibility in problem solving.
- Capabilities, to develop critical thinking, gain more confidence and promote creativity; the end result being to acquire the much needed transferable skills for professional purposes.

Those three bases of the triangle then turn into concrete outcomes, respectively supporting the students' studies, bridging the skills gap, identified as a primary issue in the maritime industry, and finally enhancing employability. If the proposed model appears to be supported by the literature and the case study, future work will look at validation, and the extension to other fields and industries, in order to generalise the proposed IDL pedagogical triangle, and better understand the place and role of the interdisciplinary approach in higher education.

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