Synthetic Spaces: Three Models for Interdisciplinary Arts History Courses

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During the early part of the twentieth century, arts schools such as the German Bauhaus (1919-1933) and American Black Mountain College (1933-1957) understood that innovation comes from a learning environment that blurred boundaries – allowing space for the creation of hybrid artistic practices.
Bauhaus projects such as *Triadisches Ballett* (Triadic Ballet), performed between 1921-1929, is an example of a theatrical dance developed by artist Oskar Schlemmer, with music by Paul Hindemith who was inspired by composer Arnold Schoenberg. Likewise, in 1927, the painters Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee invited the composer Bela Bartok to give a concert at the Bauhaus; understanding that exposure to his music would benefit students working in various artistic media. After 1957, this type of cross-fertilization among the visual, performing and literary sister arts was discouraged as academics focused instead on the segregation of disciplines with preference given to the mastery of single subjects. Today, interdisciplinary artistic practices in the college classroom have been revived as an active area of pedagogical growth. This type of pedagogical innovation focuses on the possibility of offering multiple, parallel histories of various sister art forms within a single course. This teaching model poses some challenges for the faculty, who need to develop competency in at least two disciplines in addition to learning new assessment tools. It brings rewards for the students who are able to successfully synthesize the intertwined histories of artists, musicians and writers into a unified whole. This paper examines a sequence of three college courses that propose strategies that interested faculty members can use in introducing this form of curricular change to their own institutions.

**History of Interdisciplinary Arts Education – Bauhaus**

During the interwar years, the Bauhaus was known as one of the most innovative and interdisciplinary arts schools in Europe. It lasted from 1919-1933, first in Weimar, then in Dessau, and finally in Berlin, and was led by three directors, all of whom were architects (even though architecture itself was seldom taught at the school). The Bauhaus was founded in 1919 in Weimar under the direction of Walter Gropius (1883-1969) who believed that “the Bauhaus strives to bring together all creative effort into one whole, to reunify all the disciplines of practical art – sculpture, painting, handicrafts, and crafts – as inseparable components of new architecture.” Due to financial difficulties, the school moved in 1924 to Dessau where it operated under Hannes Meyer (1889-1954) until he was removed in 1928 because of his growing Marxist affiliations. The third director, Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) then brought the school to its final location, in Berlin, where it remained until the Nazi regime ultimately closed the institution in 1933.
Even though the Bauhaus was primarily a visual arts school, music had a strong presence in both the campus environment as well as the curriculum. According to student Ursula Schuh,

“In fine art, the parallel with music [particularly in Kandinsky’s classes] was felt very strongly: the seemingly free forms and colors were yet developed according to certain laws. Again and again this was expressed in the titles of pictures such as *Fugue, Variation, Crescendo* or *Allegro.*”

Kandinsky’s interest in creating a synthetic space within the Bauhaus is also evident in various

“musical events including the first performance of Hindemith’s set of songs based on Rainer Ferruccio Busoni’s *Six Short Pieces for Piano,* a performance of Ernst Krenek’s *Concerto Grosso,* and the second German performance of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Soldier’s Tale,* conducted by Hermann Scherchen in the presence of the composer.”

Hindemith’s music was also performed at the Bauhaus from 1921-1929 as part of Oskar Schlemmer’s *Triadishes Ballett* (Triadic Ballet), a dance inspired by Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire.*
Bauhaus students, such as Stefan Volpe (1902-1972) were inspired by Schoenberg and Hindemith to create musical adaptations of Dada poems, including Kurt Schwitters’ *Anna Blume*. Focusing himself on *Gebrauchsmusik*: or music that serves a social function. “Klee first heard Schoenberg in Munich, as did his friend and Bauhaus colleague Wassily Kandinsky (who had studied piano and cello in his youth). Klee, contributed to the creation of synthetic spaces within the school, believing that

“now it is possible that sound could form a synthesis with the world of appearances . . . But to gather insights into music through the special character of polyphonic works, to penetrate deep into this cosmic sphere, to issue forth a transformed beholder of art, and then to lurk in waiting for these things in the picture, that is something more.”

Kandinsky, who immediately saw the parallels between dissonance in contemporary music and in painting, eagerly initiated a correspondence with the composer.”

“Although Schoenberg was most likely invited to the Bauhaus by Gropius, who named the composer to the Board of the ‘Friends of the Bauhaus,’ there is no record in the documentary literature on the Bauhaus or Schoenberg that a visit ever occurred. Several Bauhausler’s did, however, mention performances of Schoenberg’s music” [at the school].

“The concerts added gravitas to the image of the Bauhaus, indicating that the school was deeply imbedded both in the tradition and the modernization of German and European culture. Not only was Klee a professional musician and concertmaster, and Kandinsky the close friend and correspondent of Arnold Schoenberg, but also most of the Bauhaus faculty and many of the students had impressive education in both classical and contemporary music.”

The Bauhaus Band was active in Dessau and later in Berlin. “The band consisted of [art] students and, understandably, its composition was not constant.”
The Band

“consisted by 1928 of some combination of banjos, pianos, percussion, bass (of unclear specification), trombone, clarinet, soprano and alto saxophones . . . . They were known as a jazz band, though the description suggests something of yet-to-be-named rock . . . the music derived from the countries of origin of the participating Bauhauslers: Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Switzerland, Russia and the United States.”

In 1928, Kandinsky designed the staging of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition at the Friedrich Theater in Dessau – a work dedicated to the synthesis of the arts.

“Klee’s son, Paul, served as a production assistant while Kandinsky designed the sets and costumes for the performance – evidence of which can be seen in sixteen surviving watercolors (now housed in the Pompidou Centre in Paris.) Sixteen watercolors inspired Modest Mussorgsky’s (1839-1881) composition. He transformed the pictures into absolute music. Kandinsky for his part designed ‘visual equivalents by following the movement of the musical
phrases with movable colored forms and projections of light.' Dancers performed in only two of the scenes . . . "Kandinsky’s scenery for Mussorgsky’s Pictures from an Exhibition . . . [is significant as it] was the only one of his synthetic stage designs to be realized."xii

**History of Interdisciplinary Arts Education – Black Mountain College**

Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 in rural North Carolina, was an arts college that was based on the philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952), an educational reformer, “who believed that art should be integrated into everyday life.”xiii

Black Mountain was home to many faculty and students from the Bauhaus (such as architect Walter Gropius, painter Josef Albers and weaver Anni Albers) who had fled Germany during and after World War Two. During its twenty-four year history (the school was forced to close in 1957 due to financial troubles) the school, located in a rural part of the southern United States, became an interdisciplinary laboratory that produced synthetic projects such as architect Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome and dancer Merce Cunningham’s first dance company. Composer

“John Cage's staging of the first theatrical "happening" in the summer of 1952 included Robert Rauschenberg, a student, whose all-white paintings were hung next to faculty
member Franz Kline's black-and-white canvas. And the avant-garde composer (and Bauhausler) Stefan Wolpe, who had written music for Bertolt Brecht in Berlin, did a stint for the college's theater productions."\textsuperscript{xiv}

By the end of the 1950s, most colleges discouraged this type of synthesis of the visual, performing and literary sister arts as academics focused instead on the segregation of disciplines with preference given to competency in single subjects. The compartmentalization of courses into distinct majors forced students to choose narrow career paths – often to the detriment of more creative and interdisciplinary educational alternatives. "In the 1980s, historical empiricism and traditional style analysis still dominated the mainstream."\textsuperscript{xv}

"From the 80s modes of analysis derived from literary criticism inspired art historians to examine visual artifacts as if they were words, capable of performing tropes and exhibiting mechanisms of signification."\textsuperscript{xvi} This trajectory led to "the complete synthetic collapse of the distinction between writing and drawing."\textsuperscript{xvii}

\textbf{Contemporary Practices in Museums and Colleges}

In this century, interdisciplinary artistic practices in the college classroom have been revisited as an active area of pedagogical growth. This type of pedagogical innovation focuses on the possibility of offering multiple, parallel histories of various art forms within a single course. The need for this type of teaching was highlighted in \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education} with a call for more creativity in the classroom. "Welcome to the creative era. To fuel the 21\textsuperscript{st}-century economic engine and sustain democratic values, we must unleash and nurture the creative impulse that exists within everyone of us."\textsuperscript{xviii} I believe that by encouraging students to inhabit,
what I refer to as the synthetic space of two or more disciplines, we are also inviting them to engage more fully in the creative process of learning. The classroom, elevated through certain forms of interdisciplinary arts education, makes room for an intellectual and artistic synthetic space that cultivates active (rather than passive) engagement in learning by students as well as faculty, resulting in a “synthetic, synoptic convergence of perspectives.”

These types of interdisciplinary explorations (which also go by the names sister arts, comparative arts, interart studies or the interarts borderland) are also being made outside of the classroom – manifest in major museum exhibitions and scholarly books. In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art in New York hosted “Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925” which focuses on the interdependence of art and music.

The exhibition’s “sound columns” allow visitors to examine paintings by Wassily Kandinsky while listening to music by Claude Debussy. Scholarly books such as Music and Literature in German Romanticism by Siobhan Donovan and Robin Elliott (2004), and Classical Mythology in Literature, Art and Music by Philip Mayerson (2001) are two examples of recent scholarship in the field of interdisciplinary arts history. These texts are an invaluable resource to faculty members who are designing new courses and expanding their own educational training to incorporate a variety of artistic media.

**Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment Models**

The major student-learning outcome (SLO) for this form of interdisciplinary history course is the student’s ability to successfully synthesize the intertwined histories of artists, musicians and writers into a coherent whole.
The 2009 Briefing Paper, *Disciplines in Combination: Interdisciplinary, Multidisciplinary and Other Collaborative Programs of Studies* also emphasizes that this form of education needs "to lead to the student’s ability to integrate and synthesize materials from more than one discipline." Likewise, in *Authentic Connections: Interdisciplinary Work in the Arts* - a position paper from the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations - the leading organization representing the dance, music, theater and visual arts teaching professions mention that “interdisciplinary education” is defined as "education that enables students to identify and apply authentic connections between two or more disciplines and/or to understand essential concepts that transcend individual disciplines."

These types of courses require new assessment tools that can gauge our students’ ability to successfully synthesize the intertwined histories of artists, musicians and writers into a coherent whole. This paper examines a sequence of three college courses that propose strategies, which interested faculty members can use in creating this form of curricular change at their own institutions. This study also examines ways in which providing a broader comparative history of the arts (music, dance and theater) deepens and enriches our students’ understanding of the history of the arts as a whole.

This project examines three models of interdisciplinary education and provides illustrative examples of each: 1) Cross-disciplinary, 2) Infusion and 3) Parallel Instruction.
I am using these models, to discern whether an interdisciplinary approach to arts education encourages a “deeper production of knowledge [which I am relating to synthetic space].”\textsuperscript{xxiii} The Cross-Disciplinary Model introduces a student research project that will contextualize, over the course of two assignments, individual time periods and styles within a broader context. The Infusion Model assesses the value of guest speakers, presenting a series of three lectures, as a method of deepening our students' understanding of the interconnected nature of the arts. The Parallel Instruction Model pilots a new curriculum for an upper-division course that would teach, in tandem, the history of two or more disciplines in one a single term.

During the 2012-2013 academic year, I launched all three models using two assessment tools: written analysis and oral and written student self-assessment. The courses were thematic in nature, asking students to create interart comparisons within a given stylistic trend. For example, Romanticism and Orientalism were themes that surfaced in a variety of artistic disciplines during the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Likewise, Expressionism and Minimalism manifested itself as stylistic and artistic movements in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. “This form of periodization [is a] powerful basis of interdisciplinary relation. Common motifs, themes and genres suggested synchronic relations within chronological eras and stylistic categories.”\textsuperscript{xxiv} I used the written analysis tool in the Romanticism, Orientalism, Expressionism and Minimalism courses as a way of bridging the forms and ideas across media. “Acting as each other’s audiences, [students] were able to assess the impact and accessibility of their work across disciplinary boundaries.”\textsuperscript{xxv} For the student, the study of art history generates a visual repertoire of artistic imagery and grounding in the historical reasons for art making. The major assessment tools in art history are written analyses of style and content area tests. The oral and written student self-assessment is implemented in addition to written analyses. These typically occur first around mid-semester and again at the
end of the term. These assessments allow students to make interdisciplinary connections themselves – a way of linking one aspect of their educational experience with another – ultimately leading to the synthesis of multiple disciplines.

**Evaluation of Data**

Interdisciplinary arts history lends itself to synthesis because of its required interaction of disciplines – creating the need for students to make connections between and among fields of study. According to the National Association of Schools of Arts and Design 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. [For example.] an examination of how the ideals of the Enlightenment had influence on and were synthesized in 18th century literature and dance would be interdisciplinary.”

I. Cross-Disciplinary Model

This model utilizes two written assignments that ask students to make connections between multiple disciplines. For this model, I asked students (during week 4) to write a brief (250-word) analysis of Peter von Cornelius’ *Faust and Mephisto on the Brocken* (c. 1811) and Eugene Delacroix’s 1828 version of *Faust Rescues Marguerite from her Prison*. Students were prompted to specifically focus on the use of light and dark in the composition as well as the ways in which the two artists create a sense of emotion and drama in the work. The second assignment (given during week 8) asked students to compare and contrast Goethe’s theatrical version of *Witch’s Kitchen Scene* from his 1828 play *Faust* to Francisco Goya’s *Witches’ Sabbath* painting (from 1789).
I prompted students to look for similarities and differences in the treatment of the subject by the German writer (Goethe) and the Spanish artist (Goya). I also asked them how the two works, from different artistic media, differ. The first short paper made it clear that students in this upper-division course knew how to draw analytic comparisons between several works of visual art (artifacts in the same discipline). The assignments demonstrate the students’ ability to describe, compare, contrast and interpret the art objects that they were given. The second assignment considerably improved the students’ abilities to interpret and analyze works of art from a variety of genres. Their ability to position themselves in a synthetic space encouraged and challenged them in ways that were not evident in the earlier assignment. This type of assignment resurfaced when students were asked to write their own research papers towards the end of the semester. For this assignment, most of the students chose to work on interdisciplinary topics that included art, music, literature and theater.

2. Infusion Model

This model utilizes guest speakers, delivering a series of three lectures, as a way of strengthening students’ understanding of the interconnected nature of the arts. This model invites local disciplinary experts to discuss various topics, within dance, music, literature or theater, in order to make connections between the history of visual art and its parallels in other genres.
The students, at the end of each presentation, wrote down a series of interpretive questions that could be used to foster class discussions at the next meeting. Students enjoyed having the guests coming to class since they added a different voice and an element of novelty to the course. The questions that they wrote, at the end of the presentations, did not, however, show that they were able to inhabit the *synthetic* space between disciplines. Almost all the questions focused specifically on the medium being presented, overlooking the link between that medium and other forms of artistic expression. Bringing in discipline-specific experts ultimately encouraged the separation of disciplines, by reinforcing the notion that only experts could properly engage their areas of scholarship. Perhaps this segregation deflated the synthetic space – as an intellectual path for students – thereby discouraging their own movement from a single discipline to multiple disciplines.

3. Parallel Instruction Model

The third model, pilots a new curriculum for an upper-division course that teaches, sequentially, the history of at least two disciplines over the course of one semester. This new upper-division curriculum creates a series of three clusters that focus (over the course of four-week blocks) on the history of art, music and literature during a designated time period.
This course uses thematic links, such as the story of Salome (for example) to illustrate ways in which artists, working in a variety of genres, approach the same subject matter. This type of instructional model, while easier for the faculty, is more segregated for the student. By compartmentalizing the various artistic genres into blocks, it is encouraging students to consider them as independent rather than interdependent.

**Conclusion and Next Steps**

In light of these three interdisciplinary models, it appears that the Cross-Disciplinary Model may create the most fruitful synthetic space for this project. The students' written work under this model exhibits the highest level of synthesis of at least two forms of artistic expression, creating the most complete student-learning outcomes of the three models. In so doing, students themselves experienced a level of greater creativity in their work – something they repeatedly cited in their self-assessments. Vanderbilt University’s Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy recently published a study that “found that arts majors integrate and use core creative abilities more often and more consistently than do students in almost all other fields of study.”xxvii “Moreover, arts graduates say their education helped them become more creative. Even arts graduates, who did not become artists, say they learned important creative skills in
school that they use in their jobs.”

I believe that by creating an interdisciplinary arts curriculum that integrates information, knowledge, perspectives, theories and or methodologies from several academic disciplines, we will be able to strengthen and refine our students’ ability to synthesize various discipline-specific materials while they freely inhabit the synthetic space that allows for their creative growth. All three models presented here challenge faculty members to expand their knowledge base and pedagogical practice. This tandem faculty-student educational experimentation results in flexing the creative possibilities of the college classroom.

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