

Forum

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Interdisciplinarity: Popular and Problematic

TO THE EDITOR:

I was most intrigued to read Julie Stone Peters's "Law, Literature, and the Vanishing Real: On the Future of an Interdisciplinary Illusion" (120 [2005]: 442–53). Peters is on to something, and you might want to solicit articles on the equally problematic interdisciplinarity of literature and science and literature and medicine. The recent popularity of interdisciplinarity seems to be a response to the increasing professionalization, microfocus, and jargonization of individual academic disciplines, analogous to the growth of comparative literature after the Second World War as a corrective to the narrowness of national literature departments.

The courses I taught were always interdisciplinary in nature, whatever the subject, and for many years I was on the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee at the City University of New York Graduate Center. On the graduate level I team-taught a course on city and utopia, once with a political scientist, once with an architectural historian. These experiences revealed another problem with interdisciplinary study: the graduate students, from a number of different departments, went into shock for the first half of each course because they could not understand what students from other disciplines were talking about. Every discipline had its own approaches and jargon, and there was no common ground on which problems could be discussed. Only toward the end of the course was there some tentative cross-communication among the students. The term papers were uniformly monodisciplinary and disappointing, ignoring the interdisciplinary perspectives the professors had been at pains to develop.

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