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## Student Learning and Conference Design: The Case of Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf

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# Student Learning and Conference Design: The Case of Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf

## Abstract

Academic conferences are events geared to disciplinary specialization, and much of the SoTL literature regarding scholarly gatherings addresses their benefits for graduate student apprenticeship. In our organization of the 22nd Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf, we explored other forms of pedagogy to augment an academic professionalization approach. In particular, we created opportunities for cross-disciplinary teaching and learning, which have particular potential for Humanities students who may end up applying their discipline-specific training in non-academic contexts and in unexpected ways. This paper explores the possibilities and limitations of the cross-disciplinary initiatives that we developed for Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf. Inspired by the interdisciplinarity of the early 20th century British author Virginia Woolf and the current critical movement known as the New Modernist Studies, we outline the theories behind our approach to conference pedagogy and reflect upon our intentions and methods. We also assess learning outcomes in relation to both apprenticeship and non-traditional models of conference-based instructional design, and consider the institutional structures and practices that both enable and limit the scope of cross-disciplinary research and its dissemination at the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty levels. By moving away from the field of literary studies and sharing our scholarly teaching perspective in the context of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, we attempt to put into motion the potentially transformative disciplinary boundary-crossings that motivated the 2012 Woolf Conference.

Les colloques universitaires sont des événements axés sur la spécialisation des disciplines et une grande partie des publications en ACEA concernant les rencontres savantes traitent de leurs avantages pour l'apprentissage des étudiants de cycles supérieurs. Lors de la préparation de notre XX<sup>e</sup> Colloque international annuel sur Virginia Woolf, nous avons exploré d'autres formes de pédagogie afin d'élargir l'approche de professionnalisation académique. En particulier, nous avons créé des opportunités d'enseignement et d'apprentissage pluridisciplinaire qui présentent un potentiel particulier pour les étudiants des humanités qui vont peut-être finir par mettre en application leur formation spécifique à leur discipline à des contextes non-académiques et de manières inattendues. Cet article explore les possibilités et les limites des initiatives pluridisciplinaires que nous avons développées pour notre colloque intitulé Woolf Interdisciplinaire / Pluridisciplinaire. Inspirés par l'interdisciplinarité de l'auteure britannique du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, Virginia Woolf, et par le mouvement critique actuel qu'on appelle Études du nouveau modernisme, nous présentons les théories sous-jacentes à notre approche de la pédagogie des colloques et proposons une réflexion sur nos intentions et nos méthodes. Nous évaluons également les résultats d'apprentissage par rapport à l'apprentissage lui-même et par rapport aux modèles non traditionnels de conception de l'enseignement basé sur les cours magistraux et prenons en considération les structures et les pratiques institutionnelles qui favorisent mais qui limitent également l'étendue de la recherche pluridisciplinaire et sa diffusion aux niveaux du premier cycle, des cycles supérieurs et des professeurs. En nous éloignant du domaine des études littéraires et en partageant notre perspective d'enseignement intellectuel dans le contexte de l'Avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage, nous tentons de mettre en mouvement les possibilités de franchissement des limites disciplinaires transformateur qui ont motivé le colloque sur Virginia Woolf de 2012.

## Keywords

conference design, conference pedagogy, cross-disciplinary, Humanities, New Modernist Studies

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**Cover Page Footnote**

This article is indebted to the work of many students and scholars, including Michael J. Horacki and Jasmine Liska. We thank the editors for their encouragement and our CJSOTL reviewers for their detailed and instructive comments. We are also grateful to the Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity at the University of Saskatchewan and the award of a Linking Fellowship (April 2013), and to the Centre for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence at MacEwan University and their funding of a Research Assistantship (June-August 2013).

Scholarly conferences offer a range of opportunities for academics to share and to be exposed to new research. They have significant potential for students as well, both graduate and undergraduate, and represent a unique venue through which organizers can explore pedagogical theories and practices. While the aim of many conference-related teaching and learning situations is professionalization, where less-experienced academics acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become members of a discipline-specific community, recent studies suggest also the benefits of creating educational experiences for students that cross discursive boundaries or integrate different disciplinary perspectives. In addition to leading to productive research outcomes, cross-disciplinary knowledge creation and dissemination may have rewards for students whose career paths do not lie within the academy or the conference community. As instructors in departments of English, we recognize that many of our undergraduates and even Masters students will come to use the knowledge they develop through their Humanities degrees in ways that bear only passing resemblance to the scholarly work of our doctoral candidates and faculty colleagues. How might an academic conference strike a balance, then, between discipline-specific pedagogical strategies and cross-disciplinary teaching and learning situations in order to serve a wider pedagogical function? What would be the results of student engagement with cross-disciplinary research, and how could those experiences prepare individuals for varied intellectual pursuits? To what extent could such applications of knowledge within a conference community affect our understanding of the continuing role of both disciplinary boundaries and interdisciplinary practices?

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf represented an opportunity to explore some of the possibilities and limitations of cross-disciplinary pedagogical initiatives in a conference setting. An event centred upon a British author whose early twentieth-century fiction is studied regularly in departments of English, the Woolf Conference arose primarily from the field of literary studies. However, Woolf's political writings intersect with the Social Sciences and with programs such as Women's and Gender Studies, and she has become a focus for scholars who participate in what has been termed the New Modernist Studies—a field of research that draws upon discourses from English Literature, History, Philosophy, Sociology, Economics, and Psychology to analyse and contextualize artistic production from the early-twentieth century. By choosing *Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf* as the title and theme of the conference, our goals as organizers were to encourage and extend the development of cross-disciplinary scholarship that sheds light on Woolf and her circle, and to offer a site in which students could use varied disciplinary methods to explore Woolf's work in relation to their own interests<sup>1</sup>. While our third goal—to connect with local communities through the conference and its related activities—was tangential to the academic core of the planning, the common impulse was to involve a heterogeneous group of learners and researchers in order to broaden the scope and significance of a scholarly event<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the co-organizers of the conference, for whose work Kathryn and Ann act as representatives: Hilary Clark, Marie Lovrod, Ella Ophir, and administrative assistants Jasmine Liska and Terriann Walling. While not one of the organizers, but rather an undergraduate research assistant through MacEwan University, co-author Taylor Witiw's identification and analysis of studies on conference pedagogy and cross-disciplinary teaching and learning are, like his written contributions, integral to this piece.

<sup>2</sup> Our thanks go to Professor Mark Hussey of Pace University and to the larger community of the International Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf. It is their longstanding commitment to diversity, cross-disciplinarity, innovative pedagogy, and artistic and scholarly excellence that prompted us to explore the possibilities of conference organization.

This paper is a consideration of disciplinarity and of the cross-disciplinary teaching and learning situations designed for the 2012 International Conference on Virginia Woolf. Using a narrative form, we outline the theories that inform our approach to conference pedagogy and reflect upon our intentions, methods, and results. In discussing the pedagogical initiatives that led up to and took place at the conference, and in examining quantitative and qualitative outcomes of student work arising from Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf, our aim is to evaluate the utility of our strategies in relation to student learning and consider the implications for the interdisciplinary field of modernism itself. In a sense, the paper represents a response to our finding that the more transformative objectives of the conference could not be realized except through the continuing and often unforeseeable cross-disciplinary practices of individuals. Such a finding may complicate assumptions regarding the impact of interdisciplinary critical movements such as the New Modernist Studies, especially as they relate to fields in and beyond the Humanities. Nevertheless, by moving away from the more familiar conventions of literary studies in order to share this scholarly teaching perspective, we are ourselves attempting to put into motion the cross-disciplinary impulses of the conference in the context of scholarship on teaching and learning<sup>3</sup>.

Academic conferences are events in which disciplinary focus and specificity are both celebrated and enabled. In our field, English Literature, conferences are not merely era-specific, but also at times author-specific, as exemplified by the Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf. Such academic gatherings reflect the notion that disciplinary learning tends towards specialization: as learners progress from one degree to the next within a certain area of study, their qualifications and objects of inquiry become increasingly focused (Cohen-Miller, 2012; Reybold & Halx, 2012). There is significant pedagogical value, then, attached to student attendance at conferences, with benefits including student exposure to current research (Perlmutter, 2008), the development and dissemination of student projects (Chapman et al., 2009; Hyland & Kranzow, 2012; Johnson & Green, 2007; Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; Meyers et al., 2007; Underwood & Wald, 1995), and increased student participation in a community of practice (Cherrstrom, 2012; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Ghosh & Githens, 2009; Haggerty, 2010). In this light, the academic conference can be regarded as a crucial stage in an individual researcher's career trajectory, which is why Chapman, Wiessner, Morton, Fire, Jones, and Majekodunmi (2009) emphasize the need for conference organizers to "see student perspectives and identify student needs as part of planning processes" (p. 18).

Much of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature that addresses the pedagogical possibilities of academic conferences focuses on professionalization and "the enculturation of student research apprentices" (Mabrouk, 2009, p. 1335). In other words, the conference is part of the longer apprenticeship of graduate and sometimes undergraduate students who are introduced to the methods, practices, and communities associated with a specific discipline and often a specific field. Important here is the role of expert mentorship, where academics with established positions in the community—supervisors, association leaders, regular attendees—can connect newcomers to the larger group, provide practical advice on issues such as travel and funding (McGuire, Simpson, & Duke, 2009), and guide students towards participating in the scholarly and social activities typical of the event. Conference

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<sup>3</sup> We are influenced by the definition of scholarly teaching offered by Potter and Kustra (2011): "teaching grounded in critical reflection using systematically and strategically-gathered evidence, related and explained by well-reasoned theory and philosophical understanding, with the goal of maximizing learning through effective teaching" (p. 3).

organizers in particular can provide students with valuable insight into the workings of institutions by enabling assistants and volunteers to gain administrative experience throughout the planning process (Holyoke, 2007). These forms of mentorship help students become familiar with the basic conventions of conferencing: how panels and presentations are scheduled, what etiquette is expected at sessions and social events, or which working groups or scholarly associations might be useful to join. Equally important is guidance relating to the student's own research agenda. Creating and submitting a proposal, abstract, or paper; understanding the function of presentation techniques; participating for the first time in seminars or panels; responding to questions or comments in a constructive manner: these are skills developed through the experiential learning that takes place at conferences and that is facilitated by experienced members of the community.

The mentorship / apprenticeship model of academic professionalization has limitations, however. First, it implies that knowledge is transferred through a top-down dynamic, from senior to junior community member, rather than being generated and exchanged in reciprocal or collaborative relationships too. Second, the quality of the apprenticeship would seem to depend upon the professionalism, reputation, and even social skills of the mentor(s) in question (Thompson, Brookins-Fisher, Kerr, & O'Boyle 2012). In addition, the guidance itself is contingent upon the established academic's willingness and ability to mentor. In a modification of this more individualistic approach to mentoring, Ravn and Elsborg (2011) suggest the need for "a competent host or facilitator" who would, as community leader or conference organizer, establish techniques in advance designed to "increase participant involvement and learning" (p. 6). The value of consistent and reliable support for students is also identified by Chapman et al. (2009); their study presents a number of strategies for productive student involvement. These include conference courses, proposal creation sessions, opportunities for faculty-student research collaborations, and planned dialogues among established and new conference attendees (Chapman et al., 2009, p. 18). Such student-centred conference organization can use the very infrastructure of the event to assist less-experienced scholars as they encounter current debates in the field and develop the knowledge and skills they need to become full participants in their discipline.

Even student-centred mentorship models posit, however, that the individual's successful transition into a professional academic context is predicated upon his or her ability "to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge" that make up an existing academic culture (Gardner & Barnes, 2007, p. 371). Such an approach risks privileging acculturation over innovation or productive change within a field, which can undermine the advantages of specialized disciplinary training. Students who are not intending to embark upon a career in the conference's particular area may feel excluded (Chapman et al., 2009), and new scholars may be tacitly or overtly encouraged to adapt their research interests and career goals in order to conform to the established practices of both the conference and the community. Cohen-Miller (2012) points out that specialization, the goal of scholarly initiation, "can lead to problematic characteristics of disciplines such as missing a broader context, tunnel vision, overlooking gaps in the research, or the inability to address 'comprehensively complex problems' (Repko, 2008, pp. 28-31)" (p. 197). Designing an array of teaching and learning initiatives that complement an apprenticeship model of student conference participation could prevent the drawbacks, then, of what Chapman et al. (2009) describe as "disciplinary entrenchment" (p. 15).

For Cohen-Miller (2012), the aim of such initiatives in a conference setting would be to facilitate "integrative, exploratory, and collaborative work" (p. 196); that is, the kind of scholarly

innovation associated with “new learning,” or “learning that provides new insight, diverse theoretical point of view, or unique or uncommon conceptual frameworks” (Wiessner, Hatcher, Chapman, & Storberg-Walker 2008, p. 369). While these are ideal outcomes of conference pedagogy, the emphasis on innovation connects powerfully to the “creativity” that Kandiko (2012) sees as being fostered “through a combination of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches” to research in institutions of higher learning (p. 191). It is a combination that Ritchey and Bott (2010) also encourage: in their experience, it helps “students in identifying cross-curriculum connections” at the same time that it reveals the value and applicability of a student’s primary disciplinary training (p. 265). For Viteri and Tobler (2009), the goal of cross-disciplinary learning in a conference setting—a form of learning that, in their study, is grounded in the student’s personal experiences as well as his or her academic experiences or coursework—is to enable students “to become active participants in re-shaping the discipline” through their individual synthesis of different discourses and methods (p. 36). In other words, productive and innovative research, whether at the undergraduate or graduate or faculty level, can arise from the new and distinctive intersections of disciplinary knowledge made possible by academic gatherings. And this is the approach we took as conference organizers: to facilitate an exchange of cross-disciplinary research at the 2012 Woolf Conference through the traditional conduits of keynotes, panels, and roundtables as well as through pedagogical initiatives, which would enable students to participate in different kinds of learning experiences, integrate different forms of knowledge, and find intersections between their own interests, Virginia Woolf’s interests, and the interests of scholars currently working on Woolf.

Held June 7-10, 2012 at the University of Saskatchewan, Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf was the 22<sup>nd</sup> iteration of the International Conference on Virginia Woolf. An annual event, the conference explores the work and life of this early twentieth-century British author and public intellectual. The diverse strands of cultural knowledge that Woolf wove into her writings speak to her place within the multifaceted Bloomsbury Group, a circle of prominent artists, philosophers, cultural theorists, publishers, and policy makers that included Vanessa Bell, Bertrand Russell, Roger Fry, and John Maynard Keynes. Not surprisingly, Woolf has been read in relation to the critical movement known as the New Modernist Studies, which addresses the connections among early twentieth-century literature, visual art, film, music, dance, drama, and fashion contextualized by the socioeconomic, political, and cultural debates of the day. As Friedman (2010) points out, literary modernism like Woolf’s frequently reveals its incorporation of strategies and subjects from multiple disciplines, and modernism’s artistic integrations of disparate fields of knowledge call for similar disciplinary boundary-crossings on the part of scholars analysing its implications. In our development of the conference and its pedagogical elements, the interdisciplinarity of Woolf’s literary modernism and of the New Modernist Studies was our inspiration—and we found their correlative in studies of cross-disciplinary research and teaching and learning.

Like modernist literature and art, cross-disciplinary research both invokes and traverses areas of specialization, as different disciplinary practices are brought into contact. Caughie (2009) writes in her introduction to *Disciplining Modernism* that “Professionalism requires discipline, a normalizing, codifying, discriminating apparatus that distinguishes one research agenda from another” (p. 6). Academic disciplines depend upon a “shared intelligibility” (p. 6) or a common group of distinguishing features that has been formalized by its practitioners and by “the institutional structures that govern the production of disciplinary knowledge” (Thacker, 2012, p. 609). Disciplines not only “demarcate the boundaries of scholarship”; they also establish

“templates for acceptable knowledge and knowing” (Reybold & Halx, 2012, pp. 323-324), which are the grounds for the apprenticeship model of conference pedagogy. Cross-disciplinary work both draws upon and pushes against the productive differences that exist between the disciplines as well as the institutional structures that underwrite their currency.

In such work, there is a tension between established academic practices and the individual application of those practices according to the unique needs or circumstances of a project. For instance, while transdisciplinarity is often characterized as relating to “theories, concepts, or methods” that “transcend disciplines and are therefore applicable in many fields” (Lattuca, 2003, p. 7), the application of such theoretical, conceptual, or methodological perspectives is driven by its context, which not only determines research outcomes but may also, in a reciprocal dynamic, modify the transdisciplinary framework invoked in the first place (Klein, 2010). Multidisciplinarity is similarly dynamic, though associated with the juxtaposition of varied disciplinary approaches in the pursuit of a common goal. An example would be “faculty from different disciplines working independently on different aspects of a project” (Collin, 2009, p.103). In contrast to the teamwork implied by multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity is viewed as an integration of methods, theories, and knowledges that have been drawn from more than one discipline (Borrego & Newsander, 2010): it is a “fusion” that may “create something that goes beyond what an individual discipline would achieve, and thus breaks new ground” (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011, p. 125). Cross-disciplinarity has value, then, for research questions requiring multifaceted responses that move beyond specific fields: “global issues” (Tremonte, 2011, p. 1), including “climate change, sustainability, energy, and public health” (Borrego & Newsander, 2010, p. 61), but also the “complex questions and problems” (Larson, Landers, & Begg, 2011, p. 38) that relate to local issues, such the affordability of higher education or the prevalence of violence against women in our communities<sup>4</sup>.

The possibilities of cross-disciplinarity in research, teaching and learning, and conference environments are stimulating, as we found in our experiences of planning and participating in *Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf*. Indeed, as a way to engage with the conceptual basis of the conference, we organized two roundtables, one to begin and the other to end the event, and invited faculty from different countries and kinds of institutions to discuss their experiences with cross-disciplinarity<sup>5</sup>. The first set of six panellists was asked to address questions related to “Interdisciplinarity and Institutional Practices” and the second to reflect upon “Interdisciplinarity and Pedagogical Practices.” Common themes emerged from these discussions. One was the shared sense of the value of cross-disciplinary work for researchers, teachers, and students alike. Among other benefits, cross-disciplinary teaching and research were viewed as enabling the clearer articulation of key terms and methods as they are invoked in larger academic contexts

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf addressed both of these social issues, and we used the conference as a way to bring that work into new focus. We formed two panels comprising community leaders and activists from Saskatoon who shared their experiences with conference attendees. One panel explored the topic of Access to Education and the strategies that different organizations employ in order to increase literacy and retention rates. The other centred on the Legacy of Sexual Abuse and the strategies that have been developed to end cycles of violence. The forums proved highly instructional: as one attendee noted anonymously on the feedback form, the speakers “got the audience to think about interdisciplinarity in a number of ways, especially as it relates to the lives of people ignored in the dominant discourses.”

<sup>5</sup> Invited speakers were Marlene Briggs (University of British Columbia), Pamela L. Caughie (Loyola University Chicago), Jeanne Dubino (Appalachian State University), Jana Funke (University of Exeter), Jane Goldman (University of Glasgow), Elizabeth Hull (Bethany College), Mark Hussey (Pace University), Marie Lovrod (University of Saskatchewan), Aurelea Mahood (Capilano University), Allan Pero (University of Western Ontario), Thaine Stearns (Sonoma State University), and Helen Wussow (Simon Fraser University).



and in specific fields of knowledge. The creation of new discursive frameworks or even new networks that opened up research, teaching, and learning possibilities was also cited as a productive outcome. A second theme, however, was a sense of the difficulties involved in cross-disciplinarity when it came to institutional structures. Job searches for recent Ph.D. graduates were viewed as involving challenges if the hiring units in question were not open to interdisciplinary doctoral degrees. For some tenure-track and tenured faculty, collaborative research and writing seemed to require a greater investment in time than a conventional Humanities model of single-authored publication, and productivity was seen to decrease as a result. For others working with departmental and college administration, multidisciplinary collaborations or interdisciplinary publishing venues were seen as more difficult to evaluate for merit, tenure, or promotion decisions. At the same time that interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaborations were being encouraged by a range of institutions, the administrative logistics of operating in cross-disciplinary contexts had not always been fully addressed.

The conference itself demonstrated the pull and push of these institutional impulses, and especially of the habituation to disciplinary thinking on the part of faculty and graduate students. A collective example is the response to our Call for Papers (CFP). The CFP had been intended to encourage a broad exchange of perspectives, listing a series of possible disciplines and fields that might prove productive to address in relation to Woolf, and inviting submissions from authors and visual artists, as well as community activists, administrators, independent scholars, teachers, and students. In many respects, the results were rewarding. Submissions for papers and panels included work on the arts (drawing, painting, dance, statuary, photography, drama, music), the sciences (ecology, botany, glaciology, medicine), the social sciences (economics, political studies, psychology, sociology), and the humanities (classics, literature, history, languages, linguistics, philosophy, religion, the digital humanities). We also attracted participants from beyond the academy—publishers, writers, painters, and the so-called “common readers” of Virginia Woolf—some of whom gave talks that reflected their own areas of expertise and knowledge. Even so, the vast majority of papers were presented by scholars from departments of English and Women’s and Gender Studies who drew primarily from the methods of literary studies. It was inevitable, perhaps, given Woolf’s centrality to the Humanities and her limited potential for other fields of inquiry; inevitable also, even with potential crossover, given our lack of familiarity with the networks and disciplinary conventions of non-Humanities fields.

Equally salient, though, is the fact that, in the discipline of English, the most common form of cross-disciplinary research is interdisciplinarity, where other fields of knowledge are subsumed under a model of close readings of texts. If students are trained to use this model in English courses and graduate work instead of multidisciplinary research methods, it may explain why only one paper out of more than 100 conference presentations spanned both the Humanities and Social Sciences. Taking the form of a dialogue, this talk enabled the two authors to provide separate as well as shared perspectives on a common issue<sup>6</sup>. And while our study is much too limited to make grand inferences regarding the state of cross-disciplinarity in literary studies, we note that the same concerns are reflected in critiques of the New Modernist Studies. This movement’s emergence in the late-1990s was seen to signal “a cultural turn in scholarly

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<sup>6</sup> The talk, “A healing centre of one’s own: Positioning Woolf’s legacy with respect to sustainable responses to child abuse,” was presented by Marie Lovrod, Coordinator of the Women’s and Gender Studies program at the University of Saskatchewan, and Karen Wood, a researcher, clinician, and Ph.D. student in Community Health and Epidemiology, also at the University of Saskatchewan.

approaches to modernism and a concerted effort to diversify the field” (McKible & Churchill, 2013, p. 429), and understandings of modernism have undergone “temporal, spatial, and vertical expansion” ever since, as scholars have come to recognize modernism’s longer history, its global presence, and its blurring of the divide between high and low culture (Mao & Walkowicz, 2008, p. 737). Nevertheless, and as Mao and Walkowicz indicate, it is “modernist literary scholarship” that remains at the core of the New Modernist Studies (p. 737). And while modernism is a field that “openly welcomes international, multicultural, and interdisciplinary approaches” (Sword, 2009, p. 471), boundary-crossings on the part of its scholars are sometimes limited, whether by a predominance of North American perspectives (Thacker, 2012), or by the underrepresentation of modernism’s racial diversity (McKible & Churchill, 2013), or by hesitations regarding what might constitute an appropriately academic field of inquiry (Sword, 2009).

In this context, the pedagogical aspects of Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf were opportunities not just for less experienced but also for less acculturated scholars to apply knowledge from different disciplines and perspectives and create new work on Woolf’s writing and life. To strike a balance between an apprenticeship model for students of English Literature and cross-disciplinary teaching and learning situations that might move students beyond literary analysis, the instructional design elements of the conference were not limited to the four days of the scholarly gathering. Instead, and working with the recommendations of Chapman et al. (2009) regarding student needs, we viewed the conference as a focal point in a longer series of related student research activities. This made a wide range of pedagogy possible as, on a logistical level, we could use the event and its prestige to leverage funding, to generate faculty interest and administrative buy-in, and to attract students through forms of both long- and short-term participation. By extending its temporal horizon to include research assistantships and graduate and undergraduate courses before, during, and after the conference, and by expanding its spatial boundaries through off-campus learning situations in conjunction with community partners, we could develop collaborative, cross-disciplinary instructional design over many months rather than restrict our pedagogical initiatives to a single moment.

The result of this approach was a variety of teaching and learning situations, which marked the conference as a multidisciplinary—if still largely a Humanities-based—event. Our initiatives entailed the following, listed in chronological order:

- Conference Pedagogy Project Research Assistantship, June-August 2011
- Conference Artist Position, June 2011-May 2012
- Conference Administrative Assistantship, September 2011-June 2012
- Conference Administrative Assistantship, January-August 2012
- ENG 805.3: Virginia Woolf, graduate course, Fall 2011, Department of English
- ARTH 258.3: Modernism in Art, undergraduate course, Fall 2011, Department of Art and Art History
- Student Director position and Theatre Production Assistantships, *Angel in the House*, conference play, May-June 2012, Department of Drama
- WGST 390.3: Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf, undergraduate conference course, May-June 2012, Women’s and Gender Studies Program
- Volunteer positions for graduate and undergraduate students, 5-10 June 2012
- “Professions for Women,” essay by Virginia Woolf adapted and performed by high school students, 9 June 2012, Drama program at Walter Murray Collegiate Institute

- “An Evening of Music and Film,” musical performance by the Jared Tehse Trio, 10 June 2012, Department of Music
- Undergraduate Research Assistantship, June-August 2013, Research Office (MacEwan University)
- Graduate Research Assistantship, August 2014, Department of English

Over 60 students<sup>7</sup> gained experience in discipline-specific as well as cross-disciplinary learning situations through these initiatives, from research on teaching strategies in support of two SoTL essays, to the creation and display of visual art in response to modernist works; from performances of music and drama at three separate venues, to the management of conference participants and their needs on-site and on-line; from registering and communicating with attendees before, during, and after the event, to developing proposals and presenting posters and papers.

While the above list illustrates how we diversified the conference’s pedagogical elements in relation to different student interests and needs, the following three examples provide a more detailed sense of some of our methods as they pertain to academic professionalization, non-academic professionalization, and cross-disciplinary undergraduate research respectively.

### **Example 1: Academic Professionalization, Graduate Level**

Given the benefits of the apprenticeship model of conference pedagogy, we viewed Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf as a way for graduate students to gain valuable academic experience. In keeping with the ethos of the Woolf academic community, we offered a reduced rate for students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty with sessional or adjunct positions, and we provided funding to offset travel costs in order to attract less-established scholars to our location in Western Canada. We also encouraged the participation of graduate students in the University of Saskatchewan’s Department of English, including paid positions that entailed hands-on participation in the long-term planning and on-site organization of conference events. As a framework for supporting student research, we organized a graduate course on Virginia Woolf, which enabled M.A. and Ph.D. students to gain familiarity with the focus of the conference and the field of modernist studies, and to develop their own papers in the Fall term preceding the conference. In addition to an introduction to Woolf’s literary career and cultural perspectives, the course provided an introduction to conference practices surrounding paper presentations, as the students each gave a twenty-minute talk on one of her texts and submitted a proposal for their final essay. For more than half the students in the class, the final research project became the basis for a conference paper proposal; and, through the process of peer review, the students—like all of our prospective presenters—received summative and formative comments from readers intended to further refine their approaches.

As a result, six graduate students from the class presented their papers to an international audience of Woolf scholars. Two Ph.D. students also met with a senior member of the conference community—an Emeritus Professor in the School of Arts and Digital Industries at the University of East London—in order to discuss their dissertation projects. Following the conference, a third doctoral student revised and submitted his presentation to the *Selected Papers* volume, where it was accepted for publication. Thus, in addition to the students’ introduction to

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<sup>7</sup> This number does not include the dozens of graduate students from other institutions who presented papers and attended events at Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf.

conferencing in general, four other learning outcomes tied to the academic professionalization process were supported by the course: the development of original research, the dissemination of the research in the form of a conference paper, the exchange of ideas within a community of practice, and the subsequent peer-reviewed publication of a research project.

### **Example 2: Non-Academic Professionalization, Undergraduate Level**

Another version of the apprenticeship model became possible because of the conference's financial resources. Using part of the registration fees as well as grants from the University of Saskatchewan intended to support experiential learning and undergraduate research, we funded an Equity production of a conference play that, while featuring professional actors and a professional stage manager, was student-directed and student-designed. *Angel in the House*, written by the New York-based playwright Eureka, explores the life and career of the painter Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf's sister. In a months-long process, a fourth-year Drama student researched these figures and, working with a faculty supervisor as well as with his cast and crew, created a highly regarded production of this relatively unknown script. The play ran for five nights, and that run included both an evening performance reserved for the conference community and a matinee performance for high school students followed by a question-and-answer session with the director and actors. In addition, he was afforded funds to travel to New York City later in the summer to interview the playwright and the play's first director.

The benefits of these experiences for the student have been significant. First, and in relation to his non-academic career trajectory, he gained an atypically early experience of directing an Equity production even while technically an amateur director. His work as a theatre professional was then leveraged in support of other directorial opportunities as well as stints in lighting design and scriptwriting. Second, and in relation to a more academic facet of his experience, the interview he conducted with Eureka became the heart of an essay he wrote regarding the production history of *Angel in the House*. This piece was accepted for publication in the *Selected Papers* volume, and he plans to transcribe the interview for inclusion in the Neil Richards Archive of Sexual and Gender Diversity at the University of Saskatchewan. While his activities are firmly grounded in Drama and in his goal to pursue a career in theatre production, the student's methodological approaches have relevance for Performance Studies, Literary Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Information Studies, among other fields. Drawing upon the skills he developed as a student in the Humanities, and exploring a discipline from multiple vantage points, he created a series of original works that have resonance both within and beyond the academy.

### **Example 3: Cross-disciplinary Coursework, Undergraduate Level**

A more formal approach to using different disciplinary perspectives in a teaching and learning situation informed our creation of the conference course. WGST 390.3, or Gender in Interdisciplinary Contexts, was designed to attract students not necessarily housed in the Department of English, to connect those students to the Woolf Conference, and to explore Virginia Woolf's life and writings through a range of perspectives. Run as a Women's and Gender Studies course, the classes were also taught by lecturers from the departments of Art and Art History, English, Film Studies, History, and Psychology. Faculty from other institutions—the University of Regina, the University of Western Ontario, and the University of East London—

participated, as we took advantage of the conference to draw upon the expertise of visiting Woolf scholars.

On a structural level, we designed assignments that included and extended beyond familiar methods of Humanities-based studies. For example, in addition to written reflection papers analysing aspects of the conference, students were asked to create research posters and to present their posters to delegates on the first morning of the event. The students' varied interests were reflected in the form and content of the posters, which addressed a range of topics: the physical spaces of institutions such as the University of Saskatchewan, Woolf's role as publisher and co-owner of the Hogarth Press, Woolf's relationship to class privilege, receptions of women's writing over time, and the politics of film adaptations of Woolf's fiction. To guide the students' work before the conference, we developed a rubric and description of the assignment with advice from Professor Linda McMullen of the Department of Psychology. The poster presentations were adjudicated by Professor Keith Bell from the Department of Art and Art History as well as by Professor Maggie Humm, a visiting scholar who responded to the layout, the content, and the implications of the students' research, and provided suggestions for further development of the projects. The posters remained on display throughout conference.

While the research posters were interdisciplinary in form and content—an academic model was drawn from the Social Sciences in order to explore a subject associated with the Humanities—they were multidisciplinary in their collective effect, as the students drew upon their various backgrounds in Sociology, Education, Film Studies, English Literature, and Women's and Gender Studies to engage with issues that had emerged from their readings and our class discussions. The transdisciplinary nature of these issues was striking. Primary among the group's work was the consistent emphasis on intersectionality, as considerations of Woolf's gender were addressed through the intertwined factors of race, representation, and class. And though inspired by Woolf's own critiques of restrictive social norms in women's lives, the students' treatments of this topic differed depending upon the specific project in which it was addressed, with the result complicating a reductive vision of Woolf and her politics.

In reflecting upon the varied ways through which a range of students participated in the conference, where cross-disciplinary initiatives augmented apprenticeship opportunities, the most challenging part of the exercise is figuring out how to gauge the success of our strategies. The academic professionalization of students as facilitated by conference organization can be judged in the most familiar way for us; that is, according to the scholarly standard of peer-reviewed publications, which reflects a common sense of “the necessary connection between conduct of conferences and publication of conference papers” (Louw & Zuber-Skerrit, 2011, p. 297). We can thus provide a more quantitative or at least data-driven snapshot of learning outcomes by enumerating the academic accomplishments of our students. These entail:

- co-authorship on a peer-reviewed SoTL publication (undergraduate student, English)
- six peer-reviewed conference paper presentations (graduate students, English)
- a peer-reviewed publication (undergraduate, Drama)
- a peer-reviewed publication (graduate student, English)

In this approach, where scholarly growth is measurable according to publication rates, the quality of the student's scholarship is confirmed through the process of peer review, in which acceptance is based in no small part upon the paper's participation in the disciplinary conventions of the field.

The benefits of discipline-specific training in a non-academic field—that is, the experiential learning process of the student director—are more difficult to quantify, as professional theatre work moves beyond our academic skill sets. And while it is tempting to point to the director’s subsequent success as a direct outcome of our support as instructors and mentors, the individual’s remarkable abilities and work ethic, as well as the variables involved in producing plays when the arts are hardly overfunded, suggest the limits of attempting to trace a cause-and-effect relationship. We find a similar challenge in attempting to gauge the immediate and the long-term ramifications of the teaching and learning situations that were intended to encourage cross-disciplinary undergraduate research. As Larson et al. (2011) have indicated, training individuals in the methods of interdisciplinary work may be desirable but difficult to achieve; and as Tremonte (2011) argues, “the very *messiness* of interdisciplinarity” (p. 1) makes the results of such teaching initiatives “more difficult to identify, assess and document” (p. 2).

Borrego and Newswander (2010) address the complexities of cross-disciplinary teaching and learning, and develop evaluation criteria by fusing engineering, science, and humanities perspectives. Drawing upon their methodology for gauging interdisciplinary learning outcomes, the work produced in WGST 390.3 would ideally reflect four student skill sets:

- disciplinary grounding: the choice and comprehension of disciplinary perspectives / methods used in the research process;
- integration abilities: the efficacy of the disciplinary synthesis or the location of common ground;
- communication and translation across disciplinary boundaries: the management of difference and the ability to find points of collaboration; and
- critical awareness: the ability to evaluate the benefits and limitations of the approach and the project

Using such criteria to evaluate one student’s final project, we can assess some of the results of the cross-disciplinary design of the conference course.

For the last assignment of the class, we tasked the students with developing an element of their research posters and placed no limits on the form that their final project might take. Several students wrote 8-10 page essays in keeping with their training in the Humanities, but one student submitted a scrapbook. The cover was made from her research poster, which had been cut and then fitted to a photo album. Inside, the student had juxtaposed scraps and fragments of Woolf’s writing with her own critical reflections. The selections of text and the responses were presented in different styles—handwritten, typed, stencilled—and were accompanied by images arranged on different kinds of paper in the manner of a homemade, family book of remembrances. The project’s medium as well as strands of its content arose directly from the student’s research poster, the topic of which was the value attributed to “real” art and “real” scholarship as those hierarchical evaluations had excluded women’s work in Woolf’s era (and, the student suggested, even in our own). One half of the research poster had been presented in a formal style, with headings, bulleted points, and clearly demarcated analyses. In the other half, the student had mimicked a scrapbook style, deliberately echoing the scrapbooks Virginia Woolf had created while writing her 1938 polemic on feminism and fascism, *Three Guineas*. By submitting an actual scrapbook for her final project, the student enacted the political potential of her research: the very form of the project challenged established frameworks regarding what was academically

acceptable, which methods of evaluation university instructors have been acculturated to use, and how those methods might work against research not traditionally viewed as “real” scholarship.

Using Borrego and Newswander’s (2010) methods to establish the extent to which the student’s final project met the expected cross-disciplinary learning outcomes of the course, we note that she had:

- grounded her work in disciplinary conventions pertaining to literary analysis and feminist theory, as well as the less-academic field of scrapbooking;
- integrated the disciplines to the point at which form was content, where the scrapbook embodied a scholarly analysis of the subject, the literature, and the theory;
- found points of disciplinary common ground, as Woolf’s work on women’s place in the home and their place in the education system was given concrete form; and
- acknowledged the limits of the project, particularly through a section of self-reflexive commentary on how an academic audience would read and respond to the scrapbook as a work of literary and feminist criticism.

The final project thus represented an extremely productive engagement with different fields of knowledge through an innovative approach that resulted in a distinctive project, and one which arose from the student’s personal not just academic interests.

Another way to address the results of cross-disciplinary pedagogical strategies is to explore their value and the value of the conference experience as identified by the students themselves. To this end, we posed a reflection question on the final examination for WGST 390.3 worth 5 out of 100 marks: “What is the most significant or influential issue pertaining to Woolf, her circle, or her work that arose for you in this course, and how might it influence you and / or your scholarly work in the days to come?” The students’ ensuing responses suggest a more qualitative method of gauging the efficacy of the course and its organization, especially given the amount of thought evident in their narratives. The student who submitted the scrapbook, for example, wrote a three-page reflection piece. She ended with the following observations<sup>8</sup>:

I now know that the influence and chance a person has in life can drastically alter [...] the work they can (or will) produce. As [a fellow student] stated, before he had met Maggie Humm, Maggie Humm was just a text. Now from this course I feel like I know Woolf more, and can understand her and her texts more.

These statements are slightly fragmented but connected through the student’s intersectional approach, as she recognizes how her own position has been influenced by her personal experiences. In a similar vein, she contextualizes the authority of more established scholars and academics, including Professor Maggie Humm, who have become individuals with their own cultural and personal histories. After invoking a classmate’s perspective on scholarly hierarchies, she enacts Woolf’s resistance to institutional power structures and asserts her own authority. It is a complex response that derives from this English major’s increased familiarity with Woolf’s writing (course content), as well as from her position within a community of practice (reciprocal teaching and learning) and her participation in conference activities (experiential learning). Like

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<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of extracts from student work, as it constitutes a secondary use of data, has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Ethics Research Board, Beh #13-130.

the scrapbook project, however—an expression of research outcomes that will, despite its insights, have limited dissemination in an academic context—this learning will not inform a scholarly career path but instead represents an assertion of her personal understanding of culture and identity that has any number of potential applications.

Another suggestive consideration of the course’s personal and political implications was provided by a student who majored Women’s and Gender Studies. She wrote:

I plan on using Woolf’s essays as references for my own work in the future and I plan to read much more of her fiction in my own time. I foresee my relationship with Woolf growing and expanding in my academic and personal life for a long time after this class is complete.

An impressive element of the response is how the student thinks of Woolf’s use of genre as those different forms pertain to academic and non-academic applications respectively: the political and intellectual applicability of the author’s essays in a professional context; the private enjoyment of the author’s short stories and novels on a more personal level. It is the former that interested one of the student’s colleagues, whose commitment to political activism intersected with Woolf’s use of rhetoric as a tool for social change:

[Woolf’s] writing style is devastatingly effective, and I wonder, as someone who will write and speak for a living, how I might learn better to use the brilliant rhetorical moves and strategems [sic] that Woolf does, to similarly play with my audience, [and] to bring alive arguments expressed as the shadow of their antithesis.

Of course, the student is already demonstrating his linguistic skills in this response, as well as his awareness of audience. His use of syntax enacts the variation on Woolf’s style that he states is his intent as a rhetorician, which the three parallel clauses of this passage indicate. And his almost poetic invocation of “shadow” suggests an allusion to Woolf’s best-known essay, *A Room of One’s Own* from 1928, in which it is in the shadow of the male writer’s assertion of selfhood that women authors are placed and from which they must speak. In these examples, then, we see students who perceive the implications of Woolf political and literary strategies in relation to non-academic and creative contexts as well as scholarly endeavours.

The students’ informed approaches to the future applicability of their coursework speak to the movement of learning outcomes across discursive as well as institutional boundaries. Even so, such applications depend upon the individual’s ability to engage in innovative analyses, which, though grounded in academic disciplinary training, can move beyond the traditions or conventions of a specific field depending on the project or career in question. That combination of discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary awareness was evident in the response provided by a student whose work was already graduate-level and who appears to be pursuing an academic path. Through the team-taught course, he wrote,

I learned a lot about the function of the classroom, but also acquired strategies for disagreeing with both students and scholars, and feel I’m better at searching for common ground and context than I was before the course.



His reflections upon the pedagogical benefits of the class are accompanied, however, by his assertion of the value of intellectual independence and of the agency that cross-disciplinarity is predicated upon:

[...] the conference was a hugely important experience in my academic career. I've realized that I have legitimate ideas on literature and literary theory which, although sometimes complex and far from mainstream, have enough integrity to not be torn apart by experts.

His ideas were expressed in powerful ways in all of his assignments, but especially in his exceptional final project, which took the form of a modernist montage and reflected a breadth of literary knowledge, theoretical perspectives, and creative forms of writing. Hardly an essay, but grounded in excellent scholarship from multiple fields, it suggests that a career far from the ordinary is in the makings.

The individualistic and local nature of cross-disciplinary work raises questions, however, regarding the potential of conferences or critical movements to facilitate transformative change for the fields or the institutional structures in question. A reciprocal dynamic is the ideal outcome of such initiatives, in which new research, methods, frameworks, and networks arise from discursive boundary-crossings that draw upon the strengths of existing disciplines. Given that Interdisciplinary / Multidisciplinary Woolf was inspired by the model of the New Modernist Studies as well as by Woolf's own modernist body of work, it is perhaps not surprising that our attempts to balance disciplinary training with cross-disciplinary innovation resulted in a number of rewarding outcomes: high-quality papers that often moved into new territory, a series of publications arising directly and tangentially from the conference, and a range of participants and attendees, including undergraduate and graduate students whose work was recognized by international academics. At the same time, we acknowledge the less-heterogeneous elements of our conference, and we recognize that the more innovative forms of research dissemination used by our students have limited applicability within an academic context regardless of their value according to interdisciplinary learning outcomes. This suggests to us the perhaps obvious conclusion that cross-disciplinarity is not an end in itself, but rather an approach to research and learning that individuals may deploy in creative and often unanticipated ways. If not an end in itself, however, it is a means to an end, and has particular relevance for avoiding homogeneity in research and teaching practices, a sameness that can inform assumptions regarding the proper practitioners of academic work. As Stewart (2009) observes, there is a series of "intangible factors" at work in higher education that contribute to "the ongoing replication of the university environment along specific and narrow ethnocultural lines" (p. 45). Interestingly, while cross-disciplinary work in the New Modernist Studies has been cited as a method for engaging with marginalized subject positions and forms of artistic production (McKible & Churchill, 2013), the potential for such interventions to affect conference organization and pedagogy seems bound still by disciplinary conventions and institutional traditions.

This essay, then, is written in response to our sense of the benefits and the limitations of cross-disciplinarity as it informed the 2012 International Conference on Virginia Woolf. By engaging with the SoTL from a scholarly teaching perspective, from our positions as conference organizers, and from our experiences as scholars of literary modernism, we have drawn from different fields of practice only to find their underlying connections. Through this constellation of discourses, we have tried to enact the individualistic nature of interdisciplinary scholarship,

and to cross not only disciplinary boundaries but also institutional boundaries in a collaborative piece that involves three scholars at different points in their careers. The goal of our work in relation to modernist studies and SoTL research has been to contribute to investigations of cross-disciplinary student learning by considering the intentions and outcomes of our pedagogical objectives in the context of conference planning. And while conference organization, like conference attendance, is one facet of scholarly life, we stress that there are as-yet-untapped possibilities in academic gatherings to acknowledge a wide variety of experiences, knowledges, and creative visions that may have both short- and long-term benefits for higher education and society itself.

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