

Editors' Introduction

“My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky.”

So wrote Wordsworth in 1802, lines from a short poem he later used to introduce his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” In these lines he was expressing a feeling surely felt by every member of the human species since the first moment our forebears realized the splendor of the multi-colored sight signaled relief from some dark and stormy time. That feeling? Hope. And of course the universality of the feeling evoked by the meteorological phenomenon explains why the rainbow has long been used to symbolize promise of better things to come in the legends and literatures of the world. The Judeo-Christian tradition recorded in Genesis – in which God offers the rainbow by way of promise that he’ll never destroy the world by storm again – is just one instance of such symbolic use of the phenomenon. They abound. And it’s no wonder that the rainbow itself – and the colors that comprise the rainbow, considered both as realities and as symbols – have attracted as much attention by thinkers in all ages and in all fields as they have.

Lucky for us, one of those thinkers is our own Brian McCormack, Principal Lecturer in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts at Arizona State University and member of the AIS Board of Directors, who agreed to revise a peculiar but intriguing paper he presented at the 2017 AIS conference in Baltimore and submit it for consideration for this volume of our journal. The title of that paper – “What Color Is the Interdisciplinary?” The answer to the question – the rainbow. As Brian explains at the start, he sees the question, “which follows from Michael Taussig’s similar anthropological question, “What color is the sacred?”” as pointing to important issues “about the nature of interdisciplinary thinking,” issues he works through in the course of the article, “with a hint [and we ourselves would say more than a hint] of both reverence and irreverence,” a mix that makes his tone at least as peculiar and intriguing as his content.

We think you will enjoy the review of others’ thoughts on colors and rainbows (and all they suggest, about both “the interdisciplinary” and “the sacred”) that Brian interweaves with his own – others from many time periods and fields of study – among them not only Michael Taussig but also Michel Leiris, Emile Durkheim, Giorgio Agamben, and Walter Benjamin, plus figures well-known to all such as Newton, Goethe, and Kant. We also

think you will be as struck as we are by the insight into the practice and promise of interdisciplinarity that Brian's singular project has yielded by the time he gets to his conclusion:

The color of the interdisciplinary is . . . the rainbow. Unlike white light itself, which integrates all the colors in a Newtonian sleight of hand, the rainbow maintains the separate identities of the various possible colors that the interdisciplinary could be. The rainbow is an emblem of *both* clarity and mystery in that all the colors are visible separately, and yet their relationship with one another remains available for further discussion. The rainbow preserves the dialogue, the conversation, the argument, or even the conflict that must proceed in any human encounter. To unite the colors in bright, illuminating, all-encompassing (integrated) white could end the conversation, and produce a monologue.

Like Brian, we hope his colorful piece will itself “preserve the dialogue” on interdisciplinarity, including “the conversation, the argument, even the conflict” on whether integrating until colors disappear in an “all-encompassing . . . white” should be the goal of interdisciplinary activity.

The second of the articles in this collection also emerged from a presentation at an AIS conference, in this case a presentation about a particular undergraduate program in which students create their own course of study, pursuing it through a sequence of interdisciplinary seminars that culminate in a senior project in which they integrate insights drawn from the multiple disciplines they have identified as relevant to their project. The program has survived through 40 years in which others have too often failed to do so, lost during dark and stormy times that have threatened interdisciplinary endeavor since it first began to challenge the reverence for the disciplinary that characterizes our educational system. And how has it done so? As Paul Kjellberg, Michael O'Rourke, and Doreen O'Connor-Gomez, the authors of “Interdisciplinarity and the Undisciplined Student” explain, they do have “Lessons from the Whittier Scholars Program” to share – lessons that arc above such clouds as have shadowed even that successful program in something very like a rainbow – a promise that others may benefit from what they've learned, as well.

One thing they've learned – and proven over many decades in which they have continued to assess and strengthen their program – is that “interdisciplinarity does not have to be postponed until after the acquisition of disciplinary expertise (as some have argued) but can usefully be cultivated at the same time.” What they emphasize here, though, is that in the last few years they have also learned (1) that students not well-grounded in

disciplines need more help than the program had been providing in order to develop an awareness of disciplinary epistemologies sufficient to enable the interdisciplinary task of their senior project and (2) that integrating a modified version of “the Toolbox dialogue approach” into the required junior year seminar could help them provide just what was needed, the core capacity they have dubbed “interdisciplinary consciousness” or IC, “the ability to recognize differences and similarities among disciplinary perspectives, including one’s own, and then combine insights based on those perspectives into a coherent point of view that is a combination of the inputs.” Their account of why and how they modified “the Toolbox dialogue approach,” designed originally for interdisciplinary teams of post-graduate researchers, often researchers in STEM-based subjects, so it might work for their undergraduates is salutary. And so is their insistence, towards the end, that the materials they have adapted to strengthen their own program are so “flexible” they may well be further adapted to do the same for others’ programs. If your heart doesn’t lift at that news, you may at least find your mind opening to exciting possibilities.

That the third of our articles is as uplifting of thoughts and/or feelings as it is – as decidedly “rainbowish” in its effect – is enormously ironic since it offers a “tale of the rise *and fall* of an interdisciplinary major” at a small liberal arts college much like Whittier that has long prided itself on its instantiation(s) of interdisciplinary studies. Over many challenging years, authors Renee Monson and Kristy Kenyon and colleagues working with them in the popular Public Policy (PPOL) major at Hobart and William Smith Colleges struggled to ensure that the program was as effective in accomplishing its interdisciplinary purposes as it was popular. But, as they explain, a final round of assessment, internal in 2013 and external in 2014, revealed the program was falling well short of what most consider necessary for “strong interdisciplinarity,” in part, and indeed in large part, because there was so very little consensus among the faculty involved (and their administrators) as to what “strong interdisciplinarity” might entail. And this time, the assessment process did not lead to productive plans for resolving the issues identified. It led to discussion of the issues, of course, but that led to even less agreement about what should be done and could be done, and, finally, as they say, to “exhaustion.” The clouds did not roll away. What disappeared was the PPOL major. And the fact that it’s still possible for students to minor in the field (however more or less interdisciplinary it can be considered to be) is hardly the stuff of which rainbows are made.

So how can we say the article is nonetheless “uplifting”? How can we suggest that it is, itself, a rainbow of sorts? We can do so because we agree

with the peer reviewer who lauded “how the authors get from a failed local experiment to insights of national [and we’d add international] interest.” Renee and Kristy set their sad tale in the larger context of the many tales still unfolding, here in the States and worldwide, tales of interdisciplinary programs’ growth . . . and vulnerability. They discuss the need for assessment that can demonstrate the efficacy of such programming, and the challenges of conducting such assessment when those involved assume rather than examine so much that ought to be of import. They see great value in the typology of programs’ organizational and curricular strength developed by David Knight, Lisa Lattuca, and others, but suggest the criteria of that typology would be much improved if modified to include consideration of “which variant of interdisciplinary education [a] program pursues,” i.e., a criterion that necessitates just such “explicit conversations” about the variants as even colleagues fully committed to interdisciplinarity too often fail to conduct. In their conclusion, they offer us the wisdom born of their experience and the analysis that has followed upon that experience so we and our programs might hope to avoid the fate they and their program have suffered:

[S]trong interdisciplinary programs are those in which the faculty clarify the specific curricular aims of the interdisciplinary [program] in light of the institution’s general curriculum, identify which of the various approaches to interdisciplinary education described in the literature will support those aims, and design a sequence and mix of disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses that will make good use of their organizational resources.

Wisdom born of dark times, enabling hope. That sounds like it might well be symbolized by . . . a you-know-what.

And the fourth of our articles, written by Bethany Laursen, a graduate student at Michigan State University who describes herself as “an evaluator-scholar who develops, disseminates, and evaluates tools that aid interdisciplinary reasoning about wicked problems,” might well be symbolized by a you-know-what, as well. For one thing, it also offers wisdom born of challenges experienced and analyzed, though this time she and her interdisciplinary work (which is a real-world practice of interdisciplinarity rather than an academic one) have benefitted from the lessons she has learned, even as she hopes that we, her readers, will do. As she explains in her abstract, “[t]his article aims to convince readers of the value of intersecting the scholarship of interdisciplinarity with the field of argumentation studies.” And why? “The interdisciplinarity literature has not much engaged with the vehicle that carries interdisciplinary learning, languages, and locutions: the

argument.” And, “[o]n the argumentation studies side, despite the diverse interests of these scholars, not many have studied how reasoning proceeds in interdisciplinary inquiries.” “To aid bridge-building from both sides, [Bethany uses] the example of interdisciplinary abductive reasoning to show how the two fields can [take strength] from each other” – and how all involved in either can do the same.

Like the authors of the article on the Whittier Scholars Program and the authors of the article on the Hobart and William Smith program, Bethany assessed the work she was doing as less well done than it might have been, and, like them, she describes a way to address the problem by modifying a model of practice developed by others (the “Toolbox dialogue approach,” in the case of the article on the Whittier Scholars Program, and the “Knight et al. typology,” in the case of the Hobart and William Smith article). Bethany recommends modification of “a prominent existing model of abduction from the argumentation field,” the Douglas Walton model, adducing her personal experience with a couple of complex real-world projects to demonstrate that this model is “necessary but not sufficient for understanding and dealing with the unique challenges of interdisciplinary abduction.” Although it does help identify “the interpersonal necessities of interdisciplinary abduction, such as shared understanding, exchange of explanations, and conversational moves across disciplinary perspectives,” it does little to identify, much less deal with, the data that are themselves so important in interdisciplinary projects. She offers steps supplemental to those of Walton’s model, with the combo forming a new model, the PEPR model, that will “help us focus on the data to be explained while we lean on Walton’s model to understand the people doing the explaining.” And how interesting that she illustrates how the combo model might work for an “Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.” It seems it might even assist in moving the members of such a panel past stormy times into a “rainbow coalition” of some kind – and a “climate” changed indeed.

We *might* begin our comments on the fifth and final article in this collection by saying that it returns us to the realm of the academic world (represented by the authors of the second and third articles) from the realm of the real world (in which Bethany Lauren has pursued her work, and will do so again, once she’s been further credentialed by Michigan State). We *might* say this. But we *won’t*. For one thing – and a very important thing it is – such distinction between the realms of the real and the academic ignores the fusion of the two realms that lies at the heart of interdisciplinary work – work that informs theory with practice and practice with theory whether it’s done within the halls of the academy or without. And while

it's true that Jennifer Schulz's article focuses on a course she teaches in the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies program at Seattle University, we think reading it will convince you – as it has convinced us – that there may never have been a course that makes an “academic experience” more experiential than this one does – that better integrates life lived in all its complexity (including the lives lived by the teacher and her students) with the wisdom offered by scholars and artists whose work (in many different fields and forms) involves the same.

As it happens, the course in question centers on the dark and stormy times that too often characterize “life lived in all its complexity” and on the traumatizing effect such times can have. As Jennifer explains at the start of the piece, both the course content and the pedagogy she has developed to enable her and her students to deal with that challenging content reflect the integration of real world work and academic work that she has achieved in her own life – specifically, work as a psychotherapist specializing in trauma and work as a professor of literature: “[B]ecause I have spent my whole professional life (in both fields) studying stories, the course is specifically focused on *narratives* of trauma,” both in literary texts and in clinical discourses (like the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or *DSM* itself and other material by theorists and researchers). By juxtaposing portrayals of trauma in the two, she's able to demonstrate the importance of “listening” to such portrayals with a “radical curiosity” that eschews such assumptions as disciplinary approaches often entail so as to allow for an open-minded and open-hearted response as much like “authentic witnessing” as possible. She underscores the point with a class exercise in which the students are paired and asked to share “something weighing on them,” something at least somewhat traumatizing from their own lives – an exercise whose powerful emotional effect reinforces their new academic understanding of the value of “authentic witnessing.” As such, it's an exercise that acts as the perfect impetus for the “interdisciplinary research into a contemporary site of trauma that [each] will pursue throughout the rest of the course as [they] continue to read literary texts and theories of trauma together.” It probably helps to explain why most students in the three versions of this course that Jennifer has taught thus far have chosen “to explore sites of trauma that resonated . . . with their own cultural, familial, and social histories.”

And talk about witnessing . . . Towards the end of her article, Jennifer shares enough of the work of two of these students to evidence how successful the course has been. A Mexican-American woman focusing on journalists addressing the violence of the drug cartels (violence that sent

her grandfather fleeing to the States) and a Filipino-American man focusing on poets addressing the on-going consequences of long-ago colonization both resist the temptation to impose interpretations that dismiss important ambiguities in the trauma narratives they work with. They both avoid interpretations that would integrate their many-hued insights into white light rather than the rainbows that they ought to be. And we say “ought to be” because Jennifer and her students would certainly agree with Brian McCormack’s views as expressed in the first of the articles in this collection (and quoted earlier in this introduction): “The color of the interdisciplinary is . . . the rainbow,” appropriate because “[t]he rainbow is an emblem of *both* clarity and mystery in that all the colors are visible separately, and yet their relationship with one another remains available for further discussion.” Like the best interdisciplinarity, “[t]he rainbow preserves the dialogue, the conversation, the argument, or even the conflict [inherent] in any human encounter.” And it promises better times to come as “further discussion” enables movement toward solutions to complex real-world problems, even those emerging from (and threatening more) dark and stormy times.

We’ll close by suggesting that a little “heart-leaping” is a suitable response to an article like this about a teacher like this and a course like this, and by suggesting that response is suitable to our whole collection of articles, too. Besides, if their emotional appeal doesn’t get to you, perhaps their practical applicability will, for they all offer that as well, little pots of gold such as symbolize the moral and material value of rainbows and all they represent. Too bad all those doing interdisciplinary work and (therefore) “always chasing rainbows” aren’t rewarded with *non*-symbolic pots of gold the way every one of them ought to be. . . but maybe that too shall come to pass once all the clouds that might menace work of this special kind have blown on by.

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