Window Shopping: Fashioning a Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning

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Keywords
SoTL, Interdisciplinary learning, Professional identities, Novice-stry

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Window Shopping:  
Fashioning a Scholarship of Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This essay proposes the practice of window shopping, systematically switching between various modes of inquiry to understand and evaluate evidence of student learning in interdisciplinary courses. Because interdisciplinarity by nature is epistemologically flexible and often yields fluid subject matter content, it can complicate (and dissuade) scholars from undertaking SoTL. This essay addresses this problem, particularly in respect to the issue of ‘novice-stry’. In addition, it offers window shopping as a practice that can support instructors grappling with what constitutes actual ‘data’ of substantive interdisciplinary learning intimately connected to local contexts and pedagogic reasoning.

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Introduction

By now, Boyer's (1990) call for higher education in America to construct a new paradigm for scholarship, one that would include a scholarship of teaching, has become somewhat commonplace. So too has Shulman and Hutchings’ (1999) reconfiguration of the parameters and possibilities of Boyer's vision to focus on student learning. In fact, as Woodhouse (2010) recently noted, the "[p]romotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has become a movement in higher education” (p. 1). This is not surprising given the pressure across the secondary and post-secondary landscapes for improved student learning and outcomes. What is surprising is that SoTL remains squarely centered on, in one form or another, disciplinary subject matter and learning. Given the initial impetus in advancing SoTL, this is understandable; however, it is also puzzling. Increasingly in the United States, administrators and educators have begun to grapple with global issues and to influence policy agendas by working across disciplinary boundaries; and they have called for undergraduate curriculum to better prepare students to undertake such work (Klein, 2010). Their call goes beyond valuing established programs or centers for area studies to include new specializations and majors, such as Global Studies and Muslim Studies. Still, with few exceptions, the scholarship of interdisciplinary teaching and learning writ large in undergraduate education remains curiously silent.

In part, this silence may be attributable to SoTL's own epistemological predisposition to approach the teaching and learning of subject matter as intimately tied to disciplinary knowledge structures. This is most readily seen in its informing concepts and ideas, such as pedagogical content knowledge, signature pedagogies, and disciplinary styles, and its alliances with the professional disciplinary communities (Shulman, 1987 and 2005; Huber and Morreale, 2002). In part, though, this silence may rise from the very messiness of interdisciplinarity, a messiness that is itself grounded in an epistemological quagmire (Klein, 1996; 2001; 2010). Interdisciplinary courses that intentionally cross, blur, or bend disciplinary boundaries often result in fluid subject matter content (Tremonte and Racioppi,
Further complicating this matter is that different conceptualizations (and models) of interdisciplinarity yield different expectations of course content. Numerous scholars (Lattuca, Voight, and Fath, 2004; Boix Mansilla and Dawes Duraising, 2007) have noted that interdisciplinary teaching content is connected to the model of interdisciplinarity enacted in a course. That is, while there are some common expectations of outcomes in all interdisciplinary courses (e.g. helping students develop multiple perspectives), the particular substance of course learning differs depending upon the particular conceptualization of interdisciplinarity held by the instructor. Such fluidity can make evidence of effective pedagogical practice and student learning more difficult to identify, assess and document.

Embedded in this messiness, however, may be yet another reason for this silence, one that we should not lose sight of as SoTL matures as a field: fear of ‘novice-stry’. Even if we as teachers and scholars are persuaded by Shulman’s principled arguments—persuaded that a scholarship of teaching is qualitatively different from scholarly teaching, or different in kind from extant representations and discourses on teaching and pedagogy—we may hesitate to undertake such work for fear and loathing of being a novice again; of having to master new theories of and methodologies for investigating ‘learning.’ Since one’s ethos within the academic universe traditionally turns on a performance of competency, it can be difficult to set aside the deep-seated stance that holds credentials of knowledge expertise as its prerequisite. This latter point tends to be one of the more daunting and fearful aspects of undertaking a scholarship of teaching project: the need to become accustomed to alien forms of inquiry without falling prey to the trap of having to immediately master entire corpi of scholarship. Even those practitioners who regularly study their own teaching often feel anxiety towards ‘tooling up’ in new subject areas and literature. That is, even before navigating the fear of engaging in a scholarship that falls outside the norm in the academy (i.e. outside the parameters of the traditional faculty reward system), practitioners must enter the conversation.

For those of us who regularly teach courses situated in the cross-roads, the pressure of novice-stry often associated with SoTL can be particularly sharp. At play are longstanding biases towards what constitutes expertise and legitimate knowledge within institutional sites and professional communities. These biases are articulated most clearly in the dominant metaphors in discourses on the differences between disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. Disciplinary work is often “signified by the metaphor of deepening along a vertical axis” while interdisciplinary work is “usually depicted along the horizontal axis of breadth” (Klein, 1996, p. 212): one yields specialized knowledge, the other general knowledge. Such metaphors signify the extent to which interdisciplinary teaching on the undergraduate level can be miscast as lacking in substantive content or as a-epistemological, even amid the rise of calls for interdisciplinary collaborations in research and development. Consequently, the fear of novice-stry in undertaking SoTL is compounded within the politics of interdisciplinarity.

How then might those of us engaged in interdisciplinary teaching and learning on the undergraduate level be persuaded to undertake SoTL? What strategies might enable us to negotiate the epistemological fluidity of interdisciplinarity (Klein 1996; Lattuca 2001), and, at the same time, navigate the fear of novice-stry? That is, what strategies might best help us fashion a scholarship of interdisciplinary teaching and learning?

A Case for Window Shopping

I would suggest one way to fashion such a scholarship is to embrace the idea of *window shopping*: to try on (and try out) various methodological masks and guises; to dress in...
other disciplines’ and inter-disciplines’ clothes, with the intent of identifying a style appropriate to a given interdisciplinary context. This is not to suggest we can be cavalier or unsystematic in appropriating methods and methodologies, but rather that we should be open to and playful when first undertaking a scholarship of interdisciplinary teaching and learning project. To begin with, such shopping helps us recognize that just as the interdisciplinary body borrows heavily from, even changes, disciplinary epistemologies and modes of inquiry, so too does our teaching of this body. Window shopping illuminates the ways in which the object of study—interdisciplinary teaching and learning—can change in different lights and locales. That is, trying on different methods for gathering and analyzing data for evidence of student learning can give rise to new questions about the very content of that learning, thus help us navigate the epistemological messiness of interdisciplinary subject matter. In this regard, window shopping foregrounds the ways in which epistemological beliefs about and stances toward interdisciplinarity inform and shape course content, pedagogic practice, and student learning (Dezure, 2010). Most importantly, though, window shopping can lessen fears of novice-stry by helping us wear the seemingly heavy robes of learning theory.

Admittedly, window shopping has a somewhat tarnished reputation, given its associations with consumer culture and spectacle. Literary scholars, historians, sociologists and cultural critics alike have been quick to critique the ways in which shopping and shopping spaces, from the Paris arcades and grand department stores of the nineteenth century to the ubiquitous shopping malls of the twentieth century, wrought significant changes in contemporary social relations and subjectivities (Benjamin, 1999; Debord, 2004; Morris, 1998; Friedberg, 1994; Rappaport, 2001). Scholars have been no less intent in scrutinizing these changes in an era marked by global flows of commodities (via the screen or in virtual space), though they do so within a new and distinctive calculus. Yet, as de Certeau (1984) has noted of everyday practices in general, window shopping can be a productive activity—one that repositions the ‘consumer’ as an active agent.

In his seminal work, The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau theorizes how everyday practices can function strategically or tactically. Drawing a distinction between the two, de Certeau notes that strategies are utilized by institutions to structure power relations within spaces or environments while tactics are employed by individuals to resist or to open new spaces within these strategic formations. Driven by desire as much as by need, concerned with aesthetics as well as economics, the ‘shopper’ can appropriate various tactics in the service of gazing, selecting and buying. For example, I can be drawn by the look as well as the functionality of a piece of clothing or an accessory. These desires and needs will shift when I try on the various items, wearing it on my own body. The scarf that is so carefully tied around the mannequin in the window can be draped upon my own shoulders, its reflection in the store window replaced with my own reflection in the full length mirror. If I step sideways and glance again, I will see all attributes of this item anew—its colors, its shape, its texture—and I will see my body anew. Each act or gesture that I make in doing so is intimately bound up with my prior experiences in wearing (or not wearing) scarves, and with my future ones. Window shopping sharpens, then, my sense of style by foregrounding what I already own and wear against some new knowledge or intuition.

Within the contours of interdisciplinary teaching window shopping functions similarly—providing a literal as well as metaphoric path into undertaking the scholarship of teaching and learning. It affords a way to try on different modes or forms of pedagogic inquiry, to experiment with mixed methods for gathering evidence of student learning, without the expectation of extra-disciplinary expertise. But it does so with an expectation of building a knowledge base and repertoire relevant to the local context. Subsequently, an everyday
practice in de Certeau’s understanding gives rise to meta-awareness and critical engagement of different systems of studying teaching and learning to determine which is most appropriate to the precise interdisciplinarity.

To an extent, window shopping builds on the vibrant tradition of border crossing already existent in the SoTL community. As numerous scholars have noted, those engaged in SoTL regularly borrow theoretical ideas or methodological practices from one another in an effort to document student learning. Historians turn to sociologists; literary critics turn to anthropologists; biologists turn to psychologists. Informal talk about teaching practice gives way to systematic appropriations of one another’s disciplinary concepts, theories and methods, which produce hybrid models for studying teaching and learning. Mills and Huber (2005) refer to this exchange as ‘trading’. Drawing on historian of physics Peter Galison’s (1997) concept of the trading zone, Mills and Huber argue that “in the trading zones of academe, analytical concepts or methodological approaches can be used in very different ways and given sharply contrasting meanings and values as they are translated between communities” (p. 11). They go on to note that such a zone “opens up a conceptual space for exchange of ideas and methodologies between/among scholars in different disciplines” (pp. 11-12).

While functioning similarly, however, window shopping is also different in kind from the trading zone or trading: it does not name the conceptual space of SoTL as much as identify one specific practice—a tactic—within that space. Nor does it intimate the same level reciprocity or obligations of a trade or exchange; rather, it privileges multiple options at once. Additionally, because window shopping is a recursive as well as tactical maneuver, it breaks the presumed linear trajectory of undertaking SoTL proper, a logic which presumes linear movement from question to data to analysis to argument. It is this latter point that is most relevant to pursuing a scholarship of interdisciplinary teaching and learning: the need to be flexible and open amid epistemological fluidity. Or, as Box Mansilla and Dawes Duraising (2007) note in their discussion of assessing interdisciplinary learning, there is a need to identify what constitutes substantive learning in a given context (p. 217). Only then can we identify evidence of the specific instances of interdisciplinary learning.

The following section offers a sustained case for window shopping as practice—a tactic—for alleviating the fear of novice-stry, and for navigating the epistemological quagmire in enacting SoTL in interdisciplinary contexts. In so doing, it offers a prelude into the specifics of documenting student learning and proffering such evidence to the rigors of peer-review and dissemination. But it is a necessary prelude.

**A Case of Window Shopping**

Like many whose teaching is interdisciplinary in character, the pedagogic enactment of any interdisciplinary approach often differs from that taken in my own research in visual cultural politics. This shift is driven by two obvious considerations: the local context, an undergraduate college of public affairs, and the individual course objectives. With a keen interest in cultural, economic and social dimensions of national and international politics, most of the students are unmistakably aware of the power of visual media in a global world. However, they often have difficulty reconciling the study of such texts, particularly film, with the study of policy. Their predisposition is to regard moving-image texts as a performance of a case or as transparent evidence of an event rather than constitutive of broader meaning. Simply taking an ‘interdisciplinary’ approach to teaching a course that integrates documentary or fiction films does not necessarily make this predisposition less problematic, nor does it automatically engender the level of visual competence required in such study.
Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach taken in any course must be aligned with expected learning objectives. For example, in a course on “Cultures and Politics in Comparative Perspective,” the goal of taking an interdisciplinary approach is conceptual—to help students negotiate a diverse range of disciplinary perspectives and texts with the intent of seeing themselves as agents of knowledge production. As such, the course has no “compelling disciplinary focus” (Lattuca, Voight, and Fath, 2004, p. 26), but rather seeks to advance students’ capacities “to integrate knowledge and modes of thinking in two or more disciplines or established areas of expertise to produce cognitive advancement” in problem solving (Boix Mansilla and Dawes Duraising 2007, p. 219). Integrating film texts into a course such as “Film, History and Nation,” in which the interdisciplinary approach is more synthetic differs significantly though the pedagogic challenges appear to be the same. In this class students are asked to negotiate discrete disciplinary concepts and theories, such as representation, without erasing disciplinary boundaries; however, their predisposition towards film—towards the visual—remains the same (Lattuca, Voight, and Fath, 2004).

SoTL offered me a way to approach these challenges as productive puzzles about the particular instances of substantive interdisciplinary learning rather than as isolated ‘teaching problems’. But it did so only after I got over the fears of being a novice again—the fear of being overwhelmed by choices in identifying and collecting ‘data’ that could provide evidence of learning that often occurs amid unsettled or emerging subject matter content. Window shopping gave me permission to try different ways of gathering evidence of student learning without first understanding how it fit into my inquiry—that is, without, actually, comprehending what constituted ‘data’ in the given case. As I rehearsed wearing these methodological masks, I acquired new vocabularies, such as axial coding and triangulation, or distributed cognition and multiple intelligences. As I acquired new vocabularies, I could re-frame (anew) the object of study. Throughout this process I was working on multiple planes and beyond my immediate capabilities—grappling with emerging complexities of learning theory and interdisciplinary epistemologies (Vygotsky, 1978).

That is, even without a robust understanding of these methods, I began to discern patterns in the data that were evidentiary of learning. I conducted structured interviews without the critical eye of the sociologist or journalist; I tried on the clothes of the ethnographer without having the depth of knowledge or familiarity of a practitioner of ethnography; I performed close readings of student work without moving into formal discourse analysis: in each case, the data revealed new facets of interdisciplinary teaching and learning. These new facets or glimpses at this body in turn raised new questions about teaching and learning that were manageable and researchable. Thus, the value of the data lay in its potential to help me ask clearer and more cogent SoTL questions—ones keyed into the epistemological undergirdings and context.

For example, for many years I believed I had successfully negotiated the problem of teaching filmic literacy in first-year writing seminars. Though these seminars were content-driven, they are not necessarily confined by discipline-specific epistemologies or ways of knowing, or discipline-specific rhetorics. Subsequently, students’ abilities to recognize the relationship between formal visual composition and narrative meaning seemed to be rooted in lack of vocabulary and conceptual frame for engaging in filmic analysis. Students in upper-division interdisciplinary courses had similar difficulties; however, in these instances, providing vocabulary or conceptual frames of analysis alone were insufficient to the main objective of the course, which was to interrogate the ways in which filmic narratives constructed a particular understanding or type of knowledge about culture/s or cultural politics or about history/ies or historical representations. In this instance, students needed also to recognize the importance of viewing practices (of scopic regimes), both in moments of historicized reception or contemporary encounters. SoTL offered a way to investigate this
pedagogic puzzle as a concrete, researchable problem in teaching by forcing me to reconsider what the ‘evidence’ of such learning looked like; and window shopping afforded a concrete tactic for gathering data that might be analyzed as evidence, in this instance interviews with students. A practice familiar to sociologists and anthropologists (among other disciplinary practitioners), the interview process was novel (and foreign) to my own interdisciplinary repertoire. Yet transcripts of taped interviews on a range of questions (from the physical sites in which students watched films to their knowledge of the visual techniques and technologies employed) yielded unexpected insights into the teaching and learning dilemma.

While students often lacked basic vocabulary or theoretical frames for analyzing the formal aspects of filmic texts, they did have established structures for viewing grounded in prior viewing expectations and experiences. That is, that the linkage between affective responses and cognitive structures was present even if in nascent form. As an instructor I needed to tap into these structures, designing assignments or tasks that would support their acquiring an elastic and generative heuristic for themselves. Not surprisingly, the interview findings prompted me to ask additional questions about student learning—and about SoTL—including pondering whether or not the learning that I expected students to engage in may not necessarily be interdisciplinary.

Following the trajectory of this window shopping, I next ‘tried on’ the garbs of the ethnographer asking this question in a specific course, “Cultures and Politics in Comparative Perspective.” Again, my choice of ethnography was an informed one, even though it was not a method in my immediate repertoire. Aware of the pitfalls of ethnographic research and the ethical issues of participant-observation, and of the contested status of an insider-outsider, I nonetheless produced a set of field notes concerning two specific classroom rituals: small group discussions and in-class viewings of films. At the same time, I continued reading widely in the literature on ethnographic methods in studying classroom practice. And as is common in SoTL, I began to seek out colleagues whose research directly involved the use of such methods, including colleagues in sociology and composition studies. Novice status gave me permission to produce a working thin/thick description in Geertizan fashion, one that, even if flawed, illuminated the ways in which the ‘data’ could reveal concrete patterns and cognitive turns in interdisciplinary learning and visual culture (Geertz, 1973; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

A cursory description of student responses to viewing documentaries, and subsequent small-group discussions of these documentaries, established how students’ prior experiences in watching films not only structured their initial frame for viewing moving images, it also structured their acquisition of subject matter knowledge. Beyond discussing how watching films in class shifted protocols and behavior, students noted their own expertise in their major fields of study influenced what they saw (and heard) on screen. More to the point, disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary epistemologies governed their expectations: international relations majors saw something very different from social relations majors who saw something very different from political theory majors, etc. Though all connected the film as text to the broader question of cultural politics, they initially linked processes of visual analysis to various class readings (and disciplinary perspectives) in myopic ways.

As the semester progressed, and students were forced to confront the implicit disciplinary biases of their responses in the small-group discussions, they were better able to generate integrated conceptual frames for approaching issues, culture and politics from transdisciplinary perspectives. This pattern emerged most clearly in the language they used in discussions, as recorded in my field notes. Certain words and concepts signaled that the
acquisition of competence in filmic analysis often occurs simultaneously with (and is intertwined with) the acquisition of emerging interdisciplinary subject matter. In a course such as “Cultures and Politics in Comparative Perspective,” which sought to enact a conceptual interdisciplinary, markers of learning of subject matter content could also be markers of visual or filmic competence.

What window shopping afforded in this instance was a tactic for moving forward without seeing or knowing an end point—hence it opened up several paths into SoTL research proper. For example, what I could not determine when wearing the guise of an ethnographer was how, even when acknowledging positionality as the instructor, my own interjections affected the students’ small-group conversations. Nor did I yet understand—though I knew the terms—how to cross-validate my findings in this instance by setting one set of data against another. But because window shopping is experimental and structured play, and involved meta-reflection on emerging design, it continuously generated researchable SoTL queries. In this instance, my descriptions of classroom discussions and in-class viewings prompted me to ask whether or not collaborative pedagogy engendered specific competencies in interdisciplinary thinking when studying visual culture.

In an attempt to think on what data might yield an answer to this question in terms of evidence of student learning, I next tried on the disciplinary style that I was trained in: close reading. As Bass and Linkon (2008) argue, close reading “refers to the full range of critical practices that literary scholars bring to bear in analyzing texts” (p. 247). But it is a theoretically inflected practice for scholars beyond literary studies, including interdisciplinary scholars. And while close readings seemed counter to the dominant methods embraced by the SoTL community in its early years, they were, in fact, always essential to processes of looking at student work—a key feature of SoTL. In this instance of window shopping, close readings of electronic dialogues in “Cultures and Politics in Comparative Perspective” revealed patterns of epistemological reflexivity and multilogical thinking, two of the hallmarks of critical interdisciplinary thinking (Klein, 1996; Lattuca, 2001). That is, close readings of student work revealed a deep understanding of processes of knowledge production and positionality when studying cultural politics. These patterns—marked by appropriate use of concepts—constituted demonstrable evidence of student learning that was explicitly linked to substantive interdisciplinary course content. This evidence yielded significant findings that could be presented as an argument that could be subject to peer-review and publically disseminated—the objective of engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Each of these window shopping expeditions afforded me the time and space in which to approach the study of teaching and learning in a systematic yet playful manner—to enter into the intellectual and critical space of SoTL without yet understanding it. And while they may have tangentially shifted my teaching practice, they did so only in relation to the type of learning that was made visible—to the learning that was concrete and documentable.

**Beyond Window Shopping, or, the Critical Shopper**

Eventually the practice of window shopping gives way to the critical shopper: a scholar adept and rehearsed in identifying, documenting and publically disseminating evidence of interdisciplinary learning and understanding across contexts. Before then, however, window shopping makes available to those of us who may feel constrained by our (inter)disciplinary expertise—and who fear novice-stry—the means by which we can approach and undertake SoTL. Window shopping, thus, is not an act of cavalierly embracing multiple disciplinary or interdisciplinary methods in the study of practice; rather it is a practice for systematically
experimenting with multiple modes of inquiry when first grappling with issues of ‘data’ and/or ‘evidence’ of student learning amid epistemological fluidity. It enables the instructor who teaches in interdisciplinary arenas to be both more reflective in his/her own teaching, recognizing when and how the ground of interdisciplinary learning shifts, and to recognize what constitutes visible evidence of substantive interdisciplinary learning. In so doing it helps us deflect the fears of novice-stry and undertaking SoTL.

References


Notes

i My deepest thanks to Karen Fitts of West Chester University for her generous readings of and helpful suggestions for this article.

ii I situate this process of discovery in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).