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**Interdisciplinary Collaboration in
the University Arts Department**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
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Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the University Arts Department

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Abstract

As a Visual Arts Professor, I use interdisciplinary collaboration because it is advantageous for my students and for the attention it brings to the Art department in a large university system. The professors I work with outside of the Arts Department typically have not been exposed to our field and vice versa. In a liberal arts college, we have access to many other disciplines and I believe that we should take advantage of this close proximity through interdisciplinary collaboration. The specialization of education that has been a trend over the past 200 years has depreciated our contact with other departments and led to an isolation of the disciplines, and I argue especially with the fine arts colleges. In this paper, I will summarize current research on the isolation of the Arts Department on college campuses through the continued specialization of education: “For more than two hundred years, specialization has been the predominant trend in research and education; this has led to the dangerous fragmentation of our entire epistemological domain” (Newberger, E A, physician’s perspective on the interdisciplinary management of child abuse. *Psychiatric Opinion* 2:13-18. April 1976). I will summarize the history of interdisciplinary collaboration, its development in higher education, and current research and advancements with a focus on the practice in arts disciplines. Then I will offer a history of my experiences, projects that I have conducted, student outcomes and achievements, as well as describing the common pitfalls that can occur. This will be accompanied with many student examples and the artwork created through the collaborations. I also will talk about the use of technology and the internet to better aid communication between courses. You may see an example of an online collaboration here: www.thesmokingdogcafe.weebly.com, which is a website created to document the artwork and poems created between my Narrative Drawing class and the Creative Writing class at Florida Atlantic University.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, Collaboration, Arts Pedagogy

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Introduction

While there are many ways to explore interdisciplinary collaboration, in this paper I will concentrate on the two methods that I have experience as an Instructor of higher education studio art courses. The first is an expository collaboration between one specific fine arts courses such as painting and another arts discipline such as dance or creative writing. The second is with courses in the visual arts combined with courses outside of the 2-dimensional visual arts such as english and dance. I offer frank accounts of my experiences in order to show examples to fellow instructors and Professors who might want to adopt some of my pedagogical methods as well as understand the subsequent pitfalls in doing so. These are all projects from courses taught from 2010-2012. Here is a brief summarization of the historical model for these collaborations and afterwards more specific examples from some of my courses.

The history of using collaboration as a pedagogical aid for art study began in many unknown ateliers and schools in the past. As a studio artist with an MFA and not an art historian, I won't delve into art historical specifics but loosely, a very obvious example is during the Renaissance. The field of art expanded after the middle ages from an artisan-craftsman discipline to a field of intellectual research.¹ Bruce Cole writes in *The Renaissance Artist at Work: From Pisano to Titian* that: “the structure of the Renaissance workshop is the basis for arts education forward”² Students within the workshop were expected to learn drawings, painting, sculpture, and architecture and have knowledge that stretched across many different areas and disciplines. Having broad areas of knowledge in the arts as well as the sciences was the sign of a good education. European art academies took a major role thereafter, although not institutionalized within the universities, they offered a place for the development of the arts. The studio arts were welcomed into the university curriculum during the 19th century, taking the education of artists from the niche-workshop environment, into the environment of a liberal arts education.³ Music, dance, poetry and theatre also entered into higher education although not all at once or with any consistency:

Arts programs entered the academy, each by its own door. Degree programs in music and visual art flowered in the late 19th century, along with developing extracurricular theatre. In the 1930s dance and film entered the curriculum, and creative writing programs began to develop. All were poised for full development in the explosion of higher education in the 1960s, coinciding with dramatic growth of the art forms themselves in the larger

¹Daichendt, James G, *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing and Research*, , Intellect Books, 2012,

²Cole, Bruce, *The Renaissance Artist At Work: From Pisano To Titian*, Westview Press, Sep 21, 1990

³Daichendt, James G, *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing and Research*, Intellect Books, 2012,

culture.¹

The 1960's were a touch-point for my personal artistic research and it was these artists, the large majority the products of degree programs in university art departments, that first sparked the idea of my doing collaborations. During graduate school, I studied radical thinkers like Alan Kaprow and Josef Beuys. This was an era when artists began to collaborate together, mixing music, creative writing, theater, dance, and visual art. This was seen in the "happenings", a loose term for performance-based work that included several disciplines.

Words, sounds, human beings in motion, painted constructions, electric lights, movies and slides - and perhaps in the future, smells - all in continuous space *involving* the spectator or audience; those are the ingredients. Several or all of them may be used in combination at any one time, which permits me a great range of possibilities. Alan Kaprow⁶

The Black Mountain College is a good example of this need to blend disciplines, but also of the hardship in it; it went out of business. The desire was there but the execution had flaws, for lack of communication between the players or for lack of sponsorship by donors and the college. The remnants, such as the combination of artist Robert Rauschenberg and choreographer Merce Cunningham, were inspirations for me as well.²

Interest in the idea of interdisciplinary collaboration was also backed up by the College Art Association's 2012 conference panels with titles such as "Happenings: Transnational, Transdisciplinary" and "Intersections between Art and Dance in the Twentieth Century."³ This is evidence of the trend today to teach what many contemporary artists are practicing, working in a manner that includes several different types of art and collaboration with other artists. Universities and colleges are beginning to allow for an interdisciplinary based Masters of Fine Arts programs that encourage creative combinations. I have first hand knowledge of this as a graduate of such a program. In the University of South Florida's Master of Fine Arts program, I was encouraged to try my hand at video, photography, performance, as well as in my previous major disciplines of drawing and painting. I did not declare a major in just one area either. In the mission statement for USF it reads:

¹Dirks, Arthur L. (1999). Historical development of the arts in higher education. Published online by author (<http://webhost.bridgew.edu/adirks/ald/papers/histarts.htm>). Bridgewater, MA. Accessed [date].

⁶DiTolla, Tracy, The Art Story Foundation, <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-happenings.htm>

²Potter, Michelle, "A License to Do Anything": Robert Rauschenberg and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1993), pp. 1-43 Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

³<http://conference.collegeart.org/2012/sessions/index.php-TakenfromtheCollegeArtAssociation'sscheduleofsessions>.

We value the shared affective and intellectual community life within which art is produced and experienced: the internal communities of the School and the University; the collaborative and interdependent communities crossing art media, art practice, theory and history; and our local and regional communities with which we seek interaction.¹

I blossomed with this approach, having come from a much more conservative background that had not encouraged me to blend in other disciplines. My personal artistic journal and growth is a real testament to what the simple act of exposure to other art forms can do for someone. Naturally, when I began to teach, I wanted to expose my students to the same sorts of experiences.

There are two types of interdisciplinary collaborations that I use in my courses. One is expository, it is simply the showing of what one discipline does to another discipline. So for example, a field trip that we would create work from and which we would then show that work to the other students. Therefore the other students would never touch my student's work but would influence it by exposure. The second type is cooperative, with students adopting another discipline in order to complete an assignment. In this way they might seek expertise outside of the class, either from Professors or other students, or they might draw from their own expertise in the discipline. In either case, instead of using the typical discipline of 2-dimensional visual arts to create a response to a project query, they would use another discipline such as music, sculpture or dance. In this instance, the word collaboration then, might fall secondary to the word interdisciplinary in my true intentions.

The following stories are examples of the pitfalls and the highlights of my teaching approach. I will not attempt to speak for the other teachers or their students but I do believe that they were mutually benefitted and have provided some of their feedback as well. It is difficult for me to gage by the exact degree though, because of my lack of follow-up and non-expertise in assessing the other discipline's pedagogical achievements. The communication between the other Professors and I ended upon completion of the collaboration due to our both being full-time teachers and artists ourselves. In the future, I will arrange to have a follow-up date.

One of the first challenges I met was from the students themselves. Although it seemed as if the concept of working interdisciplinary was exciting, students were hesitant to leave their own preconceived self-categorization. This might be barked up to simply not being exposed or to feeling pressured to finish school quickly in order to get a job. This specialization trend is summed up by Danny Chronic nicely in his article, "Adventures in Academia: The Dangers of (Over)Specialization: "No undergraduate would be foolish to gain a broad education when tightly-defined specialties are the best economically."²

¹From Mission Statement for University of South Florida College of the Arts
<http://art.usf.edu/content/templates/?a=1196&z=160>

²Crichton, Danny. Adventures in Academia: The Dangers of (Over)Specialization, July 10th, 2009

The state universities that I have worked at, the University of South Florida and Florida Atlantic University, mandate that all students take courses across the breadth of their offerings, from science to math, languages to social studies, and all of these (and other fundamentals as determined by each school) are treated as foundational courses, giving the student a base amount of information in order to be adequately prepared for life. In my classes, it seemed to me that students strived to choose a specific field before these fundamentals and wanted to become proficient solely in that specific field.

In an informal poll I did of all of my students for a year (approximately 140 individuals), I asked if they thought they were required to take any unnecessary classes before their degree courses. The students were divided on this question, half were vehement about how they were forced to take classes that they had no interest in (including the Design 1 half were seated in) and half admitted to enjoying being forced to go outside of their interests, although only afterwards and not really during the course. Here is the question and some of the answers:

Do you believe that you are forced to take unnecessary courses that do not contribute anything to your learning while in college?

I absolutely think that we are forced to take unnecessary classes in college. I understand that the point of the required classes is to help make our education more vast, but there are some classes that are just straight up not relevant to anything that I would ever want to do in the future.

Of course, but that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy them in the end. In fact, I've probably learned more from those classes I was forced to take than the ones I signed up for voluntarily. But then again, I've been forced to take a lot of classes.

I do believe I am forced to take unnecessary classes because many of the courses I have taken have nothing to do with actually taking pictures, video or editing photos and video.

This attitude motivated me to somehow weave back into the coursework the opportunity to reach outside of the studio and into other areas. I wanted to show them that other classes within the fine arts could be incorporated into the one that they were seated in and that even collaboration with areas such as the English or Science department could bring benefits.

Quickly, I realized that expository and cooperative collaborations were easier thought of than done. E-mails to other departments went un-answered, most Professors were too busy to reformulate portions of their semesters (understandable) and did not seem incentivized by their departments to do so, and I found the easiest places to take my students was the museums and art galleries nearby, places that already had a history of art students visiting and a welcoming staff to support us.

One place already established was a trip to the Gross Anatomy Laboratory. The University of South Florida had a long-standing relationship with the College of Medicine's cadaver laboratory and the history of medical illustration aided in this collaboration. Each semester, students were brought in to draw from the cadavers. This practice, of course, was based on Da Vinci and

Michelangelo's sketches and most (not all unfortunately) of the medical Professors and students seemed to be aware of this. It struck me just how simple and mutually beneficial this simple field-trip to the laboratory was when one of the medical students raised their heads up from a dissection and asked us point blank "Why are you guys here?" The lab manager, an artist himself, answered "Because of them, you are here." Referring to the study of anatomy that was greatly advantaged by artists who could document it before photography was invented. It was then I saw clearly that there was a learning moment going on with the medical students.

I continue this field trip when I began teaching at Florida Atlantic University, as well as taking them to the dance studios there. At FAU, we observed a Modern Dance class for an hour twice a week over a 3 week period. Gathering these sketches, the students used them to create paintings. These paintings were exhibited in the front foyer of the theatre at the end of semester recital. The dancers became aware of our process as we became aware of theirs by attending their rehearsals. In the end, the paintings produced were more about this observation of process (much in the way Degas went backstage) than of the final dance itself.

Here is a description of both experiences from one of my students:

I really enjoyed working with another discipline in the arts, including the dancers and the anatomy lab. At first it was really challenging, specially working with the dancers since they are always moving around and at the beginning I couldn't decide what to draw. This collaboration not only improved my drawing skills but it also helped improve my work's line quality. I'm not sure if it had to do something with what the figure was in but there was something that made me want to capture the moment and so the quality of the line was so much better because of it's purpose, to capture the moment, and it seemed there wasn't a line wasted in it. I feel that the class also went through the same process; we shared our sketches with each other and would point out how interesting and good a drawing came out to be; we saw each other improve with each drawing and with our final project we were really impressed how we had all progressed.

A different set of challenges and achievements were present with working with the anatomy lab. The challenges presented themselves in the form that the human figure was not like we were used to seeing it. It was challenging because there was so much more information. Usually when we draw the figure of a model we draw the flesh and the different ways it bends and how the light hits it. In this situation there was not only flesh but there was tissue and bones and muscle; it was adding a whole dimension to our world. So that when it came to drawing, and I am used to drawing what I see, nothing made sense. Now, it made sense to me because I was the one who drew it, but if someone else was looking at it they would have a hard time realizing what they were looking at. I then found my mistakes and strove to make them less and less. I realized I didn't need to draw everything I saw, because it was

too much. Instead I started to recognize which pieces were important to make the picture whole; where and how to add a certain detail so that it would enhance the drawing. I also realized that being aware of the human body as a whole has helped me improve drawing the figure because I now visually understand how a muscle or a tissue bends through and holds the body together.

The overall change I have felt or seen this affect my work is that I now I'm inclined to draw and capture a moment that captivates me, such as a musician playing his violin and I want to capture more moments like that; I also begin to be more careful now which how much information I put and how much information I need to add to get the message across; I would say that, among others, I have developed a better eye for composition and technique through both of these experiences.¹

These two collaborations were more expository than direct or cooperative. The dancers and cadavers were our subject matter and we learned from the dancer's artistic process by being exposed to their rehearsals and attending the final recital. They never touched our work or us theirs and I strongly believe that a more direct collaboration, where both classes would have interacted to the point of simultaneously creating one piece, would be very exciting but would also have to be an entirely separate class. It would need to be listed separately, perhaps causing a bureaucratic credit problem, and it would need to be team taught by two or three professors or by an interdisciplinary artist/dancer. Part of the problem in academia is that our classes are structured by a systematic project-by-project, midterm, final project, homework, etc. formula that is hard to break and easily enforced.

The Smoking Dog Cafe project conducted with the English department was a direct collaboration although with one major issue. The two classes involved were not at the same physical time. In response to this issue, we created a website to facilitate the exchange of information. The collaboration was name "The Smoking Dog Cafe" after the name of a famous cafe in Paris where artists congregated to talk and exchange ideas. The cafe wasn't restricted to only painters, writers or musicians, but to everyone. The project was structured on a call and response motif. It began by me gathering first draft poems from the creative writing students. My students then chose from these poems and created work from them. I posted in-progress pictures on the website and then the finished drawings. The Creative Writing students then created 2nd drafts and we created second pictures and finally they created final draft poems. (figures A, B, & C) The website still exists at this address: www.thesmokingdogcafe.weebly.com.

¹Tinglof, Sabin, student from Florida Atlantic University



Fig. A



Fig. B



Fig. C

Even though this collaboration went well, it was quite an endeavor for both the other Professor and I to keep our schedules on the same track. It required planning two months in advance and wasn't without its communication hiccups. The effort to keep the project's due dates in sync with the call and response, one group having to be prepared to give the other group their work, was a struggle. All in all, this was a highly mutually beneficial collaboration between the two departments. The poems created in response to our drawings were in other Professor's words:

“Last night, I read the poems that my students wrote in response to your students’ drawings, and some of them were terrific. I think that the challenge some of the art work presented, especially the abstract drawings, pushed some of my students beyond my limits. So I’m really thrilled with the results. All the students pushed to a new level in their work as they struggled to respond to your students’ drawings.”¹

My students also created work that was unique and creative while they struggled to adapt the words into visual images.

This collaboration across the disciplines led me to reshape expectations for two foundational visual arts courses, Design 1 and Color Fundamentals. Since learning and experimentation improved by exposure to another kind of artistic stimulus, then why not encourage the same within a single class? The collaboration in these classes would come from the students themselves, as a classroom community which would share their individual research. Projects included outside research into other artists that work interdisciplinary and stepped into other visual arts departments. It was open experimentation into different fields of visual arts while still fulfilling the knowledge requirements for the foundational level courses.

To get the ball rolling and discover what my students were already bringing to this community, I included on the (previously mentioned) survey, questions such as “What are your expectations for this class” “what don't you know about art making but wish you did” what kind of art do you wish you could make and give me three artists who currently make it.” The most important one

¹English Professor, Florida Atlantic University, name withheld

for my intentions was #4.

Which of the art disciplines do you enjoy working in? This includes: Music, Dance, Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, Video, Film, Photography, Net Art, Installation, Acting, Singing, Performance and any other ones I forgot to list.

This is the first time I have ever been engaged in any sort of artistic endeavor or environment. I suppose I would have to say Net Art since the first artistic project I ever attempted was a site I did earlier this year in response to the concepts that were coming to my mind in relation to my life when I listened to music... I

As you know already, dance is my passion. There is nothing that I enjoy more than loosing myself in a song on the dance floor. In a world where everything is so crazy, dance is something that allows you to escape from it all for little, and just be free within movement. Performance and Music are also big parts of my life because of my background in dance, so I really enjoy those too. After taking your Color Fundamentals class, I also discovered that I really like installation pieces as well.

Like I said before, I love writing. It's what I plan on doing when I get older and I'm confident in my ability to succeed at it. Dance, photography, and music are all very interesting to me as well but I can't really say I'm good at any of them haha! But I'd like to be, some day.

This is a rough group of some of the responses, but they were typical. I found that many students came with experience in at least one or two other Arts disciplines and/or expressed interest and motivation in trying something new. Since Design1 and Color Fundamentals were relatively blanket curriculum where the principles and elements that needed to be taught were already long ago established, the students already knew what they needed to demonstrate knowledge of it in order to pass. Many had already experienced the projects (such as value scales, color wheels, non-objective design squares about emotions, etc. etc.) in high school courses or had the knowledge readily available online. The classes were what I termed "show-that-you-know" classes and not classes that focused on individual discovery and stylistic experimentation.

So after the mid-term, when I felt comfortable that all the required projects for them to pass the Bachelor of Fine Arts portfolio review (which mandated certain "show what you knows"), I began to make the projects what I termed *open discipline*. I first allowed them to solve the project by using one of the disciplines they had mentioned in the survey at the beginning of class. After this initial project and critique, where they shared with the rest of class their process could expand to other disciplines with the aid of the classroom community.

For example, the color wheel project is one where they were required to show the position and colors within the wheel in the correct order. I encouraged the students to think of the ways other discipline skill sets could help them. I lectured them on the history of the color wheel but also color wheels see in dance, music, film sculpture and video art. They were then to think-tank,

discuss in small groups and finally consult with me individually before beginning.



Fig. D



Fig. E

The results were incredible, ranging from a steel sculpture of the molecular particles that made up the colors in the color wheel (fig. D, E) to a song written and sung on an acoustic guitar about the different color's histories. In other projects, we had dancers who danced on colored water and created paintings with their feet, we had outdoor sculptural installations, video art (fig. F), large-scale interventions (fig. G), etc. Students collaborated and got the freedom to explore other disciplines while in the same class as each other, doubling the exposure when it came to critique time.



Fig. F

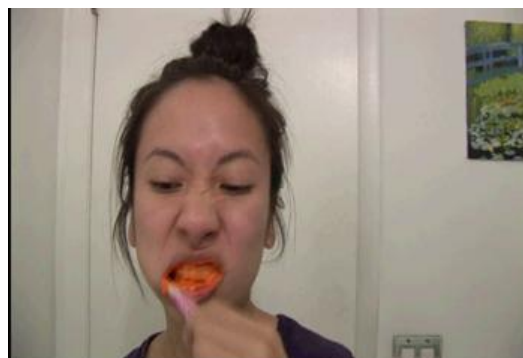


Fig. G

The downsides were my own inexperience with all of the disciplines they wanted to explore, which led to a democratization of the classroom in the latter half of the class. The upside was that students learned to be more internally self-motivated because of this. They learned to do independent research and not rely on simply questioning the teacher in order to get answers. Also, it was time consuming. Instead of completing the project in a class day or two, it would take two weeks. This was not optional for the short semesters we have at both FAU and USF.

In the future I will continue to teach using interdisciplinary collaboration while also pushing for some changes. I think improvements to the projects and structure of the classes could include the possibility of classes being taught by

multiple teachers which would help nurture student projects and offer more expertise. Another aid would be in the availability of resources and materials for the students to use, such as access to video, musical, photography and workshop equipment and facilities. I did find it limiting that some projects seemed to be mandated by institutional reviews that seemed too daunting to try and disrupt. So in the future, support from the department in allowing non-standard projects to be considered adequate for passing portfolio reviews and other institutional requirements would be one of my goals. I hope to co-teach some courses specifically with english and dance classes as well as continue my interdisciplinary methods in my personal course. I do think in the long run, the quality of the artwork produced by the students, was worth any obstacles or challenges presented.

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