

Does Africa Need Interdisciplinary Humanities? Editorial

Yamikani Ndasauka 

Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Humanities

editor.jb@unima.ac.mw

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jb.v32i1.1>

Abstract

This editorial explores the value and viability of interdisciplinary approaches within African humanities scholarship. It argues that complex contemporary issues require perspectives spanning traditional disciplines. However, African humanities faculties remain largely siloed in colonial-legacy models limiting theoretical synergy. Pursuing meaningful interdisciplinarity has the potential to dismantle ideological constraints, better comprehend multidimensional African realities, restore epistemological cohesion severed through Western knowledge fracturing, and develop contextual, analytical tools. However, the paper cautions against superficial interdisciplinarity lacking methodological rigor or merely signalling trendiness. It stresses retaining a disciplinary base while leveraging scoping reviews to chart relevance for other fields in addressing complex questions. Harnessing interdisciplinarity's potential requires institutional structures and incentives to facilitate humanities scholars to cross boundaries without abandoning specialisation. This editorial seeks to continue the debate on pursuing deliberate, purpose-driven interconnection.

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1. Introduction

The humanities refer to the subjects of study related to human culture, such as literature, philosophy, history, religion, art, and languages. The humanities provide value in several important ways: (1) They help cultivate critical thinking, interpretation, communication skills, and creativity; and (2) They explore meaningful aspects of human experience by delving into subjects essential for

human flourishing - the nature of beauty, truth, identity, morality, justice, religious belief systems, and the human condition. There has been growing recognition of the value and need for interdisciplinary approaches within the humanities worldwide in recent decades. The complex social, political, cultural, and developmental issues facing the world nations require perspectives and methodologies that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. In Africa, interdisciplinary humanities research has the potential to offer more nuanced analyses of multifaceted problems, challenge established theoretical paradigms, foster innovative solutions, and ultimately advance scholarship and societies.

This editorial seeks to continue the scholarly discourse concerning the merit, viability, and pragmatism of interdisciplinary integration within the humanistic investigations underway across institutions of higher learning in modern Africa. The time is ripe for Humanities scholars to engage in forthright stocktaking regarding the contemporary value and trajectory of humanities scholarship on the continent. Are the humanities, given the fundamental openness of cultural artefacts and their essentially hermeneutic nature, truly suited for interdisciplinary synthesis in the first place? Or might attempts to fuse humanistic and social scientific methods and frameworks ignore the rich tradition of interpretation, contextualisation, and value sensitivity at the heart of the humanities? In the long run, could over-enthusiasm about interdisciplinarity come at the expense of disciplinary rigour and coherence, inadvertently diluting the potency of the various analysis streams? This editorial does not presume to offer definitive verdicts on such complex matters of theory, practice, and institutional policy. Raising such questions constitutes a pertinent step to spur debate and self-scrutiny within and across humanities faculties as scholars (see Willis, 2012).

2. Understanding Interdisciplinarity

Defining what constitutes interdisciplinary studies is essential before delving deeper into interdisciplinarity in African humanities scholarship. Interdisciplinarity involves integrating and synthesising methods, concepts, theories, and insights from multiple academic disciplines to construct new conceptual frameworks,

methodological tools, and solutions to address complex topics that transcend established disciplinary boundaries. Genuine interdisciplinary scholarship, therefore, requires substantial interaction between scholars, students, ideas, and methods from humanities areas like philosophy, politics, literature, history, arts, and law. It entails questioning traditional boundaries, epistemologies, and assumptions within one's home discipline under the analytical lens of another. Structured correctly, universities can facilitate this kind of boundary-crossing co-creation of knowledge across departments and faculties, unlocking new vantage points for addressing society's complex challenges.

While interdisciplinary efforts have expanded, the humanities in many African institutions remain primarily organised and studied within conventional singular disciplines (Aina, 2023). This tendency toward disciplinary silos limits opportunities for synthesising diverse epistemologies and theories. It also inhibits collaboration across humanities departments and with other fields, including the social and natural sciences, technology, and medicine. There are exceptions at institutions like the University of Cape Town with its Institute for Humanities in Africa, providing an encouraging model. However, there remains untapped potential for African humanities scholars to reach across disciplines in their teaching and research. This represents both a structural barrier embedded in the configuration of universities and incentive systems and an ideological barrier persisting from the legacy of colonial education models throughout the continent.

3. Why Interdisciplinarity

To restore connections between ways of knowing: For centuries in many African societies, knowledge systems were centred around holistic worldviews, interconnected realms of the supernatural, natural environment, community, and self. Indigenous languages interwove complex metaphysical ideas with earthly phenomena, from seasonal cycles to notions of justice. Colonial rule and Western education fractured this epistemological unity through compartmentalising knowledge into detached subject areas studied in isolation (Zezeza, 2006). Pursuing interdisciplinarity within the humanities provides opportunities to rebuild bridges

between severed ways of knowing, integrating insights from history, philosophy, literature, arts, and myth traditions towards renewed cohesion and contextually grounded scholarship.

To navigate contemporary complexities: Africa faces enormous, complex challenges at the intersection of health crises, environmental threats, societal inequality and poverty, and governance weaknesses. These problems feature endless moving parts, shaped by everything from climate stress to cultural attitudes on medical treatment legacies of marginalisation. They defy solutions from single disciplines. Interdisciplinarity within the humanities helps uncover multidimensional drivers and pressure points of such contemporary crises by synthesising vantage points spanning language, spirituality, artistic expression, politics, customary beliefs, and beyond (Sivagurunathan, 2012). Interdisciplinarity, thus, equips scholars and policymakers with better comprehension to develop systemic solutions.

To revitalise cultural frameworks: Dominant Eurocentric paradigms have limits in their ability to accurately analyse economic, political and social dynamics unique to sub-Saharan African realities. For example, some communal land-management practices resist comprehension through either classical economic theory or contemporary international development orthodoxies but contain underlying logic illustrated by appealing to fields like African philosophy, anthropology, postcolonial thought, and oral history. Pursuing interdisciplinarity centred on integrating broadly construed African epistemologies helps articulate new theoretical frameworks and analytical tools purpose-built for local contexts (see Andersen, 2016). This ultimately enables more penetrating scholarship to drive social change.

4. A little caution on interdisciplinarity

Firstly, it is tempting to pursue interdisciplinarity in a scattered fashion by superficially taking insights from various fields together. This risks theoretical incoherence and accusations of lacking methodological rigour. Scholars should guard against dabbling through deep immersion in their central discipline while rigorously identifying and justifying key synergies to integrate with others (MacLeod,

2018). Secondly, seeking interdisciplinary breadth can veer towards tokenistic signalling rather than meaningful integration if core assumptions go unexamined. Scholars should avoid cursory references to trendy theories to capture attention and funding. Instead, they should remain centred on research problems for guiding the integration of disciplines where epistemologies substantially inform and transform your home perspective. Finally, opening Pandora's box of multidimensional analysis risks overwhelming theoretical coherence, analytical clarity, and practical application. Scholars should aim to maintain an orienting disciplinary base while leveraging methodological techniques like scoping reviews to chart intersections with other fields (Nowell et al., 2022). Iteratively synthesise insights focused on their relevance for comprehensively addressing complex questions.

5. Conclusion

At this critical juncture, African humanities scholars stand to gain immensely from adopting interdisciplinary frameworks that resurrect the interconnectedness of human experience so fundamental in traditional African philosophies. Constructing institutional structures and incentives to facilitate this boundary-crossing research constitutes the next step for intellectual and social advancement throughout Africa. The potential for interdisciplinary collaboration remains underutilised within African humanities faculties to the detriment of students, academic networks, policy development, and decolonisation campaigns. With targeted, field-wide measures, scholars can unlock deeper insights, dismantle persistent ideological constraints, and lead global conversations on the power of interconnecting disciplinary knowledge to meet local and international challenges. The route forward lies not in wholesale abandonment of specialisation but in deliberate, purpose-driven navigation across disciplinary boundaries. This requires reflection on inherent limitations to one's home discipline to substantively incorporate various understandings without surrendering scholarly rigour. However, humanities should continuously reflect on the implications of adopting interdisciplinarity in Africa.

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