

# Five Strategic Imperatives for Interdisciplinary Study in Mass Communications/Media Studies in the U.S. and U.K.

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## Abstract

*Interdisciplinary study can allow students to share ideas with scholars in allied fields and broaden their knowledge of global issues. Mass communication/media studies programs in the U.S. and U.K. can serve as models to lead students into successful learning through interdisciplinary study. This paper outlines five strategic imperatives for the study of mass communication/media studies in the U.S. and U.K. Curriculum improvements are suggested for helping students evolve and grow into leaders in the field.*

## Introduction

This paper addresses a fundamental question: How can the field of mass communications/media studies, which has grown into its own discipline, still benefit from interdisciplinary links with other university departments and research approaches from other fields? Students who graduate from a mass communications program in the U.S. or U.K. today face significantly different challenges than did the cohort of students in the 1980s and even the 1990s. Unprecedented changes in global economy and technology, as well as new cultural, ethnic, and ethical issues worldwide, have altered the landscape for studying mass communications in the U.S. and U.K. This new direction calls for greater focus on an interdisciplinary study of the liberal arts in the mass communications/media studies curriculum. In addition, more interdisciplinary research and teaching are needed to help students grow and succeed in their chosen work.

Researchers might argue that colleges are already accomplishing what is necessary to train its students for the new century. Indeed, colleges and universities in both the U.S and U.K. have made strides in this regard and improved their core curriculum. Nevertheless, the essential questions that fuel the work of educators and researchers include: Are students being adequately prepared for their first job or for life? Can they grapple with world issues and concerns that impact the future of democracy and freedom by merely taking one or two courses in history or political science? Are students evolving into competent problem-solvers, critical thinkers, and creative individuals or just adding courses to their transcripts that seem to fill these roles? Faculty members need to prepare students not only to compete for jobs in a new global economy, but also to have the intellectual breadth of knowledge to understand complex issues, become creative knowledge-seekers, and behave ethically. Students require preparation to become world citizens who will positively contribute to the organizations they join and, in turn, benefit society.

This paper suggests five strategic imperatives for the study of mass communications/media studies in the U.S. and U.K. that will support the important role of interdisciplinary study to extend the theoretical foundations and research methods of the field as well as global knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The five imperatives are: (1) embracing an interdisciplinary approach to the study and research of mass communications/media studies by forging an alliance with the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, information technology, and education; (2) providing internships in more than one field of study; (3) improving ways of knowing and learning in the classroom; (4) stressing global literacy as an essential part of the college experience; and (5) addressing issues of discipline and assessment in the curriculum and ascertaining its ultimate achievement.

### **Learning across the Disciplines**

The first imperative involves embracing an interdisciplinary approach in the curriculum. Interdisciplinary study typically bridges multiple disciplines and involves data collection and analysis from more than one research tradition. The field of mass communications/media studies has early roots in political science, sociology, psychology, and rhetoric and speech. It offers an interdisciplinary focus and is itself the object of interdisciplinary study (McQuail, 1985). However, the discipline appears to be drifting away these liberal arts roots while forging its own niche as a self-contained discipline. To meet students' growing demands for more relevant courses that can lead directly to jobs, the discipline has often sacrificed creating links to other university departments that could broaden its students' knowledge and mold them into true world citizens. Corporations, non-profit organizations, advertising and public relations agencies, broadcast networks, newspapers, and magazines are in great need of talented, creative, and widely educated students who can adapt to any environment and welcome change in a work world that reflects an interdisciplinary approach. Unlike their academic counterparts, few organizations today operate in a "silo" mentality; to achieve success, their workers must perform tasks in multiple departments with workers possessing diverse skills and knowledge.

While many courses in a mass communications/media curriculum may help students win their first jobs, a broader interdisciplinary education in conjunction with practicum courses will move them into more meaningful higher-level jobs. Their broader knowledge will arm them to become true knowledge-seekers and problem-solving thinkers who are more aware of cultural relationships and boundaries that shape today's world.

### **Political Science Perspective**

One certain way to encourage this potential is to forge stronger links with political science departments so that students will not only learn the nature and effects of propaganda and persuasion, but also the process by which political systems in the U.S. and around the world determine policy that influences how governments function at their best and worst. Future policymakers with training in both the mass communications discipline and the political process will draw from a much wider context to suggest solutions for international problems. Students inclined to enter the public service sector with a mass communications degree would benefit from this cross-training as well.

### **Sociological Imagination**

Undergraduates who expect to spend much of their lives helping organizations build relationships with global customers, partners, and citizens would benefit from acquiring a strong theoretical grounding in how the social world works—its norms, rituals, and traditions—and an understanding of the impact of

social issues on communications. For example, future journalists might become more analytical observers of the world they cover by understanding the sociology of media organizations along with the mechanics of writing a news story. They might also be better served by spending more class time reading the works of Weber and Durkheim and less time on calculating the readability formulas of Flesh and Gunning. This does not underestimate the importance of the mechanics of journalism education, especially as employers insist on these skills for the marketplace. Nevertheless, mechanics alone is inadequate; students need to learn to analyze social and organizational issues in order to write more creatively and insightfully about them. Because sociologists have studied the impact of television, media, and news reporting as well as the influence of culture on society (Gans, 1979), their crucial findings and perceptions should be integrated into the communications courses of traditional college curricula.

### **Learning about Human Nature and Society**

One of the principal figures in the early history of mass communication was anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who featured relational communication based on cybernetic theory in the study of mass communications (Rogers, 1994). Thus, the study of anthropology would demonstrate to students how tribal societies form opinions and co-exist or why certain cultures view others with favor or disdain. This field offers practical advice and knowledge on how students can create communication campaigns in the profit and non-profit sectors with a stronger global understanding of human nature.

### **The Technology Perspective**

The more technology undergoes social change, the more critical it is for the discipline to retain links with university departments that are up-to-date with such changes. Information technology faculty, for example, can be an important resource for mass communication students in helping them master new technologies and articulating the implications of their use in the marketplace. They could suggest curricular changes to new media faculty and collaborate on team-taught survey courses in technology applications. Through this joint effort, mass communications students would be exposed to the most recent advances in technology applications as they prepare to enter the workforce or attend graduate school.

### **Media Literacy Perspective**

Finally, a joint effort with the education department on teaching media literacy would contribute significantly to university life as well as society. While mass communications students could benefit from new instructional technology approaches offered by the education department, young teachers could benefit from the expertise of mass communications scholars in media literacy. As a result, new teachers, especially at the high school level, would be better equipped to understand the workings of media on a much broader scale than they were previously taught.

While students typically can declare a minor in a separate field of study or take courses in a related field at many colleges and universities in the U.S. and U.K., the courses are not necessarily interdisciplinary nor do students make such cross-discipline connections. One solution to encourage an exchange of ideas beyond the core curriculum is to break down department silos and allow mass communications students to explore new and linked learning environments. Thus, they would become better equipped as world citizens, not merely as consumers of knowledge.

### **Experiential Learning across the Disciplines**

The second strategic imperative is to create an administrative protocol that allows mass communications/new media students to experience the power of internships in more than one field of study. Most mass communications departments now in the U.S. and U.K. urge their students to complete internships in a subspecialty such as public relations, advertising, journalism broadcasting, and new media. With such work experience to complement college courses, students can make more intelligent decisions about their career plans. Another advantage of an internship in a subspecialty is its socialization of students in a professional area of interest. However, by adding a second internship to the curriculum for credit or pass/fail in a field outside but closely aligned to the major, students would meet professionals in that field and extend their own expertise to another field that complements their learning in mass communications. As illustration, a public relations student major who would like a career in government service would be assigned as an administrative intern to a government agency for the management team, learning about the operations of that agency. The student's second internship would be with a public relations firm that works closely with the agency or government clients. With this dual learning and training, the student would be better positioned to create well-designed communications plans which meet the needs of the agency or clients. As another example of dual training in internships, an advertising or new media student major who wants to have a non-profit career would be first assigned to a non-profit agency with the management team to learn how a non-profit functions on different projects. In the second internship assignment, the student would move to an advertising agency to create promotional pieces that enhance the agency's image and raise money for the agency's primary cause. This cross-training in two aligned disciplines would provide the student with a greater breadth of knowledge previously unavailable in the current curriculum.

This cross-disciplinary approach through internships is not easy to accomplish in an academic setting. On the one hand, its greatest administrative challenge is to require different academic departments to cooperate and share resources and faculty to help students learn about an allied field. On the other, more positive side, however, colleges or universities can promote this dual-learning approach among parents, prospective students, and employers. Nevertheless, students would be the main beneficiaries of this interdisciplinary approach to experiential learning, as they would receive a foundation that launches their early careers and sustains them throughout their lives.

### **Other Ways of Knowing and Learning in the Classroom**

The third strategic perspective is to improve ways of knowing and learning in the classroom. It has become necessary to challenge a college's traditional organization around disciplines and to question whether this structure is best for giving students the broadest view of an academic discipline. On some level, students are aware that the real world is not neatly divided into categories called history, physics, psychology, politics, and literature. Each field is alive with human practitioners, all of whom offer different worldviews and experiences which draw from across disciplines. In addition, prospective employers expect newly-hired college graduates to understand new concepts by gaining knowledge from departments as diverse as information science, marketing, accounting, and public relations in order to function in their chosen field of interest.

In a study conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education which examined the conditions under which students learn best both inside and outside the classroom, "many seniors single

out interdisciplinary courses as the course that means the most to them” (Light, 2001, p. 126). While students are satisfied with in-depth education in one or two disciplines including a minor field, Light points out that they also want more exposure to different aspects of the curriculum.

Faculty members and administrators can give students a cross-cutting experience by promoting team teaching across the disciplines. In this approach, students are more apt to synthesize ideas while drawing on their faculty’s experiences of introducing divergent viewpoints into the classroom. A good example of this would be a communications professor and a political science professor who team-teach a campaigns course, with subjects ranging from public opinion dynamics, persuasion theories, and communication strategies to voting behavior, planning, and measurement standards. This collaborative learning would clarify in dimensional form how campaigns are researched, planned, organized, and conducted.

Team learning is becoming an integral part of the workplace landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As companies, government agencies, and non-profit organizations establish high-performance teams to tackle major projects, students exposed to interdisciplinary learning in and out of the classroom may have a competitive edge in those settings. At least, they will become more conscious of how the media and other disciplines are interconnected.

In addition to team work, another technique to improve ways of knowing and learning in the classroom is to create learning communities within the discipline. A learning community typically links two or more disciplines around a common theme and arranges for students to attend courses and live together on campus. While one early goal of learning communities was to improve student retention rates on college campuses, they have also helped students in mass communications program to understand more fully the relationships between their discipline and work in other fields on campus. In experiments with learning communities, American colleges have found that their students benefit from shared learning and greater insight into the media environment. Blanchard and Christ (1993) suggest that not only is building bridges vital between communications departments and the academy, but connections should also be constructed within the communications discipline itself. Thus, mass communications/media studies programs in the U.S. and U.K. can increase their effectiveness by identifying the benefits of team teaching, team learning, and learning communities, and incorporating them into the curriculum.

### **Global Literacy and the Global Village**

The fourth strategic imperative is to make global literacy essential to the college experience. For students in a mass communications/media studies program, global literacy involves understanding national interdependence, interacting and communicating with diverse peoples, and creating and distributing content persuasively to audiences of all sizes. Globally-literate students should think with an international mindset that values the cultures and customs of other nations. In addition, they should participate in teams where diversity of talent and nationality is the rule rather than the exception.

Students are now living in the “global village,” so aptly coined by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s. Information flows freely and rapidly across borders, creating instant access to international news events. For global literacy to become integral to the college experience, faculty members must discover ways to make it relevant in the classroom. One step is to invite scholars from the international relations department to share their global perspectives and suggest pertinent activities. Another step is to establish global exchange programs and cultural and international events, which can allow students to travel abroad and begin applying learned skills in an international context. A third step is to train students to speak,

write, and read a second language to facilitate their travel and enrich their experiences through greater comprehension and communication.

Mass communications/media studies programs need champions of global literacy on the campus who recognize that when students gain a global perspective of current issues, they will more likely thrive internationally. Many courses in the mass communications discipline can be modified to include a segment on global literacy, which explores a range of world and cultural issues as student's progress through their major. Service learning projects are another tool with which colleges can promote global literacy. For example, colleges in or near large urban centers can set up programs that incorporate immersion into encounters with more varied nationalities and cultures than are available on campus.

In exchange programs with other colleges, visiting scholars can be recruited to spend one or two semesters on campus mentoring students in the mass communications/media studies department. Similarly, mass communications faculty can spend a semester overseas interacting and conducting research with foreign students. Mass communications/media studies departments can also establish web-based initiatives to join students from many countries with local nationals. Finally, faculty can apply for grants from international organizations that encourage cross-cultural skills training and open new areas of communication research in developing countries or "hot spots" such as the Middle East. With a global literacy perspective in the curriculum, students can be trained not only to interpret behaviors in different cultural contexts, but also to build meaningful relationships with others in foreign lands.

### **Rigor and Assessment in the Curriculum**

The fifth strategic imperative concerns the all-important issue of rigor and assessment in the mass communications/media studies curriculum. Colleges and universities in the U.S. and U.K. are gradually ensuring that undergraduate programs offer significant experiences and learning outcomes for their students. The faculty-at-large are also being challenged to provide students with deep learning experiences that compel them to challenge assumptions, create new ways of thinking, and take risks in the classroom. To create an environment of excellence, the best college teachers are becoming increasingly familiar with best learning practices and the conditions in which such learning will flourish in the classroom (Bain, 2004).

Mass communications/media studies programs remain popular on U.S. campuses, and are growing in popularity in the U.K. For the most part, the field of mass communications in the U.S. has achieved parity with the more established fields in the liberal arts such as psychology, sociology, and history. Its scholars are widely published and its students are some of the brightest on campus. In the U.K., however, some critics have labeled media studies and mass communications programs "Mickey Mouse" courses—that is, they lack rigor and are not seriously considered by the academic community. Yet, this judgment has been vigorously challenged by U.K. media studies scholars who demonstrate the field's significant relevance to students and faculty in other disciplines. The field's mainstream history for more than 40 years has recognized strong traditions of excellence on many U.K. campuses (Baty, 2003). Equally important for the field's credibility is that some of the more interesting approaches to the study of mass communications/media studies have been offered by U.K. scholars at worldwide academic forums and conferences.

An organization at the forefront of improving the quality and stature of mass communications programs in the U.S. is the Accrediting Council on Education and Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). It judges programs against objectives that institutions set for themselves and against

standards that the Council regulates to prepare students for professional careers in journalism and mass communications. The Council adopted new standards that went into effect in September 2004 for accreditation reviews in 2005-2006. Colleges and universities that apply for accreditation must submit documentation to meet the standards in the following nine areas: (1) Mission, Governance, and Administration; (2) Curriculum and Instruction; (3) Diversity and Inclusiveness; (4) Full- time and Part-time Faculty; (5) Scholarship, Research, Creative and Professional Activity; (6) Student Services; (7) Resources, Facilities, and Equipment; (8) Professional and Public Service; and (9) Assessment of Learning Outcomes. The Council currently accredits 105 schools and departments of Journalism and Mass Communications in the U.S. and one program overseas (more than 400 colleges and universities offer one or more mass communications programs). ACEJMC evaluates Bachelor's degree and professional Master's degree programs.

Another valuable tool for evaluating mass communications/media studies programs is the internship program in such areas as advertising, public relations, journalism, radio, television, film, production, and web communications. These students often complete extensive reports on their experiences that allow the college to measure the effectiveness of its program in the workplace. Feedback from employers who hire interns can also assist the faculty and department to upgrade the curriculum and make necessary changes. Some colleges have used advisory councils composed of industry experts to shape the mass communications curriculum and create a "sounding board" for new ideas and research.

Other tools with which college faculty and administrators can measure the success of their programs are professional portfolios, alumni/employer surveys, and capstone courses (Blanchard & Christ, 1993). Many colleges now require their students to develop a student portfolio documenting their class or internship assignments that demonstrate professional competence in their major field of study. Students can also show their portfolios to prospective employers during job interviews. Similarly, portfolios demonstrate levels of student learning that senior faculty in the department can assess. The alumni/employer survey is an excellent way to collect feedback on the mass communications program. Young alumni out of college less than 3 years and senior alumni in the workforce 10 to 20 years can be rich sources of information on how well the college or university is training candidates for the workplace and life itself. A poor report card by junior and senior alumni members may indicate the need for a major program revision. Employers in the profit, non-profit, and government sectors should also be surveyed regularly to gauge the quality of students completing their programs at U.S. and U.K. institutions. Finally, capstone courses can help faculty ascertain the value of the mass communications curriculum. Typically, students undertake major research projects for their capstones in which they integrate theoretical knowledge from coursework with applied research skills on a topic in their area of specialization.

## **Summary**

The five strategic imperatives outlined in this paper are designed to stimulate discussion and debate on the value of interdisciplinary study in the field of mass communications/media studies. Each imperative challenges college faculty and administrators to move beyond comfort zones and "silos," and apply these approaches to the classroom and field work. Both profit and non-profit organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will demand that students adapt to changing global conditions, participate in interdisciplinary teams, solve problems and create new ideas with critical thinking, and be increasingly culturally sensitive. Mass communications/media studies programs in the U.S. and U.K. can serve as models to lead students into successful learning through interdisciplinary study.

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