

# **Creating meaning in interdisciplinary dialogues within Global Health: reflections from postgraduate teaching**

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## **Abstract**

Interdisciplinary research is often hailed as the way forward for research. Indeed, in a world where problems are increasingly complex, interdisciplinarity needs to be considered more so a necessity than a temporary trend. However, evidence shows that there are still considerable challenges in achieving true conversations between and across disciplines. Where old (disciplinary) habits may be deemed too deeply entrenched, new generations of scholars and students are a spark of hope for the future of interdisciplinary understandings. Yet, the question still begs - how do we do that? In this essay, I reflect on my experiences as a postgraduate teaching assistant and social scientist teaching Global Health to medical students. Inspired by dialogic pedagogy, I explain how I framed theory to be understood as the beginning of knowledge to encourage engaging and productive classroom dialogue. Facilitating such a dialogue required making space for two E's – emotion and exploration – to guide and shape our discussions which each other, which enabled us to transcend the boundaries of discipline in order to have successful interdisciplinary dialogue that is meaningful in ways that go far beyond a tick box exercise, as well as promoting active learning and critical thinking.

Teaching Global Health as part of medical curriculums has been on the rise in the last few years (Drain et al., 2007; Rowson et al., 2012a). Whilst understandings of Global Health have been changing and shifting, there is a growing consensus around the need for Global Health to move beyond a narrow and reductionist biomedical focus (Rowson et al., 2012b). This shift has been reflected in the Global Health curriculums, which have moved beyond predominant focus on epidemiology, towards a greater incorporation of the social sciences, which allows to explore the social, economic, and political aspects of health that underscore the field (Kasper et al., 2016). Such a shift necessarily requires an interdisciplinary approach, which though lacking a singular definition, can be broadly understood as an approach that combines theoretical frameworks, study designs, methodologies and perspectives from two or more disciplines (Aboelela, 2007). However, its importance needs to be foregrounded by beliefs in its ability to help address complex issues today by contributing to comprehensive understandings (Spelt et al., 2009). Interdisciplinary learning is not without its challenges, particularly as the topics and ideologies covered are not commonly taught in medical degrees (Yudkin et al., 2003) and thus will be new to many students. During my introductory sessions as a GTA teaching a global health course to medical students, I certainly noted student's apprehension regarding how to best tackle this different type of learning material, a trend that has been noted in the literature too (Yudkin et al., 2003).

An additional challenge in teaching Global Health is that, in many ways, it is not a neutral field of research. While 'health' might at first glance appear like a logical and positivist area of research, by virtue of its common association with the

biomedical sciences, Global Health as a field is guided by the quest for health equity and desire for social justice (Abimbola, 2018). This ultimately assumes a normative approach, and complicates health by embedding complex and layered issues, such as power and politics, in the quest of health for all (Whitehead, 1991; Braveman & Gruskin, 2003; Ooms, 2014). I was keenly aware that this was something I had to carefully consider and integrate when facilitating seminars in order to create value in interdisciplinary teaching that goes beyond just superficially engaging in it because it is a trend that is heavily pushed for right now (Jacob, 2015), particularly in the backdrop of growing disillusion in relation to interdisciplinarity (Albert & Paradis, 2014; Callard & Fitzgerald, 2015).

To facilitate meaningful interdisciplinary seminars, I opted for an approach inspired by dialogic pedagogy. Dialogic pedagogy draws its roots from the writings of Paulo Freire (1970) on critical pedagogy, which posits that learning is best facilitated through dialogue and requires a reconfiguration of classroom dynamics and hierarchies by removing the authoritarian role of the teacher. The authoritarian teacher, as per the 'banking model of education' (Freire, 1970), represents an expert figure whose role it is to fill up students ('empty vessels') with knowledge. Dialogic pedagogy's transformative potential lies in replacing these structures with a problem-posing approach that encourages an active reshaping of one's own understandings of reality and creation of new truth (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). In practice, a more horizontally organised classroom is in many ways a logical choice that intuitively suits GTAs, who themselves occupy a liminal role through their dual identity as both teacher and student (Anderson, Lowe & Patsiarika, 2022). It

can also help mitigate some common concerns faced by GTAs around their abilities as educators, such as a lack of competency, knowledge or professional identity (Archer, 2008; Muzaka, 2009, Feezel & Myers, 1997; Cho et al., 2011; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020) which are alleviated when their authoritative expectations are removed. Yet, creating and fostering empowering environments for transformative learning requires a transformation within teachers themselves (Freire, 1970; Fernandez-Balboa & Marshall, 1994; Cranton & King, 2003) wherein their self-view shifts from conveyors of knowledge to active agents of change (Lysaker & Furuness, 2012). This may be a considerable impediment to GTAs, given the notorious lack of training and support of GTAs (Sharpe, 2000; Park & Ramos, 2002; Green, 2010; Cho et al., 2011) and challenges prevail regarding their abilities to adopt social justice oriented pedagogical praxis, including dialogic pedagogy, within the systemic constraints of the neoliberal university (Madden, 2014).

In the next sections, I reflect on my experience teaching first-time interdisciplinary learners in a higher education setting, using the case study of a Global Health course. I discuss the two key elements that have guided my teaching experience, which are 1) seeing theory as the beginning of knowledge, and 2) allowing the two E's, emotion and exploration, to guide classroom dialogue. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature by reflecting positive outcomes of dialogic approaches to interdisciplinary teaching and suggesting applied conceptual anchors for prompting meaningful dialogues in these settings that can be particularly effective for GTAs. While this seeks to serve as an impetus for GTAs to consider the transformative impact this can have on their praxis, there is also an acknowledgement of the difficulty to

maintain these efforts authentically over time given the lack support and pedagogical communities (Madden, 2014). As such, this paper is a call for action and further research on the relationship between dialogic pedagogy and interdisciplinarity, and how best to support and empower GTAs to navigate this as part of their praxis.

### **Theory as the beginning of knowledge**

To foster and encourage dialogue, I framed theory as being the *beginning of knowledge*, instead of the whole of knowledge. Students were challenged to not accept theory as *sine qua non*, but rather as an opening for the comprehension of a topic. This removes the bounded limits and prescriptions of dialogue that restrict the possibilities of discussion when theory is used as a narrow framework for discussion, and reflects the reality of our messy lives in which the relationship between theory and reality is not always straightforward. Theory served as a discussion starter, upon which I encouraged students to bring in other forms of knowledge, such as their everyday knowledges (Silseth, 2018), to contextualise, complement and challenge theory. Rather than undermine the value or importance of theory, students are invited to view theory for nothing more or less than what it is - this approach helped students to situate theory and assess its validity, applicability, strengths and limitations. It helped to create an environment for students to be active learners, by encouraging them to make connections between new information and what they already know (Morss & Murray, 2005) and engage in meaning-making through dialogue (Vygostky, 1987; Wells, 2007). This allowed a 'deep' approach to learning (Morss & Murray, 2005), as the

primary purpose of theory moved away from a mere utilitarian one, in the sense that it served to be strategically or superficially used to make a point in an essay or exam even when it is not the best fit. This approach aligns with Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) view of a transformative critical pedagogy, which they argue is one that problematises knowledge - which I seek to do through presenting theory as not being the 'be-all and end-all' - which makes learning relevant to students - I seek to encourage their own forms of knowledge and interest to be brought in.

The concept of 'poverty' is often a central theme in introductory Global Health modules, as was the case in ours. How initial theories are introduced and presented is important as it sets the tone for the style of teaching – therefore it was important to not impose one central definition of poverty. Besides the mainstream monetary definition of poverty (such as \$2 per day), it is common practice to introduce alternative understandings that are more encompassing and multidimensional in nature. Sen's capability approach (1990, 2005) is often presented as a popular contender, but students frequently struggle to grasp it fully and thus resort to the mainstream approach due to its easy applicability. This essentially just fulfils a tick-box exercise that assumes students should have developed critical thinking by virtue of presenting them with multiple choices from which they need to make an 'informed choice' to pick one. Instead, I invited students to contribute their everyday knowledge about what a meaningful life means to them and how that might be achieved, irrelevant of how this related to the theories they had read. By building confidence in their own knowledge, students found it much easier to make sense of various aspects of Sen's theory such as

functionings and capabilities. A deeper comprehension and attenuated fear of imperfect theory application shifted student's demonstration of critical skills from one that criticises (for example in the form of a superficial regurgitation of an online summary, citing generalised commentary such as 'lack of applicability') to one that critiques, through the location of an analysis of self and society that directs attention to aspects of power, inequality, oppression and domination (Braa & Callero, 2006). Particularly in the context of interdisciplinary learning, where there might be an inclination to adhere to learning theories diligently and abstain from being critical, perhaps out of hesitance or intimidation, this can be bridged by problematising theory and minimising its authority in the classroom.

### **The two E's**

Reflecting upon how I sought to establish dialogue in an interdisciplinary classroom, I found myself guided by what I refer to as the two E's – Emotion and Exploration. Creating space for emotion and exploration in our dialogues made a fundamental difference because it enabled us to talk *to* each, as opposed to talking *at* each other from the comfort of our own disciplinary bounds without crossing them. Emotion and exploration are counter to the ethos of a traditional authoritative format of learning in which students are nothing more than passive agents, in no small part because of their perceived subjective nature. I argue that they deepen our possibilities of knowledge, because they renegotiate what we understand as truth and to what end we see it to serve us, as well as creating a community of learning.

### *Emotion:*

The dominant notion, rooted in positivist traditions, that knowledge production and consumption need to be value-free and neutral in order to be rigorous implies that there is no room for emotion in academic discussions. Emotion is often seen as undesirable because it is portrayed as an impediment to logical thinking, and its impulsive and intuitive nature as unreliable (Parkinson et al., 2005). However, I believe that allowing emotion to be felt as part of the dialogue and going in so far as letting it shape it, was a crucial part of the learning experience in this module. bell hooks (2003) argued for the importance of nurturing love and emotional growth in the classroom, particularly in humanities (and I argue that this holds true for interdisciplinary teaching too) where objectivism does not provide a useful basis for learning. She describes objectivism as merely a mask for disassociation, as it promotes the retention of content like a script rather than encouraging a critical understanding of it. In Global Health specifically, Finnegan and colleagues (2017) discuss the indispensable need to foster solidarity in teaching, which requires highlighting uncomfortable failures and tensions. A focus on the glossy aspects and good intentions of Global Health, paired with a lack of critical appraisal of 'successful' intervention (success often being measured in terms of metrics and criteria set by donors) is devoid of emotion, hindering to foster any sincere sense of solidarity. As such, I view emotion in interdisciplinary learning to be productive and generative.

As we made space for emotions, the richness of our dialogue grew as it spanned from frustration and indignation to hope



and enthusiasm. Feeling and voicing emotion gave depth to the understanding of the course material. In the context of a seminar on 'Trade and Global Health', we discussed the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS agreement) and its effect on creating an impediment to access of vital life-saving antiretroviral medication (ARV) for HIV/AIDS for thousands of people across low- and middle-income countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Forman, 2016). The expressed frustration and shock prompted many follow-up questions and searching up of information to make sense of the how and why. It encouraged them to read between the lines and understand the nuance of a topic like trade that may initially appear to be dry and uninspiring, by asking about the lived realities and implications of policy. Rather than merely looking at the logic behind a trade agreement implemented by top-down actors, they wanted to see other points of view – of those that had experienced the devastating outcomes of these agreements and those that had fought to reverse the agreements. Understanding that things are not always as they seem allows the construction of a counter-hegemonic perspective which problematises dominant ideologies, as is sought to be achieved through the praxis of critical pedagogies (Braa & Callero, 2006).

*Exploration:*

The second E that guided my approach to creating an environment conducive to interdisciplinary dialogue, was Exploration. I understand (intellectual) exploration to be the ability to not feel restricted by perceived (disciplinary) bounds influencing what is deemed acceptable to say, which allows the freedom to pursue and develop discrete thoughts

into ideas. Allowing students to thread new theoretical grounds should be inviting, rather than intimidating. Much of the success of meaningful interdisciplinary teaching lies in enabling this and is in line with theories that posit that active learning is promoted by encouraging students to create new connections and articulate them out loud (Michael, 2006). While simple in theory, its practice is much harder given the dominant tendencies for teachers to limit themselves to relaying scripted information, as the banking model of education elucidates (Freire, 1970). This is particularly relevant today in the backdrop of a neoliberal climate that some deem so threatening to critical thought that it prompts calls for a 'resistant curiosity' in pedagogy (Tadajewski, 2023). These tendencies are so ingrained that even when educators explicitly aim to adopt a dialogic approach, they often slip into the role of 'truth knowers' that control discussions in a way that renders them monological (Alexander, 2008; Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). In my experience, I found that establishing trust early on was necessary in order to avoid such dynamics and lay the groundwork for exploration – a large part is making space for people to come as they are. This required managing expectations, by communicating my awareness of the new nature of these theories, and that I valued their thoughts and opinions more than the neat use of a theory. As our familiarity with each other and the course materials grew over the course of the module, so did their disposition towards being explorative, which naturally fostered active engagement.

One way I did this is through case studies, which both helped to break the abstract nature of theory by understanding its real-life relevance, as well as allowing students to tailor the learning process to their interests. In our seminar on Gender

and Global Health, I suggested students look into examples of microfinance as a case study for understanding the outcomes of gendered interventions (Garkikipati et al., 2017). Students grew perplexed at the continued popularity of these interventions as they were peeling back the layers and uncovering the negative outcomes that some of these intended 'gender empowerment' interventions had. It led them to interrogate the popularity behind the business model of microfinance – which could have been perceived as digressing away from the central seminar theme (on gender) as a result of exploration. Some rabbit holes, for example, consisted of delving into biographies of individuals that had made big profits from launching microfinance businesses. However, such 'deviations' from the theme always ended up being productive to the learning process, and students, more often than not, circled back to the initial topic on their own. They established connections by drawing back to theories from previous seminars, such as power in global health and health financing, which created an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the various topics. Much of the essence of interdisciplinarity revolves around building a bigger picture by way of understanding these interconnections, though that is usually difficult to achieve without overloading or overwhelming students who are new to interdisciplinarity. This is achieved organically here because exploration allows that in a manageable way, that does not force critical thinking onto students without giving them the necessary tools.

## **Conclusion**

A dialogic approach in interdisciplinary teaching can be

extremely useful in creating meaningful dialogue that encourages a deep understanding of learning material. Particularly for GTAs, who might be grappling with questions around authority and credibility in the classroom, promoting non-hierarchical and open dialogue is an option that is well-suited and organic. As an anchoring point to guide dialogic practice, theory was framed as *the beginning of knowledge*, which made interdisciplinary dialogue accessible for students who are for the first time engaging with a new area of study, but also promoted deep learning as it effectively helped to create connections and meaning-making by bringing in other (more familiar) forms of knowledge. To enable this, I made space for the two E's, emotion and exploration, to navigate our dialogue. Allowing emotion to guide our dialogue enabled a more organic exploration of the topic, often generating a great level of analytical depth in the process. Similarly, welcoming exploration and curiosity drove learning and meaning-making further. The result of this was meaningful interdisciplinary learning and dialogue, which did not lose sight of the essence and complexity of the themes as often happens in interdisciplinary discussions when the different disciplinary backgrounds talk *at* each other instead of *to* each other.

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