

WHEN YOU CARE ENOUGH TO THINK THE VERY BEST¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

We all love memorable advertising slogans. Companies use catchy marketing phrases to capture our attention. We want to be identified with what they are selling, hoping that the products, services, or style will offer something of the marvelous! Some of them can become so significant that they become historical markers of the eras we live through. Wheaties' "Breakfast of champions," "Budweiser's "The King of Beers," Avis's "We Try Harder," Coco cola's "It's the Real thing!" Levi's "Quality never runs out of style!" Gillette's "The best a man can get!" or Apple's "Think Different" are just a few of them. Whether their hype lives up to reality, their slogans are a part of us. We wear them. We use them in our stories. They have become a part of who we are.

If you look more closely at these slogans, you see they share common threads. These companies make claims that what they have to offer is the very best. Their products outpace competitors. They stand out from all the rest. These promises are appealing for we all want lives of meaning, purpose, and significance. We want our experiences to be rich, peer-environment perception of us credible, and our personhood and presence accepted, appreciated, and respected. We are looking for something worthwhile, easy to use, and long-lasting. Why? Because we are worth it!

One powerful way to help "be all you can be" is to become the ultimate "thinking machine." How is this possible? Think multidisciplinary! This is perhaps the most critical thinking skill to master. Why? The problems we are experiencing in today's world are becoming complex as we face unexpected results unknown to previous generations. Technological advancements, sociological changes, and environmental changes are changing the way, work, and play. As we interact with these forces, they can affect us in unprecedented ways. We face new promises and perils, distinctive opportunities and challenges, different delights, and sufferings. Adaptive, creative, collaborative, and sustainable solutions need to be found.

While our imagination is still at work trying to come up with a tagline for the value of multidisciplinary thinking, when you meet one who does, you realize that this person is no small mind. In other words, you won't be asking, "Where's the beef?"

Thinking multidisciplinary is one of the most potent, distinctive approaches you can ever use to solve problems, bring about change, and foster innovation. Thinking multidisciplinary is compelling, exciting, and inspiring. Said differently, would you like to bring fresh answers to perennial problems? Would you like to organize dissimilar courses and random class topics?

¹ If you are a first-generation student and are looking for a "launching pad" for academic success and human flourishing during your university or college experience, I recommend checking out on Amazon Paul R. Shockley & Raul Prezas, *Thinking with Excellence: Navigating the College Journey & Beyond* (New York: Two Creeks Publishing Group, 2018). E-version is also available.

Would you like to integrate what you are learning with personal and social experiences into a unified plan and purpose? It is this nexus where creativity and innovation abound in original ways. If so, come along. We have a lot to share with you!

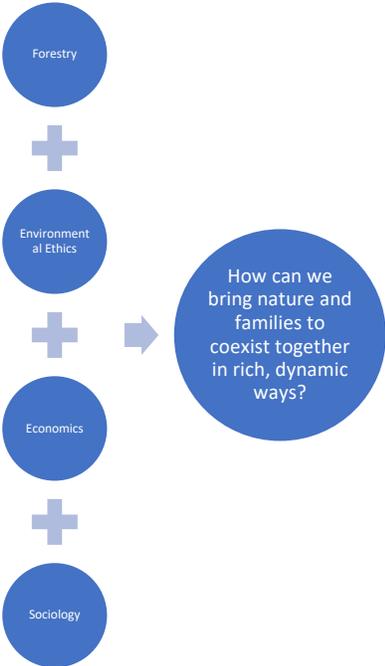
II. COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is Multidisciplinary Thinking?

Multidisciplinary thinking occurs when you take a single issue, problem, or topic view from the viewpoint of more than one discipline. So, instead of studying, majoring, and specializing in one area of study (e.g., history), you study additional ones. In other words, you are adding, combining, and integrating the distinctives, tools, and resources of the fields of study you enjoy the most to create an educational background that is adaptable, and able to cross specialized boundaries.

This enables you to be more effective in disentangling perplexing problems through varied interpretative lenses. You will be able to use the strengths of these fields of study you will be able to see and do more.

Consider the following examples: a land developer *uses* the specialized fields of knowledge of environmental ethics, forestry, economics, and architectural design to landscape a future neighborhood that brings together nature and families in the most enriching ways:



Thus, a land developer who has these skills will be able to put together a plan for a neighborhood in a way that looks at this question through the lenses of forestry, ethics, economics, and sociology, casting an inviting vision, anticipating problems, and exceeding expectations. In other

words, using a multidisciplinary approach the land developer can think through the possibilities and problems of a neighborhood using each one of these specialized fields of study. Consequently, the land developer can foresee and do more.

“Think outside the square. Think for yourself. Don’t just follow the herd. Think multidisciplinary! Problems by definition cross many academic disciplines.” ~ Lucas Remmerswaal

Other examples include the following. A person trained in restaurant management, family development, and kinesiology *creates* job opportunities for those with special needs (e.g., restaurant). A religious leader *utilizes* the fields of philosophy, art history, and religious studies to analyze anemic worship experiences. A hospital quality care specialist integrates the history of medicine, normative ethics, and legal studies to promote best healthcare practices for hospital staff. A science teacher *combines* the strengths of biology, speech communication, and computer science in a way that is pedagogically sensitive to educational and generational changes. A business owner *puts together* an effective action plan for employees who are hurting from toxic customers using knowledge acquired from sociology, interpersonal communication, and business leadership.

“If you skillfully follow the multidisciplinary path, you will never wish to come back. It would be like cutting off your hands.” ~ Charlie Munger

How are Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Thinking Different?

Since they are similar, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary thinking styles are sometimes used by people interchangeably. But there is a significant difference. When you combine knowledge from multiple disciplines whereby theories, methods, and perspectives are integrated into a single theme you are thinking interdisciplinary. In other words, interdisciplinary harmonize relationships between the disciplines studied into a coherent pattern. But for our purposes, if you think can learn to master multidisciplinary thinking first by looking at a problem from more than one field of study, then the skills of thinking interdisciplinary will follow.

What are Some of the Significant Benefits of Thinking Multidisciplinary?

Why do we recommend learning how to think multidisciplinary? Consider the following twelve benefits you can acquire if you can learn how to think multidisciplinary:

- Investigate complex problems from two or more specialized fields of knowledge.
- Observe connections and relationships that are otherwise missed from a singular specialization.
- Synthesize results learned from differing disciplines to gain a holistic understanding.
- Use interpretive skills from one discipline to look at another.
- Knowledge of vocabulary, concepts, methods, people, and practices in more than one field of study.

- Be able to use a wide variety of specialized insights, resources, and practices to anticipate, recognize, and solve complex problems.
- Connect with a variety of people.
- Have greater value when competing with peers who are experts in only one field of study.
- Recognize how consequences generated in one area affects other ones.
- Experience those rich “aha” educational moments in the fields of study you come to learn.
- Exercise creativity as a thinking skill.
- Greater adaptability given the changes we are experiencing as emerge into a global community.

“For some reason, I had an early and extreme multidisciplinary cast of mind I couldn’t stand reaching for a small idea in my own discipline when there was a big idea right over the fence in somebody else’s discipline. So I just grabbed in all directions for the big ideas that would really work.” ~ Charlie Munger

What are the Distinctives of those Who Think Multidisciplinary?

As you intentionally develop these skills with a larger project in mind, namely, becoming a person who is multidisciplinary in interests, practices, experiences, and vision, certain character traits and dispositional values will emerge, giving you a cutting edge for success and flourishing. Here are twelve of them.

- Flexibility: You’re able to shift your focus from one field to another with greater competence and ease.
- Greater use of varied critical thinking skills.
- Curiosity: You’re interested in learning about more than one discipline of thinking.
- Open-mindedness: You’re willing to consider new approaches, ideas, counsel, and specialists from specific departments. You value teachability.
- Relationality: You’re interested in creating relationships between activities, ideas, interests, and people. You value coherence and unity.
- Anti-reductionistic: Since you’re able to make worthwhile connections between varied fields, you recognize other relationships not easily observed by others. You see more.
- Imagination: As your studies transcend specialized boundaries, you’re able to create new relationships that are not considered before. Your vision will be inclusive.
- Visualization enhanced. You can see more details, complexities, dissimilarities, and similarities between fields of knowledge. “In between” spaces become part of the scope of your vision. Voices ignored are now heard.
- Communication Skills. You can understand and use specialized vocabulary in more than one domain of knowledge. You will speak more than one technical language.
- Teamwork Mindset. Since you recognize the strengths of experts from specialized fields, you can utilize those differences advantageously to achieve targeted aims. You are a leader.

- Psychological Security: Since you know more than one field of knowledge, you can move from one domain to another given changes of time, geography, culture, people, and trends. You have resources.
- Holistic Understanding: Since you are observing, using, and integrating multiple departments of knowledge, you can see and appreciate “the big picture.” You are more effectively able to see the trees and the whole forest.

If these benefits and values are interesting, then consider this one additional factor as it relates to organizational leadership. To solve a problem, if we are wise, and there are no competing appetites (e.g., pride), interests (e.g., ambition), and vices (e.g., impatience), a good leader will surround oneself, learn from, and benefit from a wide range of specialists. Like sitting in the captain’s chair, will ask these experts for their counsel. Critiques between specialists can also be informative. The leader will then take all that information, synthesize it, and decide. Consider the oil industry. Entrepreneur Eike Batista put it this way, “Finding oil is a multidisciplinary science. You need a lot of people—statisticians, engineers, and geologists, of course. And what I have learned in the past 30 years is that I read people better than I read books.”

But given the all-too-common problems associated often found in companies (e.g., do not have the resources to pay for specialists; do not understand the vocabulary and methods used by specialists), the multidisciplinary is able to understand and give multiple perspectives to a problem. Wisdom is found in multidisciplinary thinking. So, what one discipline cannot do, a multidisciplinary approach is likely to do. Imagine what Batista could do if he had multidisciplinary thinkers on his hunt for oil!

“I like the idea of multidisciplinary conversations, so in that spirit, I try and make a contribution from the art world into the music world.” ~ Fred Tomaselli

III. PRACTICAL STEPS TO BECOMING A MULTIDISCIPLINARY THINKER

Here are clear step-by-step to take to gain competence and confidence in multidisciplinary thinking. If you are impatient, don’t care for learning, or have other goals in mind (e.g., I just want a degree however I can get one), then learning to think multidisciplinary will be challenging for you. But if you are naturally curious, you can shift to an active mindset and not a passive one. Consequently, you will come to discover a truth Novalis (aka George Philipp Frieherr von Hardenberg, an 18th-century Romantic philosopher) found, namely, “learning is pleasurable but doing is the height of enjoyment.” Indeed, learning is pleasurable. When those “aha” moments come, they can take your breath away. But when you can use your educational investment to ameliorate the problems we are facing in today’s world, you will experience something worthwhile and meaningful. Here is what you do.

Step 1: Gain a general understanding of every field of study you are most interested in learning. Know the basic vocabulary, concepts, context, figures, debates, and conclusions. Understand the historical development of each field of study from a bird’s eye perspective. Here you are learning the basics as you are exposed to the

various ideas, history, people, movements, and methods. If you don't know what you want to study, then experiment. Take electives, join clubs, participate in social causes, and meet people who are different from you. Talk to counselors and professors. Study the lives of people who are making a life-given difference. Know your own giftedness, skills, temperament, and leadership styles.

Step 2: Using critical thinking skills like a detective analyze each field of study you are learning. Bombard each field with good questions like, "What do you mean by that?" and "How did you come to that conclusion?" Consequently, you will grow exponentially as you seek to understand **what** the central figures are thinking about and **how** they are thinking. Here you are gaining advanced knowledge of the field.

Step 3: Study the controversies, problems, debates, and consequences facing perennial and contemporary scholarship. Who are the "movers and shakers?" What methods are used to deal with the issues discussed? Here you are gaining mastery of your field of study.

Step 4: Repeat steps 1-3 with an enduring commitment to excellence for each discipline you desire to study. For example, let's say I studied sociology. I fulfilled steps 1-3. Now I am going to turn to art history. Do steps 1-3. Thereafter, I will seek to do religious studies. Do steps 1-3. As I work to fulfill step 4, step 5 emerges. Step 5 is very significant for they are some of the blessings and empowerment you will experience for all your hard work.

Step 5: As you begin to develop expertise in two or more fields of study, you will begin to observe the following:

- a. similar if not shared patterns
- b. distinctives evidenced in comparison
- c. overlooked, neglected, or forgotten issues evidenced in comparison
- d. the in-between spaces between these disciplines.

It is at this level where the powers of originality, creativity, and synthesis are cultivated into full bloom, difficulties in one area are solved by another, and where interdisciplinary convergence, integrating the insights from the disciplined studied into a coherent theme, topic, or pattern can be put together and implemented.

"That's the key to new and good ideas; they come from having a very broad and multidisciplinary range of interests." ~ Robin Chase

IV. BE FOCUSED: KNOW HOW TO THINK CRITICALLY

If thinking multidisciplinary is new to you, following steps 1-4 are reasonable steps for success. But we can't over-emphasize the importance of step 2. Developing critical thinking skills is essential, necessary, and worthwhile if you want to flourish whether you are pursuing a specialized field of study or wanting to think multidisciplinary to meet the complex problems we are facing in today's world. Therefore, please make sure you inculcate the following five critical thinking skills in every specialized field of study you pursue:

Analytical Thinking: dissect an argument, eliminate non-essentials through questioning, sorting out evidence from conjecture. Focus on the premises of an argument. If the premises are true, then the conclusion will be true. Breaking down a problem into its fundamental, basic parts is critical to understanding. Trial and error in searching for the fundamental problem will likely be exercised as you dig into the varied, smaller components of the big problem you are studying. You are looking for smaller problems that are found within the larger issue. Once small problems are resolved, then the larger issue will be remedied.

For example, "I can't seem to lose weight." Here is the big problem. Let's explore why? What and how much food do you consume daily? Please give me a record of the type of food you eat over a week. What is your caloric intake? How many carbs do you consume at every meal? How much fat do you consume? How much protein do you consume? How often do you exercise? What type of exercise are you doing? What are your hobbies? When you are stressed, how do you deal with it?

Synthetic Thinking: Look at the problem for harmony, internal consistency, and logical thinking. Observe how all things relate to one another and function together.

For example, what is the relationship between your daily exercise and caloric intake? How are isolation weight training exercises contributing to strengthening your body core?

Other examples: How do the parts of the digestive system operate together? Why aren't the parts of this car engine working together? In what ways does our community work together to protect and provide for its citizens?

Existential Thinking: Looking at this problem through an existential perspective that is concerned with the deep struggles of the human condition. How does this problem relate to one's search for fulfillment, significance, meaning, and purpose?

For example, “How does the problem of not being able to lose weight related to significance, meaning, and purpose? Is my failure to not lose weight related to my belief that no one will ever love me? Is my failure to not lose weight the real issue? Or is this argument that I can’t lose weight really a smoke screen for a deeper question I am refusing to sort out, namely, why can’t I seem to love myself?”

Lateral Thinking: Using creativity as a thinking skill by investigating something in unconventional ways and non-conformist approaches. Here you look at the problem using feelings, hunches, and intuitions. You consider the analyses of non-experts.

For example, “What am I feeling when I say to myself, ‘I can’t lose weight?’” Ask a non-expert like a young child, “What do you think I should do to lose weight?”

Practical Thinking: Looking at this problem through case studies, actual short-term and long-term practical consequences, eyewitnesses, and primary and secondary historical documents. Statistics, substantiated scholarship, experts, images, and other records become important. We also look at precepts, principles, and other action plans.

For example, “What evidence do we have that a low-carb diet is the best approach to losing weight? Here we appeal to case studies, precepts, and expert testimony about what has worked given similar circumstances (e.g., body type; lifestyle; etc.). Other examples may include, “What are the best practices for effective learning?” How can I be better discipline with my studies? What works?”

V. CONCLUSION

Words are inadequate to express how timely it is to understand how to think multidisciplinary given what we are now facing in today’s world. The opportunity is before you! You can amalgamate what you are curious if not passionate about into a rich education that is specifically tailored for you, giving you a larger set of tools for knowing and doing life. Consequently, you will cultivate creativity, innovation, and original thinking. Like Apple advertised during the Covid-19 pandemic, “Creativity goes on!” You will be able to solve problems that go beyond one field of study. You will be unique, making a valuable contribution that transcends any specialized field of study. You will leave a rich legacy. Using Nike’s slogan that helped change millions of people’s lives, “Just do it!”