This examination of the pedagogical and curricular characteristics and imperatives of an interdisciplinary studies program for adult learners, within a wider context of theory and practice, draws on the example of a general education course to demonstrate the vitality between interdisciplinary thinking and adult learning.

Enhancing Adult Learning Through Interdisciplinary Studies

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What do a public school assistant principal, a forensic psychologist, a church pastor, a theater youth director, a fiber artist, a bank vice president, a senior analyst of a national health program, an academic adviser, and a news film production director have in common? They were all graduates of the bachelor of interdisciplinary studies degree program at Wayne State University (WSU). They were also all adult learners who found their way to a bachelor’s degree program whose curriculum addressed their needs and dreams, a curriculum that bridged what they knew and what could be known, that would expand their horizons both broadly and deeply well beyond their expectations. All this occurred within the framework of an interdisciplinary studies curriculum designed and developed by faculty with thirty years of experience studying and working with the best pedagogy for adult learners. This includes flexible modes of delivery and a creative balance of theoretical content and application that renders intellectual inquiry relevant to the complexity of real-world issues. In the tradition of John Dewey, we have found that engaging students in emotional participation through communication is a fundamental part of a successful adult education experience. In essence, we have experienced the vitality of a marriage between interdisciplinary studies and adult learners. To illustrate this advantageous partnership, this chapter offers a case study illustrating how theory and practice successfully converge—how adult learning is enhanced through interdisciplinary curriculum.
Interdisciplinary Studies and Adult Learners

Most texts that focus on interdisciplinary curriculum development do not consider the adult learner student population in any significant way in their discussion and analyses (Klein, 1990; Davis, 1995; Newell, 1998). And most studies that focus on adult learners do not consider interdisciplinary studies in any significant way either (Cross, 1981; Mezirow, 1991; Brookfield, 1992). Halliburton (1981) was likely the first to examine the interconnectedness between adult learning and interdisciplinary studies. Since that time, there have been some insightful studies that build on Halliburton’s assertion that “interdisciplinary studies is a compatible learning style” for adult learners and his discussion of this somewhat revolutionary (for that time) idea (p. 466).

One such recent text is Klein’s “Interdisciplinarity and Adult Learners” (1995). Klein writes primarily about graduate liberal education, which she describes as “a subset of activities within two larger fields, adult education and interdisciplinary studies” (p. 113). Her analysis provides many insights about the symbiotic relationship—the link—between adult learning and interdisciplinary studies generally. In particular, she emphasizes that the link is twofold: “an approach to knowledge and a way of structuring programs and organizing courses” (p. 114). She offers illustrations of these two aspects of the connections between the two fields, aspects that are also “allied with the traditions of general and liberal education in the United States” (p. 114).

Changing Landscapes of General and Liberal Education

Within the broader context of general and liberal higher education, a changing agenda has emerged in the past two decades. There has been an increasing emphasis on practical, integrative, collaborative learning (Schneider and Shoenberg, 1998), all hallmarks of interdisciplinary studies and successful adult learning theory and practice.

A recent essay that focuses on the close connections between adult learning and interdisciplinarity (Schindler, 2002) builds on Halliburton’s and Klein’s work. It is informed by the changing agenda of general and liberal higher education and includes significant connections between interdisciplinary studies and adult learning. Indeed, best theories and practices for enhancing adult learning are very much aligned with best theories and practices for enhancing interdisciplinary learning, as documented in student testimony, effective curriculum development, and learning outcomes: “All evidence indicates that an interdisciplinary studies classroom that has taken into account the needs and attributes of adult learners is the ideal environment for these special students” (Schindler, 2002, p. 233). These students “bring the world of adult motivations and life engagements into the classroom and are often viewed as valuable learners and alumnae” (Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel, 2000, p. 450). For this reason and others that
are documented, interdisciplinary studies resonate with adult students in a profound way: “These students gain practical, problem-solving, even job-related skills; enjoy a more individualized approach to learning than might otherwise be followed; are immersed in a contextual exploration—the how and the why—far beyond the absolutist stage of thinking; build confidence that endures in their personal and professional lives as well as in any further academic pursuits; and . . . participate in collaborative learning opportunities that create a meaningful and long-lasting bond among them as peers and with their instructors” (Schindler, 2002, p. 233).

The Changing Place of Adult Learners in the Academy

The average age of college students has been increasing over the past three decades. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2000) informs us that roughly 50 percent of the nation's student population is over age twenty-five, with a significant number over age thirty-five. (This is an increase of almost 250 percent of students over age thirty-five over the past three decades.) Moreover, adult college students are now a much more highly diversified population (in terms of gender, class, race, culture, occupation, and other characteristics), including a marked increase in the enrollment of female students: more than 325 percent over the past two decades. These statistics are reflected in WSU's Department of Interdisciplinary Studies. The average age of our students is thirty-eight; more than 60 percent are African American, and 60 percent are female.

The increased numbers and diverse characteristics provide a context—indeed, an imperative—for effective interdisciplinary curriculum development for these students if we accept—and we do—that interdisciplinary studies and adult learning are highly compatible educationally. The changing demographics of the adult student population, moreover, require a continuing reassessment of the educational needs of this group in terms of the structure, methods, and content developed for them.

The core of the bachelor's degree program of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies (IS), comprising forty credit hours, is made up entirely of interdisciplinary courses across the academic areas of the humanities, social sciences, literacy and critical thought, and science and technology. These courses are taught by a faculty steeped in interdisciplinary thinking, although each has academic roots in one or two disciplines. For example, some of our faculty's academic roots are in both biology and history, or music and culture, or sociology and law. However, each of the courses is designed to be explicitly interdisciplinary, based around a thematic problem or issue. Since adult students typically transfer into this program with some credit hours from two-year colleges and, at minimum, a “subjects” orientation from high school, they are already preconditioned to disciplinary ways of working. A hallmark of our program is to deconstruct that disciplinary-and subject-focused approach to higher education from the outset. We do
this through an introductory course for new students on interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge and follow that through the spine of the program with a course of interdisciplinary models of theory and research, culminating in the student’s two-course capstone seminar: they engage in a thematic topic approached through interdisciplinary exploration as a topic for their mini-thesis. Around the spine of this course, students can select from a variety of interdisciplinary courses that meet general education requirements or are advanced topics courses. Importantly, we do not exclude disciplinary courses from student choices; indeed, we encourage them in the form of either specific knowledge areas or minors. However, these are disciplinary knowledge areas that serve the interdisciplinary core rather than the other way round.

Although some subject areas may seem more or less open to interdisciplinary approaches, our thematic and issues-oriented approach allows students to draw from knowledge as relevant rather than knowledge as driven by the disciplinary content. Content is exemplified in particular rather than being “covered” in general. For example, when we teach Computers and Society, we are concerned not just with the applications and software but also the hardware and its history and with broader issues of how, as the subject shapes the world through technology use, its use transforms the human subject. Through this exploration, students acquire a sampling of the specific skills but always in a context of the broader issues.

To illustrate our approach, we focus on one course, The Africans, which embodies the range of sensitivities, creative possibilities, and critical appreciation that challenges our students to become emotionally engaged learners.

**A Thematic Course in Interdisciplinary Studies for Adult Learners: The Africans**

The Africans is a junior-level, four-credit, interdisciplinary course developed for IS students but also taken by other WSU students across several other colleges. It fulfills WSU’s general education requirement in foreign culture and is one of three courses the department offers in this field (the others are The Arabs and The Chinese).

Africa’s diversity and complexity make it a rich case study for an interdisciplinary curriculum in an adult learning environment. As a survey course to meet the growing need of adult students interested in crucial information about the forces of change affecting Africa, The Africans was designed to cross many disciplinary and ideological boundaries. It encourages constructive dialogue among adult students with limited international exposure and brings them to terms with cultural variability, colonial and hegemonic discourse, the challenges of democratization, and the impact of globalization policies. Compared with discipline-oriented curricula, The Africans embraces collaborative thought, research, and teaching. Structurally, it provides the tools in an experiential learning environment where adult students are
encouraged to a world of inquiry about a continent for which their experience is so limited. The ultimate goal is to transform students from passive listeners to active learners and creative thinkers and guide them to reach challenging conclusions about various social, political, economic, and environmental phenomena that affect Africans on the continent.

There is increasing emphasis on African studies and interdisciplinary teaching. Africanist scholars are pushing for more interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Africa at the undergraduate level. Gordon and Gordon (2001) in one of the required textbooks for the course, Understanding Contemporary Africa, points to this fact: “We discovered . . . it is difficult to locate a good, up-to-date text on sub-Saharan Africa to use in our introductory courses. Available texts were for the most part too discipline-oriented—created especially for history, anthropology, or political science courses; they were too advanced for students with little prior background” (p. xi).

These comments are echoed by Bastian and Parpart (1999): “The current interdisciplinary and innovative approach in African Studies . . . is elsewhere being trumpeted as the solution to globally sensitive research and teaching. Thus, African Studies as a discipline is being challenged at the very moment when its methods have become most celebrated” (p. 1).

These statements emphasize the need for relevant interdisciplinary pedagogy to enhance students' learning and heighten their understanding of the issues relative to Africa's place in the world.

Course Description. The Africans, an IS staple, has enjoyed singular popularity over the past thirteen years among adult students and also across campus. The course often attracts as many as sixty-five students in a semester.

Derived from the television series by Ali Mazrui, a political scientist and a respected worldwide intellectual from Kenya, The Africans was designed as a thematic interdisciplinary survey course on Africa for U.S. adult learners who are largely limited in international exposure and deficient in knowledge of world geography. The title of this course is itself interdisciplinary because Mazrui takes on the daunting task of exploring Africa's culture from three perspectives: Africa's indigenous roots, Islam, and European Christianity. In so doing, he promotes a better understanding and appreciation of cultural differences in human behavior, thought, and values through an interdisciplinary lens. An effort is made not to dwell solely on the failures, weaknesses, and natural phenomena such as drought, HIV/AIDS, famine, civil war, and poverty that tend to relegate Africa and its people to second-class status but rather to provide insights and perspectives that contribute to students' understanding of the dynamics that surround Africa's fate in a globalized world. Of particular importance are Africa's relationship and presence, its adaptation and readaptation to the world in the light of its immense diversity. An understanding of ancient African history is primary in this context.

Adult Learners. Adult learners often come to the classroom after an educational hiatus that can range from three to as many as fifty-five years
following their General Educational Development (GED) examination or high school diploma. Steeped in prejudices and misinformation about Africa, due in large part to Western portrayal and stereotypes coupled with global apathy, many of these adult learners (more than 95 percent) are employed, with families, and have never traveled beyond their immediate city or state environs, much less out of the United States; in addition, they have had minimal access to reading materials or even media coverage on Africa of any substance or import. Tarzan movie imagery of a wild land with animals running amok, on the one hand, and the notion of Africa as an ancient land of kings and queens, on the other, are some of the stereotypical perceptions that must be discarded. These stereotypes are compounded by news media images of Africans in tribal and ethnic wars and the corruption of Africa’s “strong man” regimes. Thus, a course like The Africans helps to create legitimacy for the subject matter, correct distortions about the peoples and their rich culture, and resurrect voices of the less prominent ordinary Africans.

The Africans also fills a void in a university where Third World studies receive relatively marginal institutional support. Only a few courses are offered on the Third World and only this one on Africa. The course seeks to enhance the understanding of Africa’s value in the study of world history. It holds particular relevance to African American adults, who constitute more than 60 percent of our adult student population and deserve to learn more about their origins from Africa, one of the largest and richest (in minerals and resources) continents. The course also offers a chance to study from an African or African Diaspora professor, which adds more credibility in the eyes of the students.

In terms of course objectives, an overarching emphasis is placed on students’ critical thinking skills—the ability to read and comprehend what they read, to question the basis on which its claims to truth are made, to speak and analyze effectively, and to think creatively. The ultimate goal is to change prejudiced and racist attitudes toward Africa and ultimately to challenge the bases on which prejudice and racism are founded. It is therefore important that students learn by using interdisciplinary tools to understand and analyze the complexities of a continent suffering from many intractable conflicts, postcolonial crises, and globalization influences.

**Flexibility of Course Format.** A flexible delivery modality is a strong indicator that we understand and take seriously our adult students’ needs. Classes are offered on weekends, evenings, and sometimes online. Class duration is three and a half hours a week, except when the course is taught as a conference, and then it is spread over an eight-hour period on weekends. The course is organized as a single-instructor-taught class or as team-taught spread weekly over a fifteen-week semester or as a conference over four weekends or eight Saturdays or a combination. These various formats have been used frequently over the life of the program with a thrust toward active, experiential, technological, and collaborative methods of learning.
Out-of-classroom experiences are integrated into the curriculum whenever possible, to include field trips to special African exhibits at area museums, local art galleries, and plays featuring issues relevant to the course. Past students also serve as role models for current students. These are strategies used to increase the sensitivities of adult learners to engender the spirit of tolerance and appreciation of cultures other than their own and to empower them with possibilities for their own future.

When the class is offered as a conference, a small class budget allows for invited guest speakers (from different units within the university, from local colleges in the area, or from their practice in local institutions or agencies) to share their expertise. In general, we have between six and eight invited African experts presenting lectures integrated with films, videos, CD-ROMs, Web site visits, and artistic and cultural presentations followed by interactive discussion and critical dialogue with differing perspectives on Africa’s current state: postcolonialism, HIV/AIDS, system of governance, resource management, the arts, Africa’s children, and other topics.

Faculty members teaching in the course reach outside traditional thinking to encourage scholarship and students’ participation. Even without a background in African or Third World studies, students engage invited faculty in dialogue about understanding such social and economic phenomena as African civil strife and poor resource management of major commodities, for example, oil and diamonds. They study relationships and try to achieve coherence in passages related to life in urban and rural Africa, the changing roles of women, polygamy, and the extended family.

Novels as an Interdisciplinary Pedagogical Tool. An important asset for students in The Africans is the use of novels to foster interdisciplinary thinking and facilitate the understanding of the challenges and changing dynamics that confront Africa. It is a powerful way to communicate cultural norms and enrich scholarly readings by breaking down the critical processes of development in simpler language. Besides changing the pace, novels provide firsthand knowledge of life in African society from urban to rural, the traditional versus the modern, black versus white, and the growing conflicts between genders from the days of colonialism to the current rapid transformation as a result of globalization. They are useful in the portrayal of Africa’s past and present as a means of understanding the future.

Over the years, authors studied have included Ferdinand Oyono, Buchi Emecheta, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Ousmane Sembene, Driss Chraibi, Chinua Achebe, and Mariama Ba. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1994), reprinted thirty times and translated into roughly forty-five languages (Hay, 2000), is a simple, readable classic that lends itself to meaningful interdisciplinary discourse. Students love this work because of its special appeal for the rural past in a decentralized society until the clash of cultures. It sends out a sense of nostalgia that goes beyond the Igbo family and its cosmology. Similarly, Mariama Ba’s autobiographical commentary in *So Long a Letter*...
(1989) puts forth a compelling interdisciplinary question on polygamy and gender status in a Muslim society to help students understand how nationalist ideologies perpetuate patriarchal and capitalist values that hurt women. Religion, economics, history, sociology, and culture are integrative themes throughout the novel.

**Core Themes.** The discussion highlights several core themes that illustrate the interrelated curriculum content and pedagogical practices that characterize courses in our adult-oriented interdisciplinary degree program.

First, we understand the needs and competencies of adult students. They have diverse life experiences, often a specialized knowledge or training, but are also subject to competing demands from work and family that put immense pressure on their time. We acknowledge these assets and constraints and take them seriously by structuring course delivery modalities to allow students maximum flexibility in terms of time to engage the courses.

Second, adult students have anxiety from being away from school for many years, maybe also from negative past experiences of education, and in some cases from doubts about the rigor of their study skills, thinking, or memory. We address these concerns by providing reassurance and support through adequate counseling, positive reinforcement of their academic work, and guidance and engagement for their ideas. These measures are designed to bring them into the program with a preponderance of others like them and serve to normalize their class experience rather than abandon them in a sea of traditional undergraduates.

Third, adult undergraduates are equipped with a wide range of comprehension and communication skills, diverse classes, gender and ethnic experiences, and mixed academic levels of accomplishment. Rather than seeing these as negative features of our student body, we embrace these characteristics. We have an open enrollment policy and address these academic differences by providing (1) materials in multiple formats designed to tap different learning styles, (2) opportunities for collaborative learning so that they can experience peer support as well as instructor guidance, and (3) challenging course content so they can creatively engage, produce, and own their own knowledge about the thematic topic, whether it is the Africans, globalization, environmental health, war, or something else. We also take into account that differences produce variations in levels of accomplishment and incorporate this into their selection of class and topic areas so that they gain strength in areas of weakness, while they also have the chance to celebrate and excel in areas of strength.

Fourth, we engage adult students in interdisciplinary course content that challenges them to discover the myths and to contextualize the realities of popular and mass-mediated knowledge so that they become knowledgeable to others. To further this objective, we employ them in various ways to teach others, whether fellow students in class or members of the community, in each case celebrating their established and changing roles. We stimulate their pride in being an adult student, encouraging their rediscovery of old
knowledge, and incorporating new insights and understanding from varied sources across a wide range of disciplinary fields.

Fifth, we reinforce students' adulthood and build on their strengths to grow professionally and personally so that they feel more connected to the diversity of knowledge, have the courage to value alternative views of the world, and incorporate these into their own analysis of the contemporary globalized world, recognized as reaching beyond their communities and societies into their relationships with other societies and different cultures.

Sixth, we empower adult students to include rather than exclude, regardless of the category of distinction, to be active agents in the world rather than passive subjects to it, and to engage issues with compassion based on understanding for change, mindful of the multiple ways that actions and discourse are interrelated with multiple effects.

In assessing the wider issue of the value of interdisciplinary approaches for adult students, we believe that students need both. They need disciplinary depth in foundational knowledge, but also integration and breadth to know how knowledge interconnects with other knowledge around its application to problems, themes, and issues (Klein and Newell, 1998; Newell and Green, 1998; Hursh, Haas, and Moore, 1998). For the nontraditional student, with life experiences as a practicing interdisciplinary worker, parent, friend, and other roles, but whose academic experience is typically one of objective and abstract knowledge, our challenge is to objectivize the former while subjectivizing the latter. The disadvantage of our approach is that we may not always succeed in demonstrating that disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are each implicated in the other. Students’ higher education succeeds when we inspire them to engage in a dialogue that does not prioritize one over the other but rather presents a dynamic movement between the two such that each is continually constituted by contributions from the other. The advantage of this approach is that it affords the students the genuine possibility of integrating academic exploration into their everyday lives.

**Conclusion**

Thirty years of experience with adult students in an interdisciplinary program make an excellent teacher. This is supported by a literature that not only demonstrates changes within higher education generally but also the unique and mutually enhancing and enriching connections between interdisciplinary studies and adult learners, which have informed the curriculum of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in significant ways, for the benefit of its students.

**References**


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