

AIS 45th Anniversary Keynote: Transformation and Change, Wholeness and Wellness

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This morning, I wish to explore the AIS 45th Conference theme with you—“Transformative Shifts: Integration, Wholeness, and Wellness.”

A new conference model is at the root of one of the most important transformations AIS itself has undertaken, and I want to underscore how radical this has been, and how it has even produced, for some, the discomfort many of you have written about in textbooks and articles, and in presentations I’ve already heard here at this conference: Interdisciplinary work is transformation of knowledge and research, and also of *practice*, of how we live and think. And this does not always go down easy. We speak of how our students struggle out of their disciplinary moorings out into the open waters of interdisciplinarity when we are no less unmoored, often institutionally, in a world where disciplinary homes can mean survival, money, recognition, and institutional power. Out into open waters we go, sometimes building the boat as we sail.

The Association for Interdisciplinary Studies (AIS) has always had a strong commitment to the practice of interdisciplinarity, not only in the academy, but in the careers of the students and researchers who leave academe and take it out into the larger world. This year’s conference took on that commitment in a new way: It is the first AIS conference not to be hosted by or at a university, but by, literally, a practice, a business, Drs. Marcus and Michelle Tanner’s *Healing Choice Family Therapy* practice. As many of you know, Marcus Tanner, who serves on the board as our Director of Digital Initiatives, was director of the Integrative Studies program at Texas Tech University before he moved to his practice full time. His move came in the course of planning to hold a conference here. In a timely fashion, when university and college budgets are strained or over-committed, Marcus’ offer to shift the conference from Texas Tech to his own practice opened up a possible new model for hosting conferences that we as an organization have not tried before. I want to thank and congratulate him and Michelle on doing this so well, and for transforming and extending the way we think about our conferences. Not all interdisciplinarians become academics and yet interdisciplinarity remains fundamental to their professions and practices. It is wonderful to find our way to a new mode of inclusion and its long-standing commitment to the many stakeholders in interdisciplinary practice.

I would say, though, that some greeted this shift with discomfort. AIS, an academic organization, seemingly gone rogue and outside of the academy, felt more disquieting. This decision asked more of the members of AIS, and of our personal and professional notions of self, than some were not, at least not immediately, prepared to put on the line. And yet now that we are here, and the conference is running, it has been a terrific conference so far, enriched by the frameworks from two keynotes of those working out there in the field (to switch metaphors from open water to the ground beneath our feet), again opening us up to new models of integration and transformation.

I had many thoughts about how to do justice to the 45th anniversary of AIS, given the many members, past and present, who have made this organization the living, dynamic entity it is today; given its sense of community, its vibrancy even in its intellectual difference; given its welcome with open arms to anyone who arrives saying “Hello, I think I’m an interdisciplinarian,” or “Hello, I’ve just been assigned to become an interdisciplinarian.” So, out of curiosity, I went back to the very first volume of *Issues*, published in 1982, to see who we were, and found the following:

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Figure 1. Table of Contents, Volume 1, Number 1, Issues in Integrative Studies

This year, 2023, is the 45th anniversary of AIS as an organization, and it is the 41st anniversary of *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*, which was then *Issues in Integrative Studies* until 10 years ago in 2013. In 1982, it was to be “an occasional” publication, and the three contributed articles seem to have been papers presented at the annual conference the year before. All four discuss interdisciplinarity in terms of the social sciences; all four were written by men.

The AIS that published the journal in 1982 was also the Association for *Integrative Studies*, an organization whose theoretical bent was to view interdisciplinarity as sets of theories and research practices that would strive toward some kind of wholeness, and even as a mindset that would overcome the limited “worldview” of disciplines, as Miller writes in his introduction to the volume. To define “worldview,” he turns to the work of anthropologist Robert Redfield:

Robert Redfield described world view as the way a group of people organize their conceptions, their feelings about their experience and things in that experience. It is a “stage set.” “World views are visions outward from the self . . . and conceptions of everything.” They contain a sense of order, of what is real and how knowledge is obtained. They are the “underlying premises” of thought. (Miller, 1982, p. 5)

Though Miller does not say it, his use of Redfield’s definition of worldview applies as much to interdisciplinarity and integration as it does to what he thinks of as the limiting “thought models” or “stage sets” of the disciplines themselves. Interdisciplinarity can function as a worldview as Redfield describes it, conceptually more open and capacious than Miller allows for in his analogy to disciplinary thinking.

It is worth pausing over the idea that a worldview is more than how people organize things conceptually, abstractly, intellectually, and focus for a moment on Redfield’s emphasis on “their feelings about their experience and the things in that experience,” that it is (a) vision “outward from the self.” It is that dimension of experiential knowledge that I want to emphasize, that notion of self, and how 41 years of *Issues* have documented and affirmed that to engage in interdisciplinary practice and thought is to be changed, it is to challenge often fundamental aspects of our identity, of our “self” and experience.

Transformative Shifts (1)

It’s never the changes we want that change everything.
Lola, the narrator of Junot Diaz’s (2007) “Wildwood”

At our conference this year, forty-five years from AIS’s first conference, our theme is also integration and wholeness, and wellness—the health, if you like, and as we have heard already, of self, our families, our communities, our programs and the institutions where we work. This health both rests on, and is challenged by, the transformations in our lives, the shifts that do transform, ready or not. I want to move for a few minutes from talking about interdisciplinarity and us as an organization to talking about our students, our pedagogies, and our practices of community and self-care to ask what integration has to do with it.

Yesterday’s keynotes were beautifully paired, as Dr. Cameron Brown talked about creating change of different orders in “Enabling a Broken System: The Importance of Attending to Third Order Change” and Dr. Marcus Tanner talked about how we hate it and often don’t do it well at all in “Official Welcome to the 45th AIS Conference.” Interdisciplinarity conceives of itself as a change-maker, a disrupter of the usual things, a transformer. And we also experience the resistance to it, both within the structures of academe and

from students who come to us out of disciplines, out of what we as interdisciplinarians see as too-limited ways of organizing “their experience and the things in that experience.” Interdisciplinarity cracks that resistance open, and can leave us in a sometimes very raw space. We have these two competing instincts: to transform and to resist the change we experience, even change of our own making.

In a short story I teach often in my introductory literature classes,¹ Junot Diaz’s “Wildwood” (2007), Lola, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, in the course of the story, is, in sum, totally blown away as she figures out that everything she thought she knew, both about the past and her immediate future, from her mother’s backstory to what it would feel like to make love to a boy, is totally wrong. Told from the point of view of an older and wiser self looking back on “you,” her younger 12-year-old self, and then “I,” her rebellious 15-year-old self, she is constantly upended in her plans to escape her overbearing Dominican mother, her plans to run away to Wildwood, NJ (where things are supposed to be, you know, wild), and to escape the person she is sure her mother is trying to turn her into. My students love this story—they almost cling to it—they feel for Lola even as they say they would not be that dumb, that naïve, that disrespectful, so unprepared for change. Lola says twice when big changes occur that she is “about to begin,” a self starting over, and even though my students, pre-pandemic, also liked this text, in our post-pandemic landscape, they identify. They did not want the change that came to them, and it seems now that it is taking the post-pandemic world a good, long while to come back online, and it’s glitchy out there. They are ready to begin, wiped clean by the pandemic of whatever trajectories they thought they were on, tired from what felt like years of being on camera in their bedrooms when they should have been outside, in class, learning more than they now think they did. They want to begin again, as do we.

Lola has one more interesting quality to her, a physical feeling that comes over her when she is about to know something viscerally that she cannot yet see or verbalize precisely. It’s a kind of premonition of change, a not entirely comfortable feeling that transformation is upon her. She says, looking back at herself,

And at that moment, for reasons you will never quite understand, you are overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change. You become light-headed and you can feel a throbbing in your blood, a rhythm, a drum. Bright lights zoom through you like photon torpedoes, like comets. You don’t know how or why you know this thing, but that you know it cannot be doubted. It is exhilarating. (Diaz, 2007)

1 Many of the examples here from literature and pedagogical theory owe much to the classroom discussions I have had with students in my literature classes and formal and informal gatherings with colleagues at Ocean County College to discuss pedagogy, our students, and being an academic in the twenty-first century. I am grateful for these discussions.

This exhilaration is also anxiety disguised as photon torpedoes, the destruction that manifests itself before and as change or transformation takes place. Our students feel it too. They know Lola this way in themselves, in their anxieties about the future, the hope they have placed in this feeling that they have about the unknown, this higher education they have come to engage in with us. Is it worth it? What is college or university supposed to do?

One thing that has become more apparent than ever is that students, consciously or not, are looking to higher education as healing space, as reparative space, where somehow they will find themselves whole again. As a micro-generation, they are often doing the hard work of integration even as they are the site of it themselves, seeing the classroom, the library, co-curricular life, and services such as tutoring and counseling, as co-extensive, all of equal value and all needed simultaneously.

This phenomenon has given rise on many campuses to interest and practice of trauma informed pedagogy, another model of interdisciplinary practice (certainly theory) and wellness. I want to spend a bit of time here to get a sense of what this is. “Trauma-informed pedagogy begins with an awareness of the trauma students may have experienced or be experiencing (in many possible shapes and forms), and a commitment to enacting teaching strategies to support and nurture students in their learning journeys” (Guilford College Library, 2023). An examination of the growing recent literature on trauma informed pedagogy, as represented here by both Guilford College’s site and the University of Michigan’s (2023) “Equitable Teaching” website, clearly finds the language of *practice* foregrounded in what is described by the latter as “a radical approach to education that is not common.” This pedagogy emphasizes “*the effect that event has on an individual*” (University of Michigan, 2023), and so connects to Redfield’s inclusion in his description of “worldview” seen above that it “organiz[es one’s] experience and the things in that experience.” Declarative memory particularly suffers (University of Michigan, 2023); and unarticulated experiential knowledge may inform a student’s outlook and sense of self (Carter et al, 2022).

Interdisciplinary are uniquely positioned to embrace trauma informed pedagogy and its attendant ability to reorganize one’s worldview, I’d argue, as some of the most foundational aspects of interdisciplinary work, such as perspective-taking, tolerance of complexity and uncertainty, the ability to work in a community or team of scholars and stakeholders, is at the root of the called-for resilient teaching (Hart-Davidson, 2020), the creation of safe and brave spaces. We strive to foster those qualities of interdisciplinary in our students, who are “ready to begin,” but, like Lola, may not see this as an intellectual or academic enterprise unless we create practices and frameworks where all of the “non-academic” aspects of college life are integrated into their learning and their transforming sense of self. We, too, are calling for change within our working lives and are not so far off from our students

in that regard; we too, tend to see our work as being something that should be a healing space, an integrative space, a space of reparation and wellness.

Having looked back at the very first issue of *Issues*, now projected out in time in ways its authors could not have foreseen, in a world of a real-life plague, political unrest, and yet another mass shooting (this time in Lewiston, Maine, October 25, 2023), it was fascinating to find in it assurance that our students' inability to articulate what is it they know they know *à la* Lola,² is, according to Winquist, another contributor to that *Issues* volume, an aspect of the integrative process. He draws on Michael Polanyi's 1967 book, *The Tacit Dimension*:

If people can't verbalize their integrative insights in precise terms, that doesn't necessarily imply that the insights themselves are vague. Indeed, such experiences are often described as having a revelatory or "A-ha" quality, which is hardly the characteristic of vague understanding. According to Polanyi, the inability of otherwise articulate people to describe the content of an integrative experience is an example of what he calls 'the tacit dimension' of human experience. This is the dimension in which Polanyi says we literally "know more than we can tell." For example, we know a person's face, and we can recognize it among a thousand, indeed a million, others, but we usually cannot tell how we recognize a face we know. In Polanyi's analysis the transformation of particulars into coherent wholes is dependent on this tacit dimension of knowing. This integration is achievable only through a process of "interiorization" or "indwelling" in which the mind recedes from the level of explicit particulars and attends to the tacit dimension. Therefore, for Polanyi, "The belief that, since particulars are more tangible, their knowledge offers a true conception of things is fundamentally mistaken." (Winquist, 1982, p. 9)

One might suggest that interdisciplinarity's practices serve, in part, as means of clearing away these explicit particulars in order to foster the insights and new ways of knowing that are not initially expressed verbally but do manifest themselves in various ways. This leads Winquist (1982) to conjecture that "[i]n this view one can culture or stimulate but not 'teach' an integrative perspective" (p. 11). In more contemporary terms, an integrative perspective or insight could be understood as an emergent outcome (Stommel, 2014).

Transformative Shifts (2)

We will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.
Amanda Gorman (2021), *The Hill We Climb*

We see in our students, and ourselves, this attention to the tacit dimension of knowledge, and in it the hope for reparation and renewal. The old is blown

² And our own. I focus here particularly on pedagogy, but the same applies more broadly as Winquist's article makes clear.

away, not to be restored. The “return to normal” or “the new normal” doesn’t quite cut it. There is hope that our very wounded world can become a wondrous one, can be healed. Cam Brown’s talk yesterday suggested that interdisciplinary thinking and practices can be part of that first, second, and third order change we and our students hope to effect, the micro and macro shifts that again, as Marcus Tanner reminded us, we resist as we are drawn by their possibility.

I want to explore in concrete terms where interdisciplinary practice and pedagogy, theory and research, is reparative, is integrative, in what is emerging around us. I thought about two kinds of tacit knowledge I’ve encountered, one in the academy and one in the classroom, that I would like to articulate.

Tacit Knowledge 1: The Hidden Life of Interdisciplinary Jobs

The first instance is hidden as well as tacit, and comes out of work I began to do as I realized what jobs my students would be interested in, coming from humanities or English, but also as gamers and even gig-work producers of game art and game content. The jobs they are interested in are often officially hidden, and their very interdisciplinary nature shunts them out of view. In the process of creating and gathering evidence for the viability of a certificate in creative and professional writing, I was directed to find potential career connections to it, along with forecasts for those professions. One I knew of, and my students know of, is non-programming jobs in the gaming industry, such as game content writer and narrative designer. I duly logged into a proprietary system of career descriptions and career coaching, which depends on U.S. government job categories, that is, CIP codes,³ and this is crucial, I found that zero narrative designer jobs were listed. Ditto game content writers. They were all subsumed under “technical writer,” an inaccurate categorization of what these jobs are and what education and skills one might need to get into the profession. As interdisciplinarians, we need to uncover and cause to be uncovered, these jobs and careers that have been reduced to tacit knowledge by an information system that overlooks them. If the classification does not exist, the job disappears. We need third order change. Arguing for department and program viability now demands that we know not only of prospective jobs for students, but have ready statistics on their occupational outlook. These hidden jobs are often those we need to bring out into discussions of program funding, career advising, and job skills (to name a few dimensions).

³ The same CIP codes are used to list careers in the publicly available *US Government Occupational Outlook Handbook*, where the same issue arises. The proprietary systems I have encountered all depend upon the U.S. Government CIP codes. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>

Tacit Knowledge 2: Does the Dog Die?

The second kind of tacit knowledge—that I am naming “Does the dog die?”—I see in my students and I see how they attend to it. I see it in their information seeking habits and how they realize they have (hidden and tacit) common ground in their knowledge of who they are and what they want. Two examples follow.

Course Electives. This micro-generation is relentlessly practical, or so it seems, going along with the STEM wave or majoring in marketing or business because education should lead directly to a well-paying job (and who would argue with that?). More and more, electives are a tacit dimension of their career plans and sense of self. If so, they choose electives to build skills for their gig work, the work that is closest to their sense of who they are, especially, where they want create, upend, subvert, integrate, experiment, for example, film, photography, writing, sociology, anthropology, art. STEM by day, in-game seller of wildly popular costumes and gear by night. They draw from elective courses all over campus, putting together for themselves an interdisciplinary package of skills aimed at the career aspirations that reflect their deepest sense of how they see themselves. But this interdisciplinary approach to learning rarely tracks as such. Instead, a student with seemingly wildly varying electives is viewed as having no plan, “searching,” and “all over the place.” Rarely are these seen as students engaging in similar kinds of practices or thinking.

Does the Dog Die? I use this popular website that answers this very question about books, movies, and TV shows as a demonstration that this generation’s tolerance for not knowing things (and for being triggered) is, they know, terrible. How will they do in class, is this all worth it, what should they be doing now? How to cope with that creeping Lola feeling that an epiphany is imminent? Head it off at the pass—why tolerate uncertainty when you can go to a website and just find out, before you invest, if the dog dies in the movie or book you are reading? They know themselves, and *voilà!* They’ve created a tool to cope with uncertainty. They know they want to know things. Uncertainty is hard. This is a humorous example, but it is the flip side of the tacit and pervasive anxiety around the value of higher education, of enduring the complexity and tolerating failure in order to learn what they cannot yet conceive of.

Transformative Shifts (3)

It also emerged in my classes that as far apart as they feel politically, students on both ends of U.S. politics could find common ground, even in the contentious territory. Discussions of control over books in schools, book banning on the one hand and trigger warnings on the other, initially yielded no common ground. Looking at both the conservative and liberal approach (hide/ban the

books or put a label on them), revealed the idea that what was really sought, hidden and tacit, was a mechanism that would allow them to deal with discomfort, and both of these strategies tended to be judged by all present as flawed in some aspect. They did the work of finding a shared, common ground, way of wording the issue.

In these cases, interdisciplinarity can open up what Devin Kelly (2024) recently called “the strangely wide and luminous space” of learning and imagination that disciplinary thinking and practice may foreclose. Out of curiosity again, I looked at the latest volume 41(1) of *Issues*, Spring 2023. In this volume of *Issues* (also a tribute to Julie Thompson Klein), no longer solely authored by men and representing a diversity of approaches and writers, Ciara Zogheib offers a new model, a transformation in how we might think of the integration that addresses what I have called the hidden knowledge problem in my first example. Her approach is artifactual, and picks up on the ways in which systems of categorization can hide the very existence of people, practices, and forms of knowing. Drawing from information studies, she writes of examining the artifacts of our practices of interdisciplinarity in order to learn about its processes:

The notebooks and spreadsheets, our information objects, contain the information (or representations of the information) being integrated. If we adopt an information studies perspective, we claim that by studying these information objects and the ways in which they are changed, shared, and analyzed during the integration process, we can learn more about what that process involved. This focus on the “stuff” of interdisciplinary research helps us mitigate the challenges presented by current ways of conceiving of integration—namely, by providing the “real life” picture of interdisciplinary integration activities that we cannot get from theoretical conceptual models while avoiding the bias that comes with the typical after-the-fact approach. (Zogheib, 2023, p. 64)

When we look at integration as a making whole again, I’d suggest that we really, in thought and practice, as interdisciplinarians, view integration as making things whole anew. We are not looking to go back but forward. We know, and we see in our students, the artifacts of their everyday lives and how these enter into the integration activities that take place in the classroom, in the library, in the tutoring center, in the counseling office, and later in how they would like to live and work. As a way of opening up a conversation on this, our 45th anniversary, I would like to have us think about the “stuff” of our interdisciplinarity in practice. A thought experiment if nothing else, it grounds us in the processes of realization: where it happens, how it happens, and in whose hands it is.

Thank you.

Biographical Note

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