

## **Double trouble? Introducing interdisciplinary modules as part of curriculum innovation**

**Wintrup, J**, University of Southampton, UK

J.Wintrup@soton.ac.uk

This paper reports on research with students taking new interdisciplinary modules, available as part of a broader programme of curriculum innovation, and offers the perspective of one module team.

A picture is emerging from research of early-adopter students; confident in their ability to cross boundaries, prepared to take risks, and strategic in their intentions.

In turn, modules require designs and learning approaches that make complex ideas or specialist types of knowledge accessible to learners from a wide range of educational traditions, while being stretching and intellectually stimulating.

We introduce one module, a form of applied ethics, to illustrate ways in which literature helped us to deconstruct and rethink ethics education. We also discuss how the process of doing so increased our awareness of the liminal spaces we operate in as educators and researchers. We go on to posit that the 'double trouble' alluded to by Land (2011) is experienced not only by students and academics, but also more broadly in the academy when disciplinary boundaries are disrupted.

### *Emergent findings from research*

In 2011/12, after two years of preparation, interdisciplinary modules were introduced to students from six Faculties and 18 programmes as part of Southampton's Curriculum Innovation programme. Over 800 students participated in year 1 rising to over 1300 in year 2. Modules included subjects as diverse as pathology, environmental change, sustainability, public health, mapping technologies, and business innovation. Some were strongly influenced by students; for example, third year medics had pushed for and subsequently co-designed a new Global Health module (Wintrup et al, 2010).

A senior researcher surveyed 399 and interviewed 72 student volunteers over the course of 2012/13. Emergent themes include the importance to students of good, clear information particularly about assessment load and method, and the value placed on the ability to demonstrate (often to future employers) a broad knowledge, an interest in current issues outside of disciplines and flexible thinking.

### *Implications and discussion*

Findings indicate that despite risks and uncertainties, interdisciplinary education provides for many students a new and liberating set of possibilities. However academics are also 'letting go of a prevailing familiar view' (Land, 2011) and in doing so, forfeit the security and status accorded to them by disciplinary norms. On the one hand, students from humanities and arts offered new, rich forms of situated analysis to challenge decontextualised and abstract ideas. On the other, those studying physical and social sciences demanded forms of evidence that enriched debate and clarified terms. Lawlor's (2007) critique of moral philosophy predicted the troublesome nature of formal ethics education and like Emmerich (2013), drew attention to the classroom itself as a site of acculturation. Both reflected the ways in which, as a diverse team of academics, we both led and followed, as students investigated pressing moral problems of their choice. Together, within the classroom and in small groups, we provoked, explored and negotiated different worldviews and beliefs through topics ranging from terrorism to sex work. We are coming to see disciplinary languages and traditions afresh, both as useful organising frameworks and as forms of exclusion.

## References

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