

## THE LANGUAGE OF MULTICULTURAL BUSINESS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSE JOINING LINGUISTICS AND MARKETING

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates past research regarding interdisciplinary teaching efforts at the college level, especially those in which the business school has joined together with colleagues in the humanities. Additionally, a proposed interdisciplinary course is presented, one which is a combined effort between a linguist and a marketer, both of whom have extensive multicultural experience.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMS

#### Courses and Programs

Interdisciplinary research and education have been incorporated into academic institutions in many ways. The most prevalent ways are the adoption of an interdisciplinary program or the addition of individual interdisciplinary courses to a traditional curriculum. There are advantages and disadvantages to both.

Interdisciplinary courses can offer a relatively simple, low-cost way for universities to accommodate new material from different disciplines and the intersection of those disciplines [Miller & McCartan 1990]. In business education, for example, courses taught in collaboration with foreign language departments are a common way to promote the growing field of international business; such courses can also give new life to traditional modern language programs [Normand 1986] [To-Dutka & Spencer 1990]. Interdisciplinary courses require a minimum of effort on the part of the administration, because they are often "electives, sporadically taught courses, or a new . . . unit" which do not require "the enormously difficult [and expensive] work of reconceptualizing the curriculum" [Miller & McCartan 1990, p. 31].

However, the simple addition of interdisciplinary elective courses has its problems. Some educators are concerned that students are getting an ever-narrower view of the world by staying in just one discipline. This is a special concern of business educators, whose students often come for specific

career-oriented programs [Markert & Silberman 1988] and are unlikely to understand the value of liberal arts learning to their career goals if they are not shown how to make the connections [Markert & Silberman 1988] [Miller & McCartan 1990] [To-Dutka & Spencer 1990].

To combat this problem, some institutions have created complete interdisciplinary programs rather than simply adding courses as knowledge advances. Nevertheless, such programs can be quite expensive to plan and implement; they require a large commitment of faculty time and enthusiasm. Predicting ongoing student enrollment in such a new program is also more difficult, especially if courses are not required.

#### Past Interdisciplinary Efforts

Different interdisciplinary efforts have different goals. However, there appear to be some basic goals that are common to interdisciplinary work in business education.

Of prime importance is business' relationship to culture and society. Efforts combining business and foreign language education see the promotion of a "world view" and "cultural awareness" to be just as important as the learning of a language for business communication with foreigners [Normand 1986, p. 311] [To-Dutka & Spencer 1990, p. 17].

Not all interdisciplinary courses need to pair business with a foreign language. Business professors have been paired with faculty from a variety of liberal arts disciplines in courses and programs that are quite successful. The University of Baltimore's program paired professional program faculty with liberal arts faculty members from a variety of disciplines; their goal was to infuse professional academic programs "with an emphasis on liberal arts learning" and to foster "greater understanding of the interrelationship between the liberal arts and the professions" [Markert & Silberman 1988, p. 7].

These goals are lofty, but they can be realized via well-synthesized interdisciplinary courses. Indeed, the ability to synthesize is one of the most useful and important goals of interdisciplinary courses. Students can learn why disciplines have different organizational schemes, can compare them, and ideally will be able to synthesize them into a broad-based education which may prove more useful to them in the long run than will specific job skills [Santa Vicca 1986] [Markert & Silberman 1988].

Boise State University has a history of interdisciplinary College of Business/Department of English courses. The purpose of one course, "Shakespeare and Iacocca in the Boardroom: Lessons from the Classics in Literature and Management" taught by Napier and Martin, was:

To examine issues in management and leadership through reading classic texts and cases in management and in literature . . . to demonstrate that certain basic principles . . . of human behavior and character underlie many situations—both actual and fictional—in which a person is called upon to be a leader." [Napier and Martin 1989]

Any interdisciplinary course or program requires a large amount of preparation on the part of participating faculty. Most such preparation involves planning the integration of different perspectives into the course(s), gaining a greater understanding of different methods and new course material, developing techniques for team teaching, and deciding on the criteria which would characterize a successful graduate of the course or program. The linguist and the marketer involved in the proposed course were lucky. The Department of Marketing and Finance hired a summer intern who helped find relevant materials and prepare the course.

The traditional method used by individual faculty members working together to prepare an interdisciplinary course is now often being augmented by seminars, workshops, and training programs used to develop faculties' interdisciplinary abilities. Normand [1986] recommends that potential language/business course professors take advantage of several business French seminars as well as language teaching training. Boise State University sponsors an annual retreat for those with

interdisciplinary interests, and attendance is a condition of funding for a proposed course. Another college made consultants available to faculty for feedback in addition to offering seminars [To-Dutka & Spencer 1990]. Nearly all the programs stress that, if at all possible, sufficient release time should be made available for faculty to "develop course materials" [Normand 1986] [Markert & Silberman 1988].

Team teaching can "show students that different approaches to a problem yield a richer range of results" [Miller & McCartan 1990]. Faculty from separate areas can recognize and clarify discipline-specific outlooks from another perspective, adding to student understanding. Team-taught courses are team planned as well, adding to the integration of disciplines [Markert & Silberman 1988].

In general, the results from interdisciplinary efforts appear to have been positive. Reaction from faculty and students has been enthusiastic, particularly when a course or program has been well and carefully planned. For students, the advantages have been a more broad-based education. Business students, in particular, come to recognize the value of liberal arts and the humanities toward their goals. They also learn that business does not operate in a vacuum [Markert & Silberman 1988] [Napier and Martin 1989]. For faculty, the preparation seminars and collaboration have been "a wellspring of ideas" for both personal professional development and classroom techniques [Markert & Silberman 1988, p. 8].

Interdisciplinary work has also been found to increase the informal lines of communication and exchange of ideas between disciplines [Markert & Silberman 1988] [To-Dutka & Spencer 1990]. Other results have been increased co-authorship of journal papers, co-authored proposals for curriculum additions/changes, and continued plans for team teaching.

#### Problems

There are, of course, many problems with and concerns about taking an interdisciplinary approach to education; and not all the results are positive. Those objections and concerns can be loosely grouped into three main categories: (1) faculty alliance, (2) funding/institutional support, and (3) student support/demand.

Faculty alliance is one of the major stumbling blocks to the creation of interdisciplinary courses or programs. "There is no tradition nor incentive for faculty to invest substantial amounts of time and effort in a core curriculum that is interdisciplinary in nature . . . This problem was particularly acute among business school faculty" [Markert & Silberman 1988, pp. 2-3].

In addition to adherence to traditional department divisions, however, universities recognize that expanding traditional programs to include interdisciplinary spin-offs can be expensive—both in terms of preparation funding and in the loss of its own "critical mass" of students to the new "subspecialties." This can jeopardize the traditional department's claim on institutional resources [Miller & McCartan 1990].

Enrollment, of course, depends upon student interest. Interdisciplinary business education, nevertheless, is still business education; and students should be able to expect that the class or program will add to their value and ability as employees with specific job skills as well as a liberal education.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF MULTICULTURAL BUSINESS

##### Justifications for the Course

There is growing concern in the nation and the world about improving intercultural communication. Anthropologists define *culture* as "the integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society" [Hoebel 1972]. In addition to cultural differences between any two countries, every modern nation also contains a number of smaller societies within its boundaries, based on race, gender, age, geographical location or social status, each of which will also have a somewhat different culture.

Language plays two important roles in any culture. First, language is used in interactions members of the society have with each other and with outsiders. Second, language expresses and encodes many of the values and prototypes of the culture. Such expression is found not only in the literature of the society, but also in the society's everyday use of language. Linguistics, with its emphasis on analysis of all types of language, both literary and non-literary, is especially useful in investigating the roles language plays.

A single course cannot begin to investigate the different roles language plays in all areas of human endeavor. In this course, the plan is to focus on issues of language use in business, both domestic and global. An ever-increasing variety of subcultures (e.g., women, senior citizens, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, Asians) is represented among both employees and consumers in the United States, which creates a number of intercultural problems and issues in domestic business alone. Interest in and need for global business ventures is rapidly increasing resulting in interactions with other peoples from widely varying culture and language groups.

These intercultural issues in business are of interest to anyone concerned with linguistics or communication studies in general, since interactions in the workplace and exposure to mass media are now integral parts of human life in all societies. As a result, students from a wide range of disciplines are expected to be interested in the course, including English majors with emphases in linguistics or writing; business students majoring in marketing or management (especially those with an international business major or minor); and communication, psychology, anthropology, and foreign language majors.

Both team teachers have essential and complementary roles in the course. One professor has a B.A. in anthropology and a Ph.D. in linguistics and will be mainly concerned with relevant issues in those fields. The other has a Ph.D. in marketing and will focus primarily on concerns in that area. The two teachers have backgrounds that overlap sufficiently to allow them to integrate the two facets of the course smoothly. The marketer has a B.A. in Spanish education and has taught marketing in Italy. In addition, she has taken a number of courses in linguistics. The linguist has studied Spanish, French, and German; has spent several years working in the business world; and has taught English as a second language to people involved in business. In addition, the team teachers have already been doing interdisciplinary research together on language issues in advertising.

##### Discussion of the Course Structure and Content

The required reading for the course will be drawn from business, linguistic, and anthropological sources. The main readings will be taken from The Language of Advertising by Vestergaard and Schrøder, International Business Communication by

David Victor, and Language: The Social Mirror by Elaine Chaika.

Both teachers plan to participate in all class sessions. After a brief introduction to the fields of linguistics and business, each subsequent lecture will include the theoretical and applied facets of an issue. The topics will include the following:

1. preconceptions about language, dialect, and register;
2. linguistic and cultural factors affecting interactions between employer and employee, vendor and client;
3. problems in communication between native speakers of different languages, including translation issues;
4. the use of English as an international language, and the problems encountered with different "Englishes";
5. use of multilingual and multi-dialectal messages in mass communication;
6. use of differing cultural metaphors and prototypes in both interpersonal and mass communication.

The class will be supplemented with videos, excerpts from movies, and speakers from the local corporate community with international experience, as well as representatives of different cultures, both domestic and foreign. Sample videos include Managing the Overseas Assignment (a film about culture around the world directed to international business people), The Colonel Goes to Japan (a film focusing on Japanese culture and its effect on business), and Killing Them Softly (a film exploring the depiction of women in advertising). Excerpts from movies such as The Gods Must Be Crazy, A Fish Called Wanda, and Children of a Lesser God can be used to illustrate in both humorous and serious ways the differences in peoples' languages and their cultures and the problems arising from those differences. In-class exercises will be administered during most class meetings. Napier and Martin [1989] followed a similar format.

The professors hope that a wide variety of students register for this course. In order for Interdisciplinary Humanities (who is funding the release time for this course) to "get its money's worth," the student group must be truly interdisciplinary. The professors hope to be able to build on previous interdisciplinary courses, both at Boise State University and those

around the country, which have been reported on in the literature.

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