The importance of multiple disciplines and 3-minute ideas

Doug Peers, Dean of Arts

Here we are at the end of March, arguably the most grueling month in the academic calendar as we cope with writing or grading midterms and essays, preparing budgets, filing our tax returns, and in general tidying up the term while also coping with fickle weather - and treading warily as the geese become even more territorial as nesting season approaches.

Given this taxing time of year, events like the 3 Minute Thesis competition highlighted in this issue are especially welcome reminders of what our students can do. I attended one of the Arts heats and was deeply impressed not only by the fascinating areas of research our students are undertaking but also by their ability to convey it with such clarity and enthusiasm, all in three minutes. I can remember my first seminar foray as a graduate student and I doubt whether...
my 50 minutes did as much justice to India’s rupee crisis (thereby disproving Oscar Wilde’s admonition in The Importance of Being Earnest: “Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational…”) as our students did in three minutes on their research. It was a humbling experience and I could not help wishing that Margaret Wente and other such critics of higher education were in the room. I will be block-booking my calendar for next year’s 3MT competition for sure.

Also in this issue we are highlighting the work of three of our faculty members who are not only applying academic and pedagogical insights to real-world problems (again, Wente take note) but they are doing so through combining knowledge and expertise from multiple disciplines. It is all too easy to become blasé or even outright cynical as interdisciplinarity has become one of the more overused words in the academic lexicon. That is why these three examples are so refreshing – they illustrate just some of uWaterloo’s capacity to leverage interdisciplinary approaches in research, teaching and practice.

And finally, I'd like to draw your attention to updates posted on our Strategic Planning webpages. Four working groups have been tasked with developing action plans for our priority areas – a vital step for realizing our Faculty's strategic objectives. Facing the likelihood of budget cuts, and with the university moving ahead on a number of fronts, particularly the introduction of a new budget model and a strategic enrolment management plan, and the wrapping up of the mid-cycle review, ensuring that we maintain the momentum will be of immense value as we position ourselves for what no doubt will be interesting times ahead.
On editing the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Disability Studies is a coherent and established academic field – we’ve been around for nearly three decades. It is also an inter- and multi-disciplinary field. What holds the field together is the idea that disability is a political and cultural identity, not simply a medical condition, or a defect that should be cured or remedied.

While there are many different disabilities (cognitive, physical, learning, mental, emotional, psychological, and so on), and while perspectives on disability vary, the field of Disability Studies does provide a somewhat unified stance. Among advocates, particularly those living with a disability, there is common ground: in the experience of stigma and oppression, and in the fight for more positive representations, as well as in the struggle for accessibility.

Diverse fields committed to a shared and positive identity

Disability Studies scholars from diverse fields often expose the ways that the concept of disability is also used to shore up other stigmatization – for instance, categorizations of race, gender, and sexuality have relied upon the attribution of biological inferiority to marginalized groups. It is important to respond by critiquing the constructions of disability, rather than disavowing this attribution while allowing cultural meanings of disability to go unchallenged, and therefore actually reinforcing them. So I choose to at once affirm disability as a shared and positive identity, while challenging the ways that the very concept of disability has been a tool for oppression. This is just one of the ways that Disability Studies can help inform other disciplines.

As editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, I work with an editorial board of scholars from very diverse disciplines – from urban policy studies, to gender studies, to community health and epidemiology, to social policy, to English, to sociology, to education, to law, to philosophy. I learn so much from interacting with the folks on the editorial board for the journal. When I get a submission and begin organizing peer reviews, I have a complex set of decisions to make, each of which helps me see the interdisciplinarity of Disability Studies in a new way.

Accessibility across disciplinary perspectives

The submissions, of course, also come from dozens of different disciplines. And it seems to me that each works, with varying degrees of success, to change the conversation within Disability Studies – bridging, critiquing, revising, refusing, connecting, and otherwise shifting the ways that disciplines shape bodies. Through peer review, these debates and conversations sharpen. Then, as I pull each issue together, I am conscious of how the articles can be made accessible to the broadest audience possible – and that takes further careful navigation through and across disciplinary conventions and perspectives. I hope that this process is actually made visible in each article and each issue of the journal.

In my own teaching I developed some of this awareness early on. Once I figured out the ways that I learned best and developed my narrow channel of expertise – which was rewarded by the educational system – I then worked to let go of it. I realized that most students will NOT learn the way that I do, and that I have to be much more flexible if I want to be a good teacher. It is that same letting-go – of disciplinary biases and narrow channels – that makes interdisciplinarity effective in my research, teaching, and in my work as an editor.
On combining disciplines in the MPS program

THE MASTER OF PUBLIC SERVICE (MPS) PROGRAM draws on faculty from six different disciplines: Political Science, Economics, English, French Studies, Leadership and Philosophy. Instructors are encouraged to design courses using the assumptions and methodologies of their own discipline, while contributing to the central goal – to equip students with knowledge and transferable skills to be successful in a public service career.

This approach is purposeful: it is intended to expose students to different perspectives and methods, which helps to make them flexible and adaptable. Feedback we have received from co-op employers indicates that this is one of the most desirable work-related traits of MPS students.

BRIDGING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP – NOT EASY, BUT DOABLE

The multidisciplinary nature of the MPS degree attracts students from many different undergraduate programs. Since its launch in 2010, we have enrolled 107 students from 33 different undergraduate backgrounds – Anthropology, Business Administration, Criminology, Legal Studies, Political Science, Social Work, Urban Planning, and so on – and this has contributed to a rich learning environment. Each student views issues and debates through a particular disciplinary lens, and they challenge each other to think critically about their assumptions and approaches.

There are also some challenges. For example, students enter the program with widely varying knowledge of the Canadian political system. Some have extensive knowledge about government and politics, while others have only a basic understanding – designing a course to bridge these two extremes has been challenging. The same is true for other courses, such as those focused on economics, leadership and communications.

MULTI-EVERYTHING IS A COMFORTABLE FIT TODAY

I believe multidisciplinary programs are particularly appealing to prospective students. Based on my conversations with MPS students, it appears that their secondary and undergraduate education have prepared them to do well in a multidisciplinary environment. For example, they are accustomed to working with classmates from different backgrounds and are experienced with group or team-based assignments.

The students understand the importance of developing a broad and diverse foundation of knowledge in order to be competitive in a dynamic labour market. They recognize that the modern workplace involves extensive collaboration in diverse, mixed teams. We’ve structured the MPS curriculum, assignments and professional development events to reinforce these traits and attitudes.
On directing a project across fields and country

SINCE 2010 I HAVE DIRECTED a national cross-disciplinary research project. The objective of the Anti-Colonialism Project (ACP) is to change the landscape of public discourse about race and colonialism in Canada in ways that increase possibilities for anti-colonialism and racial justice. This will be accomplished through the production and distribution of films, interactive websites, and other new media tools aimed at audiences in multiple sectors (universities and not-for-profit, social service, governmental, and advocacy organizations). The project began with a small group of academics in summer 2009, then held a SSHRC-funded workshop in fall 2010, and has received SSHRC Partnership Development and CFI funding. Members of the ACP include 20 faculty and filmmakers from across Canada, who together represent over 200 years of experience on issues the project addresses.

RACISM AND COLONIALISM STILL EXIST IN MULTICULTURAL CANADA
Much of public (and academic) discourse in Canada suggests that Canada is a global leader in multiculturalism, and that issues of racism and colonialism are isolated and rare. The ACP begins with the assumption that racism and colonialism exist today in Canada, and that they are not problems relegated to the past. The project aims to build public engagement with the ongoing consequences of racism and colonialism in Canadian society, and to facilitate avenues for anti-racism and anti-colonialism.

COMPLEX ISSUES REQUIRE CROSS-DISCIPLINARY EXPERTISE
Project members examine issues of race and colonialism in six areas: education, child welfare, health, land, media, and colonialism. Given the complexity of the issues and the range of areas we cover, the project requires extensive cross-disciplinary expertise from communication, media studies, English, history, law, social work, education, cultural studies, geography, equity studies, and linguistics.

Effective cross-disciplinary collaboration is possible when we, as project members, are willing to endorse a vision for the project that is larger than our individual priorities and commitments. Since 2010, the ACP has held multiple face-to-face meetings. We have grappled with conceptual themes that guide the project, explored theoretical tensions in our work, and articulated what it means to work toward a common vision from our respective fields. To some extent, it requires that project members live with ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and contradiction.

MOBILIZING ACADEMIC IDEAS TO CAPTURE REAL LIFE
The project is producing educational resources about the complexities and intricacies of real life. To a large extent, academic disciplines support the division of theory and practice, and of concept and context. Efforts aimed at changing the landscape of public discourse about racism and colonialism must have an intimacy with lived experience. Racism and colonialism are about space, economics, social organization, history, media, power, and politics. Adequately addressing these issues requires an interdisciplinary approach, as well as the willingness of project members from various disciplines to critique academic norms that contribute to denying, minimizing, and misnaming the existence of racism and colonialism in Canadian public life.

I completed my doctoral work in an interdisciplinary program, and was not bound to any one department or program. Communication as a discipline can be defined as the shared process of making meaning. I choose to focus my work on the meaning of racial and other forms of injustice – what they look like, their consequences, and what might contribute to their undoing.
3MT: ideas distilled here

WHEN LINDA WARLEY (Assoc. Dean, Graduate Studies) returned from the annual Canadian Association of Graduate Studies conference in Ottawa last fall, she had caught the 3MT bug. “I learned many interesting things at CAGS” she wrote in her blog, “but nothing got me more inspired than the notion of the three-minute thesis.”

Recognizing a perfect opportunity to both enhance graduate student training and showcase their research, Linda partnered with the Graduate Studies Office to plan the Three Minute Thesis (3MT, a trademarked event) at Waterloo. The notion was indeed infectious and by December all six faculties were hustling to get organized.

In case you missed them, the faculty heats took place over the last few weeks. Twenty-nine Arts grad students competed, representing Accounting, Anthropology, Economics, English, German, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology. With just one slide and three minutes to talk, students presented a distillation of their thesis. “It was impressive to see how much of the originality and importance of the topic could be captured in three minutes,” says Doug Peers “as well as the passion and enthusiasm of the participants.”

The 3MT judging criteria emphasize the ability to engage a non-specialist audience; in the end, it was women in social sciences who most impressed the Arts judging panel comprised of faculty, staff, and alumni. The Arts 3MT winners are:

Louise Hayes, PhD candidate in Accounting, presented ‘Determinants of undetected, unintentional errors in audited financial statements’. She was passionate, driven and conveyed to us the widespread importance of her topic. Afterwards, Louise said: “We can’t really expect family, friends and people we meet outside our discipline to listen to our ideas for more than a few moments without their eyes glazing. We need to hone our ‘elevator pitch’ if we ever want to share passion about our research with others.”

Emily Milne, PhD candidate in Sociology, presented ‘Aboriginal family-school relationships, academic achievement and connections to schools’. Her 3MT was outstanding for the way she painted a scenario of the problem that her research addresses – she immediately had us all invested in her topic. Emily later commented on the importance of “first taking the time to engage the audience and help them relate to my research. This is quite similar to an academic job interview. The 3MT is a great learning exercise, which I feel has helped me prepare for the future… I’m very excited about the next round of the competition!”

Kaleigh Eichel, MA candidate in Public Issues Anthropology, presented ‘Analyzing baboon skeletons to identify hybrids between species in the fossil record’. She was remarkably composed, yet clearly excited by her research topic; in three minutes she impressed on us how smart archaeological techniques can map species evolution. Afterward, Kaleigh said she prepared by presenting her spiel “to anyone and everyone that would listen. I was even practicing on the bus to strangers!” Maria Liston, chair of Anthropology and Kaleigh’s supervisor, enthused about 3MT: “This is a wonderful experience for students… I’m a fan of 3MT from now on!”

The Waterloo 3MT final takes place on March 27 followed by the Provincial 3MT competition at Queen’s University on April 18.
March Break Open House

Arts Photo Booth

April Pedagogy Picnics

APRIL 2: Veronica Kitchen (Poli. Sci.) Teaching With Simulations

APRIL 9: Greg Berberich (AFM) Spreading the Gospel: How to Promote Teaching and Learning in Your Department or School

APRIL 16: Tim Kenyon (Philosophy) Using Journal Referee Reports in Seminar Teaching

APRIL 23: Barbara Bloemhof (Economics) How Self-Directed Learning Can Change the Game

Pedagogy Picnics are held 12-1 pm in EV3-3408. Everyone welcome!