Discipline and Prosper? A Case Study of Interdisciplinary Environments in English Literature Master's Level Courses in Sweden

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Abstract

Interdisciplinarity has emerged as a major trend both in Swedish academia and abroad. While the value of interdisciplinary contributions to research has long been acknowledged, others worry about the waning of disciplinary specific training in higher education. Arguments both for and against interdisciplinary teaching environments have been raised. How does an interdisciplinary teaching environment impact the study of English literature? This article studies two online master's courses at a Swedish university: *Narrating Madness in Literature and Culture* and *Literature and Disability*. These two master's level courses knit English literary studies with other research fields, such as disability studies and medicine. These courses draw students from a variety of disciplines, such as psychology, social work and pedagogy, as well as English and comparative literature backgrounds. In this article, we examine the seminar fora from the two courses. We ask: how does the interdisciplinary environment contribute to knowledge construction and how does the disciplinary background (English literature or non-English literature) of students influence participation and performance in the course? While the courses resulted in 'epistemic insight' and knowledge construction, we found that improvements could be made to support students from non-English literature backgrounds. We conclude this article with some suggestions.

Keywords: interdisciplinary education; English literature pedagogy; higher education; online education; educational technology; epistemological insight

Background

Often driven by funding bodies, interdisciplinarity has emerged as a major trend in Swedish academia and abroad (Lyall et al. 2013). While the value

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of interdisciplinary contributions to research has long been acknowledged (Wallerstein 1996), others worry about the waning of disciplinary specific training in higher education (e.g., Kramnick 2018). This article examines two new (created within the past five years) courses at a Swedish university. Specifically, these master's level courses knit various research fields, such as disability studies, psychology, and medicine with English literary studies. These courses are *Narrating Madness in Literature and Culture* (*Narrating Madness*) and *Literature and Disability*. The sole prerequisite for these online courses is high school English and a bachelor's degree in any discipline. For these courses, students do not need a bachelor's degree in English literature, allowing for a broader base of students. Indeed, many of the students on these courses are psychologists, social scientists and teachers, among others. There are also students with English and comparative literature backgrounds.

The two courses are designated as 'profile courses' at Umeå University. In 2013, the university's Faculty of Arts issued a call for proposals for profile courses. These courses were to be accessible to all students with a bachelor's degree in the humanities and if possible, outside the humanities. Furthermore, a profile course should include an orientation within a strong, or potentially strong, research area for the Faculty of Arts at the university. Thus, the course should be linked to ongoing research projects. Researchers (those university employees with mainly research in their contracts) were particularly encouraged to both develop courses and contribute to the teaching.

The learning outcomes for the two courses (*Narrating Madness* and *Literature and Disability*) include both generic academic, as well as more specific humanities and literary skills. One generic learning outcome applicable to most subjects is 'to locate and integrate relevant literature independently into scholarly work'. An example of a more specific humanities learning outcome is 'to contextualize contemporary theory and approaches to mental illness/disability with historical representations in order to identify any continuities or ruptures'. A learning outcome arguably more specific to literary studies is 'to understand and interrogate associations of creativity and mental illness as represented in literary texts'.

In formulating our research questions, we took into account the many positive and critical arguments for and against interdisciplinary teaching environments. One key positive argument concerns possibilities for

epistemic insight or what Billingsley, Taber, Riga and Newdick (2013) understand as knowledge about knowledge. Indeed, as Billingsley and Fraser (2018) write 'adopting epistemic insight as a curriculum goal … can potentially engage students' intellectual curiosity, develop their interdisciplinary scholarly expertise and ability to find solutions to wicked problems which are rational and compassionate' (1109). Interdisciplinary environments and courses can challenge the boundaries around university disciplines that are at times impenetrable (Bernstein, 2000). These disciplinary boundaries 'encourag[e] a siloed approach to learning and negat[e] the need or opportunity to call on any other discipline' (Billingsley & Fraser 2018: 1109). As Billingsley and Fraser (2018) among many others have pointed out 'The solution of real-world problems and answers to *Big Questions* … do not reside in one discipline alone' (1109). One effect of interdisciplinary courses that engage in epistemic insight is that students can gain the tools 'to position themselves within humanity' (1109). While this is a fascinating consideration, we do not investigate how the course affects their 'position[ing] within humanity' here.

In an older but well-cited article, Benson (1982) articulates five key critiques of interdisciplinary studies: conceptual confusion, lack of a mature base in a contributing discipline (among students), inability to develop a disciplinary competence, shallowness of course content and financial drain. While all are relevant to the practice and pursuit of interdisciplinary courses, one relates particularly to the pedagogical experience and informs our second research question. In Benson's second argument, the participation of students who lack a mature disciplinary base allows them only 'spectator[ship]'. This concern is more recently voiced in Rives-East and Lima (2013). The aforementioned critiques have undergraduate students in mind. The students under study here are at a master's level, so we can assume that they have had the opportunity to master at least one discipline in their undergraduate degrees. However, this concern is still relevant to the approach of English literature by students who do not have a disciplinary background in English literature.

In this study, we consider a set of cases, namely two interdisciplinary environments (the courses *Narrating Madness* and *Literature and Disability*) with these potential advantages and disadvantages of interdisciplinary studies in mind. The teachers of the courses observed the development of fora discussion and rarely interjected. This allowed us to

look at the ways in which students reach insight without the teachers' immediate prompting. Analyzing these discussions allowed access to how students with different disciplinary backgrounds supported each other's learning and knowledge construction.

Specifically, we pose the following research questions:

1) How does the interdisciplinary environment contribute to knowledge construction?
2) How does the disciplinary background (English or non-English) of students influence participation and performance in the courses?

The current study

The current study is a qualitative study of two part-time master's level courses in English literature taught at a Swedish university. These courses were *Narrating Madness* and *Literature and Disability*. These courses were created and taught in the past five years by the first author. We provide overview data about the courses, but as the number of students is relatively low (see Table 1), a quantitative analysis such as an ordinal regression analysis that links background to performance is not merited.

Narrating Madness considers depictions of madness in Western literature from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century (with all texts read in modern English translation). While the course progresses chronologically from the Middle Ages and considers how texts can be located within their contemporary contexts as far as religion, gender and medicine, the students also engage with significant modern theoretical discussions of madness and creativity as offered by Foucault, Freud and others. The five units of *Narrating Madness* in the version of the course under study are 1) Divine Madness, 2) The Anatomy of Melancholy, 3) The Great Confinement, 4) Clinical Hysteria, and 5) War and Madness.

Literature and Disability explores contemporary disability studies through a series of critical readings and examining the representation of disability through close reading of a selection of literary texts from the nineteenth century and onwards. The six units offered in the version of the course under study are: 1) Models of Disability, 2) Deafness and Life Writing, 3) Autism 4) Prosthesis, 5) Disability and Children's Literature, and 6) Disability and the Gothic.

As an integral part of the courses, 27 students contributed to asynchronous online written fora that were designed for educational

purposes. In these fora that were linked to each unit, the students were required to present and discuss course assignments, as well as discuss ideas with other students. Further, the students presented their own reflections on the assigned readings. While prompts for reflection were included for each seminar, students were encouraged to follow their own interests in the reflections, which were to be between 250-500 words. In order to foster a lively dialogue, students were encouraged to respond as soon as possible to their peers' reflections, ideally within 24 hours of posting. However, there was no requirement for students to respond to all posts. Some posts resulted in engaging discussion, while others did not.

Table 1 shows the number of students who studied each course and their disciplinary backgrounds. The categorization was at times not straight forward, as some students had studied English as part of their undergraduate degrees. After discussion we decided to categorize only those students who took their major in English literature as English scholars. Although not all students were Umeå University graduates, for simplicity, we distinguish between disciplines in the humanities and other faculty scholars based on Umeå University's faculty model.

Table 1. The distribution of students per course and undergraduate faculty, based on Umeå University's faculty model

Course	English Scholars	Other Humanities Scholars	Other Faculty Scholars
Narrating Madness	1	7	5
Literature and disability	5	6	3

Students offered various motivations for taking these courses in the introductions they provided for themselves at the start of the course. For example, many of the students reported taking these courses in order to enrich their current employment, such as teaching, therapy or social work. Others noted their interest in deepening their other studies through literary reflection. An example of the former is provided by a special needs teacher who motivated their interest in taking *Literature and Disability* by gaining new insight which they could then share with their students. An example of the latter is an archeologist who stated their motivation for taking the

course *Narrating Madness* to explore 'the possibilities and limitations for interpreting the mindsets of individuals in the past'.

Methodology

We undertook a close reading of the comments in the course online fora. Specifically, we focused on the knowledge construction that occurred in responses to a student's initial post. Not all response posts resulted in this kind of knowledge construction. Some response posts were independent statements indicating participation in a course forum, yet without extending knowledge construction. Further, some response posts created interaction, yet without knowledge construction involving the ideas of the initial post. We used a process of iterative inductive analysis (Patton 2002) throughout our close reading, as detailed in Langum and Sullivan (2017; 2020). That is, we first read the fora discussions independently of each other, then we re-read the discussions, noting examples of knowledge construction and problematic exchanges before meeting a month later to discuss these examples and exchanges. Not all fora resulted in knowledge construction; the examples we present below are therefore indicative of what can happen.

To assess how well the students ultimately performed against the expected learning outcomes, we considered the final grades awarded to the students in relation to their disciplinary backgrounds.

Ethical considerations

For each course, students were taken from a randomly selected single cohort. We do not report which cohorts to assure anonymity and confidentiality. Further, we do not cite any student discussions that include personal details. We follow Burman and Kleinsasser's (2004) ethical guidelines for the use of student work in scholarship of teaching and learning research: we employed a group of current students as 'proxies to identify hot spots, e.g., What makes students feel more or less vulnerable?' (75). In this way we could assure that the citations we use do not compromise the students who had taken the courses. This body of students led us to remove one direct quotation, which we subsequently paraphrased. After review we member checked with our cohorts by inviting them to

read and comment on the manuscript; a few students requested the text but did not suggest any alterations.

Analysis and discussion

We divide our analysis and discussion according to the research questions where we present our analysis of three fora discussion examples of knowledge construction and one example of a problematic exchange. We have selected these examples as they illustrate the rewards and pitfalls of this type of master's level course taught in an interdisciplinary setting. We did not set a minimum number of discussion turns as a selection criterion, but selected discussion examples on the basis of their content.

How does the interdisciplinary environment contribute to knowledge construction?

In this section, we discuss examples related to knowledge construction.

From the weekly assignment on Divine Madness found in the course *Narrating Madness*, we selected a forum discussion that consists of nine discussion turns. The assignment consisted in required reading: selections from the fourteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* in translation and two critical articles about the primary text: one that focuses on the depiction of postnatal psychosis in the text (Jefferies & Horsfall 2014), and one concerning medicine and medieval mysticism (Langum 2018). The students were offered the following prompts for their reflections: 1) How is madness characterized in *The Book of Margery Kempe*? Are understandings of madness and mad behaviour consistent? 2) What concepts and ideas are critical to contextualize this text in relation to the cultural history of madness? 3) What insight does the reading reveal about the relationship of madness and society, social roles, the ability to communicate? 4) Do historical 'cases' such as Margery's shed light on contemporary understandings of mental health? What are the possibilities and limitations? What should contemporary scholars keep in mind when doing so?

Student 7's initial response to the reading focused on the depiction of the female body, connecting the assigned medieval text to contemporary horror. The response also raised the difficulty of perspective and objective truth in historical sources. The post resulted in a number of responses that developed upon the original post. Many of these responses drew upon texts

outside the course, reflecting the integration of previous studies and experiences. For example, on the question of truth, one literary studies respondent (Student 4) drew upon Erich Auerbach's classical study *Mimesis: The representation of reality in western thought* (1946), which was not assigned for the course. Furthermore, this interaction's initial post engaged the students across disciplinary backgrounds with students bringing in non-assigned literature and examples from their various academic backgrounds.

Within this topic focusing on the depiction of the female body, other interactions also had wide-ranging discussion turns with knowledge generation. For example, one response from a non-literary studies student (Student 8) began with the biblical story of Adam and Eve and ended with the regulation of sexuality in Sweden in the 1960s and other countries in the present time, in examination of the construction of sexuality and 'sickness' throughout history. Another response from a literary studies student (Student 14) referenced Barbara Creed's (1993) *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, which was not assigned on the course. The author of the original post (a non-literary studies student, Student 7) was familiar with this text and acknowledged how it may have influenced their reading of the assigned medieval texts. In these responses, we see how earlier study outside of English literature influences and extends understanding and analysis of the set literary texts, both for the students with English literature backgrounds and those with other backgrounds. The example illustrates how the students' posts linked back to previous student posts, triggered new thoughts that are presented together with reference to literature, and sparked personal reflection relating to the relevance of this literature.

This is also evidenced in the fora linked to other course themes. From the forum 'The Anatomy of Melancholy,' an interaction that consists of 14 discussion turns supports our findings from the fora discussions relating to the female body. The assignment for 'The Anatomy of Melancholy', included required reading of two primary texts: a selection of Robert Burton's early modern *The anatomy of melancholy* and a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Suggested further reading, which many of the respondents read, included two essays from Freud and three critical essays, one about the concept of melancholy in the early modern period (Gowland 2006), one about the comparison of contemporary depression with historical melancholy (Radden 2003), and one about the connection

between artistic creativity and melancholy (Sullivan 2008). Prompts for reflection were: 1) How does Burton characterize melancholy and the melancholic? What concepts are needed to contextualize melancholy in its cultural and historical setting? 2) How does gender factor into this characterization, either implicitly or explicitly? 3) How might you read Hamlet with Burton? 4) What does the reading reveal about the relationship of mental illness and melancholy to society, social roles and the ability to communicate?

Again in this forum we find students bringing other texts from a range of literary periods and languages into the discussion. One initial response (Student 3) reads Hamlet against Burton, yet makes a cursory reference to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which was not assigned for the course. Later discussion turns draw examples from other novels such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (Student 4), J. W. von Goethe's *The sorrows of young Werther* (Student 3), and Selma Lagerlöf's *The emperor of Portugallia* (Student 3). While not a suggested prompt, one poster (Student 4) concludes that the 'myth about the suffering genius is alive and well still today'. An active and respectful debate within the forum considers whether Hamlet fits Burton's criteria for melancholy with some arguing against the original poster that they 'can see some similarities between Burton's descriptions of melancholy and Hamlet' (Student 8). The interlocutor mentions the publication dates of the two texts, stating that there is, more likely, 'a common view of what melancholy is and what causes it'. The idea of understanding constructions of melancholy and supernatural forces, such as ghosts, or religious experiences, such as visions, within the cultural context of the text production develops easily in the discussion with a variety of examples adduced both from the set reading and the previous week's unit on *The Book of Margery Kempe*. One sub-conversation emerged about how Burton would have considered Margery Kempe's case and whether Burton would have diagnosed her with his understanding of 'religious melancholy'. This discussion considers the historical development of religion—'Burton seems to mostly see religious melancholy as any religious behavior that does not fit his protestant viewpoint of what is proper religious expression' (Student 5). A final poster discusses the imbrication of the spiritual and medical in Burton's text, as well as the role of gender:

> I do not think that he would have treated her the same way if she were a man. His focus is pretty much on the academic individual; a picture that Margery does not really

> fit into, I suppose. Or he would see her as a paradigm for what happens if women leave their husband's custody (because he mentions that family, marriage, etc. are the best way for women to escape melancholy. (Student 2)

While the last post does not explicitly draw upon a non-English literary studies background, the preceding posts certainly opened discussion to other periods and traditions that encouraged a perspective outside of periodization.

In the forum, 'Clinical Hysteria', an interaction consisting of eight discussion turns shows epistemic insight is developed through message interaction in the forum. The assignment included Sigmund Freud's 'Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria ("Dora")' and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story 'The yellow wallpaper'. Prompts for reflection were 1) What particular concepts are necessary to contextualise views of hysteria in these texts? 2) What do the readings suggest about gender and particular kinds of mental illnesses in relation to previous readings and periods? 3) What do the texts reveal about hysteria and/or hysterics in relation to society, possibilities for expression and communication? 4) How do the texts engage implicitly and explicitly with questions agency and mental illness? The initial poster (Student 8) expressed disgust at Freud's handling of his patient, which the poster characterizes as a 'lack of empathy'. Furthermore,

> Freud is also very narcissistic, he is so sure of what he is doing but he is hiding behind a (kind of) humble attitude and hereby justifies his actions. That is also a classic sign of psychopathy, they are very often charming and social skilled. But the fact that he thinks that he can interpret Dora's story as he wants and make it fit into his own idea about mental illness, makes him untrustworthy. (Student 8)

While adamant against Freud, the poster recognizes that their interpretation stems from their own 'cultural context'.

The initial post generated a heated discussion about presentism and contextualization. For example, one wrote 'Freud just believed in his own theories, not being psychopathic or narcissistic, I think' (Student 12).The commentator argues that Freud should be read within the context of his contemporary period. The original poster did not hold with this, arguing 'of course he is reflecting his own time, what other time could he reflect? But that does not necessarily defend him. We cannot defend every douchebag just because they did not know better' (Student 8). The

conversation developed about how far cultural and historical contextualization can excuse certain attitudes.

While referencing this debate, another commentator made a larger point about psychoanalytic criticism, drawing in other theorists such as Julia Kristeva, namely that it 'exhibits an authoritarian trait: things are as they are because the theory says so, and theory itself is not questioned' (Student 15). Ensuing posts reference professional 'ambivalence' to Freud within psychology and gender studies (Student 1). Overall, this one discussion draws upon a range of student disciplinary backgrounds, from gender studies, comparative literature and psychology. This interaction of disciplines allows the students to consider an issue that does not reside in one discipline alone—namely presentism or the evaluation of past thinkers and actors according to contemporary values and standards—and promotes epistemic insight among the students, those with an English literature background and those with other disciplinary backgrounds.

In sum we have found that the interdisciplinary environment contributes to knowledge creation and supports epistemic insight through challenging their own and their peers' interpretations, thus addressing our first research question. In the fora discussions students challenged each other's readings and interpretation drawing from their disciplinary backgrounds.

How does the disciplinary background (English or non-English) of students influence participation and performance in the courses?

Our second research question asked how does the disciplinary background (English or non-English) of students influence participation and performance in the course? Table 2 indicates that students from other disciplinary backgrounds are able to acquire the English literature skills to pass the course; in our small sample those with a background in English literature were more likely to achieve the highest-grade pass: pass with distinction. However, the low number of students completing these courses makes it impossible to draw any statistically valid conclusions.

Table 2. Distribution of grades (Early drop out:, Did not complete:, Pass:, Pass with Distinction)

Course	English Scholars	Other Humanities Scholars	Other Faculty Scholars
Narrating Madness	0:0:0:1	2:0:2:3	1:2:0:2
Literature and disability	0:3:0:2	2:1:3:0	2:1:0:0

In this small sample, the students with non-English literary studies backgrounds tended both to dropout and not complete more frequently than students with an English literature background. This we do not find surprising. The former group of students is trying a new direction driven by a perceived interest. Some rapidly realize that this direction is not what they expected. Others find that the skills required are difficult to acquire and operationalize within the frame of a short distance-based course. Some of these students were, however, active in the course fora. Moreover, others read the course in addition to their full-time degree programmes in another discipline. However, those non-English literary studies students who read the course as an option course, as part of their degree programme, tend to complete these courses.

One clue as to why some students do not complete can be found in the fora. In the *Literature and Disability* course-task looking at the representation of autism in literature, we can find superficial comments coupled with a lack of interaction with literature. In one post, a non-literary student (Student 25) abandoned their own interpretation of *Bartleby* for that of a scholar, rather than critically examining the scholar's argument. In this sense, the non-English literature student appears more of a 'spectator' that Benson mentioned earlier in his critique of interdisciplinary education. Rather than acknowledging that there are multiple interpretations, the student seems to think there is one way that the text can *really* be read.

The primary texts for this unit were Herman Melville's 1853 story 'Bartleby the scrivener' and three chapters from Mark Haddon's 2004 *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time.* Additionally, students were assigned three critical texts: one about the historical development of Asperger's syndrome (Koegel 2008), one critical text about each primary source (Freißmann 2008; Nixon 2014), and a chapter on cognitive

difference and narrative (Hall 2016). Prompts for reflection included: 1) Do the fictional texts illuminate aspects of autism? 2) Compare the narrative styles in *Bartleby* and *The curious incident*. 3) Is there a danger of being reductive when we suggest characters such as Bartleby have autism? Does this diagnosis take away or add to the story? 4) *Bartleby* was written before autism came to be recognized as a disorder and *The curious incident* was written after. How does the scientific acknowledgement of the condition affect the writing styles in the respective narratives?

We would have expected from this forum a more robust discussion about the pitfalls of retroactively diagnosing both people and characters from literature and the distinction of characters from literature and real life, or the referential fallacy, which can be for both literary and non-literary scholars a difficult skill to master. Such a discussion occurs in another forum. 'It is kind of obvious that Bartleby can't even be interpreted as a narrative about ASD since the concept wasn't even invented at that time. However, there may be historical value to Melville's story, as a way of showing how people, with what we define as ASD, were perceived, treated and maltreated' (Student 21).

In addition to theoretical and methodological concerns, there is also the question of proficiency in English. English literary studies at master's level naturally demands a high level of English language proficiency. High school English was the requirement for the course, with the assumption that most students would have engaged with academic English during their undergraduate studies. However, not all students can transfer their teaching and learning in English to using English at master's level. Further, not all students manage to develop the disciplinary discourse no matter the level of their English proficiency or how much they have studied or read in English. These aspects may also impact attrition rates.

Conclusion

In the case of the presented courses, the interdisciplinary environment does not appear to disadvantage the development of English literature students. At the same time, they allow students from other disciplines to develop literary analytical skills. However, in spite of extensive supporting materials offered in conjunction with the course, some students require more support. As Rives-East and Lima (2013) note, '[s]imply coming together does not magically grant understanding' (102). The concerns raised by Benson (1982) about interdisciplinary learning also emerge in

our analysis and help explain why the interdisciplinary environment did not appear to be supportive enough for students from a non-literary background.

What additional teaching and learning support could be provided to help students without English literature backgrounds to pass such interdisciplinary courses? Rives-East and Lima (2013) provide a range of interdisciplinary course design suggestions. While these suggestions are generic, they can be easily adapted to the particular challenges of English literary studies. Many of these suggestions are already incorporated in the courses but could be further developed. For example, Rives-East and Lima (2013) suggest 'put[ting] students at ease' by 'acknowledging they bring varying levels of experience and ability. Create a climate where asking basic questions is accepted and encouraged' (103). Furthermore, they suggest that teachers 'provide some background for students. Focus on what students outside your discipline need to follow key concepts in your course' (103). In the introduction to the courses under study here, the students are told:

> while most of the primary texts studied in the course are literary, the course is a general humanities course, gathering people with backgrounds in various academic disciplines, methods and theories. This environment greatly benefits the study of mind, body, medicine and culture.

However, inclusivity and epistemic insight could be encouraged by seminar prompts asking students to position the readings of the assigned texts within their own disciplinary frames. As for the second suggestion, on their online platforms, the courses already include several documents from the English department that summarize key theoretical concepts and literary methods. Nevertheless, the teacher could supplement these materials and direct students to helpful sections in conjunction with the relevant readings and fora. For example, in the case above, the teacher could direct students to readings about the referential fallacy. Simply making materials available is insufficient. There is also an onus on the teacher to support interdisciplinary learning by integrating supplementary materials into their teaching as needed. Hence for the course fora we examined that rarely included immediate prompting from the teachers, more students may have experienced deeper learning if there had been greater support.

While the teaching approach used in these cases without immediate prompting from the teachers may not have 'magically created understanding', our analysis of the fora discussion suggests that students were still able to gain epistemic insight regardless of disciplinary background. From our reading of fora contributions, we contend that the students saw the connections between their various disciplinary backgrounds and did not experience their knowledge in opposition to one another, but rather saw and experienced them as complementary. Drawing on the work of Michie, Hogue and Rioux (2018) that considered *Both-Ways* and *Two-Eyed Seeing* in pedagogical settings that work with connections between Western and Indigenous world views, Billingsley and Fraser (2018) wrote: '[e]pistemic insight can … engage students in looking at knowledge from many worldviews and inflecting on both the origin of these different ways of knowing and the relationship between them' (1112). Here, we argue, 'worldviews' can include disciplinary perspectives, thus highlighting the way these courses can assist the students in applying their studies to their personal and professional lives, their understanding of the world and society.

Although the standard of English proficiency required by such courses poses a challenge, English is one of the few disciplines in the humanities in Sweden that can welcome both Nordic students and international students from a range of countries and continents. Further, English is an international language with a body of literature, including translations from both major and minority languages. This affords multiple opportunities for drawing on various perspectives and disciplines without the linguistic restrictions that would exist if such courses were offered in a Scandinavian language or another major European language such as French or German.

Limitations of the study and further research

As we randomly selected one cohort from each course, we cannot assure whether our findings are generalizable to all the other cohorts or to other similar courses. Further research on more courses would indicate how generalizable our findings are. Equally, trends concerning who drops out of these and similar courses could be tracked across cohorts. Furthermore, future research may consider adapting the teachers' role in the fora to examine how this affects the students' knowledge creation in such interdisciplinary cohorts.

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