

CAP 115 Interdisciplinary Writing

Parker

Common Ground Journal

We may agree that a good conversation requires speakers to share a reason for having the conversation and share a language or means for understanding one another. Likewise, in interdisciplinary communication, disciplines often need a way to communicate to one another that makes sense and crosses linguistic boundaries. How does a computer science person effectively communicate with a visual artist to solve a complex problem? Finding “common ground” partly involves finding key words or concepts that are understood across disciplines.

Repko and others argue that the goal of interdisciplinary work is integration—and that creating or discovering common ground is necessary for integration to occur. In this sense, common ground is a bridge of communication between disciplines. Central to interdisciplinary work is having a way or a language to communicate across disciplines. As you study interdisciplinary research and writing this semester, you will keep a common ground journal where you record and define concepts useful in interdisciplinary communication.

One approach to this journal is to record key terms or concepts that you believe are apt for cross-disciplinary communication and explain your terms from at least two disciplinary perspectives. For example, the term “abstract” at its root means “withdrawn, removed, separate” (OED). When applied to art, for example, the term refers to art that has no reference to any figurative reality; in other words, the art is “withdrawn, removed, separate” from recognizable objects or scenes. Similarly, in dentistry, to abstract a tooth means to pull it out (“withdraw, remove, separate”) from one’s mouth. Across disciplinary scholarly literature, “an abstract” refers to a brief summary of a longer work. An abstract summarizes the essential information in the work; in other words, “withdraws, removes, separates” the key ideas from the body of the text. Defining and demonstrating the use of a common term in specific disciplines is one way to make entries in your common ground journal.

Another approach to this journal is to identify concepts that are shared across disciplines, but might have different meanings in different fields. For example, the term “efficiency” has quite different meanings for economists (money out/money in), biologists (energy out/energy in), and political scientists (influence exerted/political capital expended) (Newell, 2001, p.19). In such a case, your journal entry would compare and contrast the diverse ways that disciplines use the same concept, noting disciplinary-specific definitions or examples and discussing possible ways disciplines might better understand each other’s use of the concept.

Your task is to discover terms that might serve to bridge disciplinary communication through identifying a common vocabulary. In your journal, list and define terms and analyze them from at least two disciplinary perspectives. Your analysis should be a couple paragraphs and include examples of how disciplines understand the concept. To receive full credit for this assignment, aim to explore at least five terms in your journal by the due date on your course schedule. Extra favor will be given to students who demonstrate insight and original thinking.

Tips for discovering terms and concepts

- Browse the glossary in the back of the Repko text for general terms that have interdisciplinary significance. You might consider these: *analysis, synthesis, integration, assumption, worldview, critical thinking, evidence, concept, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, element, epistemology, theory, phenomena.*
- Browse journals from specific disciplines and list recurring terms or concepts.
- List terms or concepts that you think might vary in definition or use across disciplines. For example, compare how linguistics and women's studies uses the term "gender."
- Think about concepts as categories and aim to discover how disciplines explain categories. For example, all disciplines have the notion of "evidence." Choose two disciplines and compare what they say "counts as evidence" from their disciplinary perspectives.

Journal entries are due at varying times during the semester. Your professor will announce the schedule for your section.