

## Chapter 7

# Benefits of Interdisciplinary Teaching at an Omani Public University: The Undergraduate American Literature Classroom Revisited

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### ABSTRACT

*During the last two decades, the pros and cons of applying interdisciplinary approaches in teaching have been debated endlessly. Many scholars have pointed to the favorable impact of interdisciplinary teaching on the quality of education; others have expressed reservations. In the context of an undergraduate Western literature classroom in Oman, teachers are challenged to make literary texts comprehensible and appealing to Omani English majors who have no familiarity with the Western literary tradition when they enroll in literature courses. This chapter explores the possibility of applying interdisciplinary teaching approaches in the undergraduate American literature classroom at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). It discusses some innovative teaching methods which help create an effective teaching and learning environment. The study found, among other things, that the application of interdisciplinary methods can contribute to the development of higher order cognitive skills, broaden students' knowledge base, and heighten their sensitivity to global problems.*

*It was an initiation into the love of learning, of learning how to learn . . . as a matter of interdisciplinary cognition - that is, learning to know something by its relation to something else. - L. Daniels "A homecoming for Bernstein"*

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## INTRODUCTION

In an age where technology has come to be a powerful catalyst in the lives of most university students, one cannot but notice that students have become more exposed to different areas of knowledge, cross-cultural opinions, and global news than was the case before portable internet connectivity was available to most at a relatively low cost or even free of charge on university premises. Accordingly, students' world views have been changing as have their expectations of undergraduate courses. There is no doubt that digitization has helped students in their studies and research with the diversity of information readily accessible to them and has opened doors wide for students to read cross-disciplinarily, but the sheer volume of available information has complicated matters tremendously for both teachers and students. Students, on the one hand, may feel that teachers have lost their pivotal role as the sole source of knowledge in the classroom and teachers, on the other, have been confronted with the new realities of classrooms where their roles have changed significantly. Despite the changed teaching atmosphere in higher education institutions, undergraduate students are still largely dependent on their teachers. With the continuous increase in the volume of online information, students need guidance to focus and filter knowledge when asked to prepare selected topics for discussion from a more specialized viewpoint or from an integrative one.

Teaching American literature to foreign language learners with little or no background knowledge about the Western hemisphere is one of the most challenging of jobs in the field of higher education in the Middle East. Not only are students expected to be taught a foreign language through a largely unfamiliar literature, but they are also supposed to comprehend the historical, social, and political contexts of selected literary texts. Since the information revolution has changed students' perspectives of the world, one can notice that they have become more inquisitive, more critical of their surroundings, and less interested in traditional classroom experiences which used to focus on mere textual and contextual analyses. Since students often experience difficulties in understanding Western cultural traditions, many English majors question the significance of studying Western literature which is based on a system of values significantly different from theirs. They frequently show their disinterest by ignoring study questions, preparation requirements, or failing to perform well in extensive reading activities. Most entertain the preconceived notion that reading Western literature is irrelevant to their contemporary concerns and interests and, above all, their culture. Hereby, the responsibilities of Western literature teachers have become manifold. They have come to assume the roles of educators, facilitators, guides, and cultural interpreters for an audience ever more influenced by the spread of globalization and international knowledge. Thus, teachers are challenged to tailor and apply teaching approaches that will successfully address the new interests and needs of English students. Students in the GCC region, specifically in Oman, are an interesting case to study.

Undergraduate students in Oman are only poorly acquainted with Western literature when they join the Department of English Language and Literature at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Despite the fact that the role of English as a world language is recognized by the Omani Ministry of Education as students start studying English in the first grade and some even before in kindergarten, public school curricula almost entirely lack English literature and it is only through individual efforts of teachers and students or extracurricular activities encouraged by some schools that students study some English literature at the primary or secondary levels. This has historical reasons. Never having been a formal British colony or protectorate, Al-Busaidi (1995) states that the Omani educational system "had no foundations for English ... there were no English-medium schools in Oman ... there was no British inspired

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