

Designing an Interdisciplinary Course out of Thin Air

Pușă Năstase
Central European University

1 WHY LADY, WHY?

The eyes of the moving company guy who was surveying the contents of our flat said it all before he uttered it: *Why lady, why?* He'd been quite relaxed and jovial until then, happy that we did not want to move any furniture and chatting about the crazy things he'd seen people moving before. And then we came to it: drawers after drawers filled with bottles of (mostly old) perfume. We needed it all moved to Berlin where we were to begin a new life.

My passion for perfume began in a vacuum. At home, my mother (God bless her!) has always looked down on fragrance and makeup as largely frivolous and unsuitable for the serious and reliable, a sign of a deceitful person, of someone trying to “walk around with a painted crow”. It was, in her eyes, beneath serious people. Outside home, the darkest years of Ceausescu's Romania were nothing but a big slab of gray: gray cities and gray people of which all joy seemed to have been drawn out. To enter *Romarta*, the premium shop selling women's things (shoes, clothes, accessories and beauty products) was like entering a sad space, devoid of merchandise and the sensory pleasure one might have expected. Ceausescu wanted to free the country of foreign debt and anything of value was exported for hard cash while no imports were allowed. This meant the shelves and vanity desks across the country were empty, devoid of cosmetics, fragrance or other happy baubles. Romania still produced some luxury products through its factories in Cluj (Farmec) and Bucharest (Miraj), but they were either exported to the other communist countries (friends who grew up in Moscow remember Romanian perfume in the Muscovite shops) or were sold internally (without them going on display), directly to the friends and acquaintances of shop managers and vendors. Perfume and other nice things made quite good presents for doctors' visits and so on.

When I occasionally came across the rare foreign deodorant, soap, or perfume (often unopened and displayed in the living room) while visiting better connected school friends, the bright colors of their packaging and their scent (sniffed through

To walk around with a painted crow (*a umbla cu cioara vopsită*) is a Romanian expression derived from the peasant fairs when swindlers were trying to sell fake products and/or walk around the crowd with a painted over crow pretending to have a parrot. It means: trying to dupe somebody, being dishonest.

the packaging) made me feel transported into a Technicolor set, a dizzying, tantalizing world of luxury and indulgence that seemed too good to be true.

That world finally opened to us in the early 1990s when the country started shedding the cloak of gray under a steady invasion of new and colorful goods – the first steps towards the consumerist revolution. To me, few things better embodied that feeling of freedom and joy than a poster I used to gawk at during my early days as a law student in Bucharest.

In it, a young and glamorous model, wearing pearls, was looking unapologetically straight at the viewer, with tilted head and come-hither eyes, while standing behind a huge fragrance bottle with bubbly indentations. The name *Dolce Vita* and the tag *L'esprit de bonheur* (the spirit of happiness) created the impression that this was a true window into a happy world of young, beautiful and pearl-affording people. It was decadent, nonsensical and oh, so irresistible. It pulled me in and spoke to me directly, reminding me of Elvis concert goers ecstatically recounting how they felt he sang only for them, how viscerally they connected to him although they were just faces in the crowd. It was a memorable ad that opened my eyes to the power of advertising as a tool for creating desire and stirring the imagination.



Christian Dior *Dolce Vita* poster, 1995

2 YOU NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST TIME

My first proper fragrance was *Kobako* by Bourjois, around 1996 bought with money I earned as a student on my first part-time summer job. I loved the scent, but I also chose it because it was a historic fragrance. In the meantime, my passion for fragrance led me to start learning about it, mostly from random magazine articles in the early internet era. I learned that *Kobako* had been created by Ernest Beaux, the Frenchman who fled Russia and the Rallet company to make history as the nose behind *Chanel No. 5*. It was a good perfume, opulent, different from the ubiquitous florals, and was affordable for my student pocket, unlike the *Dolce Vita*. Soon after, I bought Lancôme's *Magie Noire* from my first salary after barely making rent. I wore it with abandon and bought more until I slowly started to suspect that the formulae of my favorite fragrances were changing. For many reasons (better discussed elsewhere) fragrance history was literally disappearing into thin air and I decided to do something about it: to build a library of scents so I can remember how these landmark fragrances originally smelled. As any collector knows, the appeal is not necessarily owning things but rather learning about them, making connections between obscure information one digs out from sheer curiosity and the gems discovered in unlikely places. My perfume collection brought me the joy of learning about the fragrance brands, the noses behind great perfumes, the ingredients they are comprised of and many other things. Most recently, my obsessive interest in scent and fragrance led me to attend a perfume course with an amazing natural perfumery master and thus become part of a very quirky group of fragrance nerds. I also branched out to other fun activities. For a few years I had a perfume review column in the English newspaper in Budapest, got invited to talk about perfume at various events, and designed a training program for sales staff in perfume shops. I also wrote the concept and syllabus for a course on perfume for a private early college program but that never came to fruition due to moving to Berlin with all the boxes that puzzled the relocation guy.

3 BOGOTÁ SPARKS

The idea of a course on perfume had never left my mind but the right time came in 2022 with CEU's newly established undergraduate program and my acceptance to the CLASP Fellows Program. In the first Fellows' meeting we were introduced to writing-based pedagogy and that, for me, opened a new perspective on teaching. If our teaching approach is built on how we were taught, mine was rooted in law and education policy, both disciplines that are quite technical and with limited

room for creativity. I could imagine that colleagues who were teaching the humanities would be comfortable with creative writing in the classroom but for me it was challenging. The tools we acquired in our meeting in Bogota were a much-needed spark, but I still could not see it igniting my education policy courses. Another spark came from discussions with another CLASP Fellow who suggested I use the writing-based pedagogies in a perfume course, after hearing me speak passionately about fragrance.

4 TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH: SYLLABUS DESIGN AND THE CHALLENGE OF ANCHORING THE COURSE IN A DISCIPLINE

The first challenge of designing this course was straightforward: interdisciplinary courses often raise questions about their focus and weak anchoring in a discipline and even more so in cultural studies.¹ Legal studies is one of the disciplines this course could have been anchored in (although teaching law-related issues seems to be among the least interdisciplinary in character).² I am familiar with the field of law and there are important legal issues in the fragrance industry: countless human rights abuses affecting workers from Madagascar to Egypt, dubious privatization of rose fields in Europe, intellectual property rights, fragrance regulations, and many others. However, this disciplinary anchoring would have required a stronger focus on legal issues, inevitably leaving out many others that I felt were equally important. The only solution was to offer a collage course without an obvious disciplinary tie, but compelling in its complexity. In the end, the course description was worded as follows:

The course introduces the students to the ethics, economics and aesthetics of perfume and examines the lives and social standing of those who produced fragrances and those who used them. It is designed to engage students in a multi-sensorial way by looking at fragrance from the perspective of cultural historians, economists, human rights activists, ingredients and bottle producers, perfumers, fragrance critics, and advertisers. The course uses a relatively light topic to lead students on a path of discovery of more difficult and complex considerations while maintaining a fun, experiential approach to learning.

The topics chosen covered several disciplines, including history, economics, law, religious studies, development studies, urbanism, art, and cultural studies. Here are the titles for each class:

- Alchemists and charlatans: introduction to the history of fragrance and the beginning of modern perfumery
- The scent of heaven: fragrance of religious spaces and rituals
- Memory and smell
- The scented court of Marie Antoinette
- Kōdō: the art of Japanese incense between tradition and modernity
- Paul Poiret's magnificent ball and the economics of modern perfumery
- How to steal a million: intellectual property in fragrance
- Allergies and health risks: between regulation and self-regulation in the fragrance industry
- The resource curse and the real cost of luxury on people and environment
- Gender roles and messages in gender advertising
- Smellscapes: mapping the scent of our cities
- Politics of olfaction
- Perfume bottle design in historic perspective
- NOT FROM PARIS: perfume industries and traditions outside France
- The Monster and other creatures: a look at famous scents and fragrance houses
- Perfume stories of Vienna and Dhaka
- The good, the bad, and the ugly in fragrance design (experiential learning session)

Additionally, it was important to find the right tone for the syllabus³ that would convey that this is a serious but also creative course. I tried to add creative titles for each class and included a mix of academic and non-academic reading materials, trade industry articles, legal texts and films.

5 VIENNA-DHAKA ON THE OSUN HIGHWAY

If the first challenge was predictable, the next one was unexpected but exciting. Funding became available for the course to be turned into a collaborative course within the framework of OSUN (Open Society University Network). My Fellows Program colleague from BRAC University was interested in bringing my course to Dhaka. We could collaborate in the classroom and outside it, using the available funding for me to visit and teach classes in Bangladesh and he could visit my class in Austria. We could take students on a field trip to visit local agarwood producers,

and the students could make documentary films as educational resources. More importantly, this opened the possibility of joint assignments and online joint classes with students interacting and collaborating with peers a world away. To integrate his expertise in the course, the classes on smell and memory, scent in religious practices, and scent and colonial history, were redesigned and taught by him (in Vienna and online). I traveled to Dhaka and taught classes at BRAC in addition to going on a field trip to the agarwood producers of Moulvibazar. As Reynolds⁴ recommends, by team teaching and bringing together students and staff with different expertise and experience, the intercultural character of the course was greatly enhanced, creating conditions for peer learning across continents.

Aside from one joint class and a live tour of perfume shops in the Vienna city center, conducted by CEU students for their BRAC colleagues, joint assignments were needed for students to meet virtually, to discuss and to reflect in writing on the collaboration. In intercultural courses it is particularly important to build assignments that reflect the character of the course and go beyond disciplinary boundaries.⁵ We decided upon several joint assignments and several others that were specific to each campus.

In the first joint assignment, students across the two campuses worked in groups to discuss their view on the gender roles and messages conveyed in assigned fragrance posters. In the second one, students had to take pictures of scented places in their cities, post them on Padlet in an online exhibition with an explanation about where the scent was coming from (a kebab shop, garbage disposal, flower gardens, etc.) and how that fit into the economy of the city. Each student was then requested to comment on the online exhibits.

Other assignments included: researching the fragrance industry in their country/region (for CEU students), designing and putting together a marketing strategy for a new fragrance suitable for a young demographic (at CEU), identifying fragrance producers and documenting their opportunities and struggles (at BRAC).

In putting together this collaborative course we had to navigate multiple challenges: different time zones (a 4–5 hour difference depending on the time of year), institutional policies (double class size at BRAC), different term calendars (a two week delay in starting the Winter/Spring semesters) and religious calendars (shortened classes during Ramadan and no class during Eid festivities at BRAC and the beginning of Easter at CEU), and technical difficulties with online teaching. Making it all happen took endless hours negotiating the details, discussing suitability of joint class activities and assignments and planning the field trip. It also required institutional support in both campuses and from many OSUN colleagues who held our hand when navigating the funding process.

6 WHO'S AFRAID OF MARIE ANTOINETTE?

The workshops we had in Bogotá were quite eye-opening not only because we learned about and experienced many writing-based activities but also because they provided a good basis for creativity and experimentation. While we used a wide range of tools in the course, several were both effective and memorable for students.

As shown by the end of class feedback and the post-course student evaluations.

6.1 THE SKIT

The skit is a class activity in which students read a text and then try to adapt it as a script and perform it for an audience. When the CLASP Fellows did this in class, many of us were skeptical at first of this seemingly gimmicky activity. We were assigned a philosophy text and had to read it several times to make sure we had a grasp of it, to negotiate interpretation and agree on what we could take forward into a script. We all brought our individual understanding of the issue but also our view on what a play should look like and what is possible to achieve in the thirty minutes assigned to this activity. Performing the skit and seeing other colleagues perform theirs helped us understand the text better and realize its layered meanings.

In my own class, I used a fragment from Elisabeth de Feydeau book's *A Scented Palace: The Secret History of Marie Antoinette's Perfumer* which describes the moment when the perfumer arrives at Versailles to deliver a large order of fragranced products only to realize that the royal couple is likely preparing to flee. Students worked in groups to read the text and put on a five-minute performance. The task was received with the inevitable reluctance, but they were able to engage with it just as we had done and to perform creative skits. The BRAC students had the disadvantage of working with historical events in Europe that were presumably less familiar to them than to the CEU students, but they were able to perform it in a better setting: in the evening of the field trip, under the stars in Sylhet. Some of them brought the local touch by adding Bangladeshi music as a backdrop making it as fusion as it gets.

The skit works well with all sorts of texts that require attentive reading and can have many interpretations. It can be a good team building exercise: participants need to engage with each other and bring their own creativity to the table. However, it requires time to prepare (at least twenty minutes) and to perform (ten minutes per group for performance and debrief) which makes it less time efficient.

6.2 WRITING FROM SIGHTS

Writing from sights is an exercise where students need to write about what they see. I adapted it to the topic of the course and asked students to describe what they smell, how they perceive a certain scent. It can be flipped by asking them how they would describe a feeling: What is the scent of love? What does despair smell like? I used this technique towards the end of the class, and it brought out interesting insights. This could be used in pairs, where students don't share with the whole group but only with their partner.

6.3 THE HAIKU EXERCISE

The haiku exercise requires students to write an (approximative) haiku. I used it in the class about incense in Japanese culture and asked students to write a series of haiku about the three traditional Japanese arts: tea ceremony, ikebana – the art of flower arrangement, and incense appreciation. Most students took to the task and shared decent haiku, with one exception being a student who requested that she send them by email because she was too self-aware to share in class. This tool is playful, can be customized for many topics, and does not require much time.

Haiku are short Japanese poems with no more than seventeen syllables and three lines in a 5-7-5 metric pattern.

6.4 ONLINE EXHIBITION AS A VERSION OF A GALLERY WALK

Gallery walk is a practice where students put up their work on the walls of the classroom inviting comments and allowing their peers to engage with it. We used it to allow students to exhibit their photo collages of their personal smellscape (scented places in Vienna and Dhaka) and comment on each other's work. It can be combined with the below exercise, What I see and what I wonder.

6.5 WHAT I SEE AND WHAT I WONDER

This practice asks students to reflect on what they see and what they wonder when engaging with the online posters from the Gallery Walk. It is difficult to motivate students to see all posters (we had forty-two submissions) and I would recommend that each student be required to comment on at least three exhibits (specific exhibits need to be assigned to make sure everyone receives feedback).

7 SOME MUSINGS IN LIEU OF CONCLUSIONS

7.1 ON USING THE IWT TOOLS IN THE CLASSROOM

Many of the techniques passed onto us during the CLASP Fellows Program can and should be adapted to fit various disciplines. They work better in liberal arts education, with a small class and less stringent time constraints, but many can work with larger class sizes and in more technical disciplines. Faculty can improve and add to these techniques; they are useful tools in stimulating creativity and allowing the faculty to improvise as they seem fit. My class would have been duller without these tools, and it was very fortunate that I was learning them as I was planning the course.

7.2 ON COLLABORATION

Teaching an interdisciplinary course in a collaborative form (team teaching, co-teaching, invited lecturers) inevitably has ups and downs. Colwill & Boyd noted⁶ that team teaching can bring discomfort as it “foregrounds conflict and differences – interpersonal, intellectual, and internal – that can become the very ground of learning.” The time and energy spent negotiating terms of engagement between course faculty involved was significant. It helps to understand the institutional contexts in all campuses involved, to have a common understanding of intellectual property rights on the course syllabus and materials and most importantly to find joy in the intellectual exchange and in experimenting with something new. The lawyer in me would also recommend agreeing from the beginning on a mediation solution (for instance, an intervening colleague all faculty involved respect) who can weigh in when things might turn difficult. In any case, despite the hurdles my advice is to persist, communicate as best you can, and find joy in being challenged.

7.3 ON THE OLFACTIVE CULTURE COURSE

The course was designed in a snowflake pattern with the topic of scent as an anchor to various disciplines. We aimed at helping students examine a complex issue from multiple points of view, to understand the complex relations between the economic, legal, historic, and aesthetic considerations impacting the fragrance industry. These are skills needed to solve complex and more weighty problems like global warming, public health and many such conundrums. The topic was also an opportunity to make the connection between our inner world (memories and feelings) and the one outside us, and in the process of opening to peers and establishing

meaningful connections. In addition, this interdisciplinary course developed competencies and skills in addition to the disciplinary ones: creativity, storytelling and experimentation. Although interdisciplinary courses are no longer the *rara avis* (rare bird) they once were, there is still a significant lacuna about them in the literature on teaching and learning,⁷ which meant there was not much I could learn from existing research in terms of course design.

I hope the case study documented in this article will provide added evidence and contribute to the scholarship on the topic.

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I want to end this article by acknowledging the work of those who made the course possible.

The colleagues at CEU undergraduate programs and at BRAC School of General Education saw the value of this course for the students. The OSUN staff members in charge of faculty mobility and network collaborative courses (Sasha, Anita, Eva, and Zahid) were essential in the collaborative part of the course. A special thank you goes to our guides in the CLASP journey (Amy, Jenny, Sammy, Nicole, Derek, and erica) who gave us useful tools, shared their experience, and encouraged us to experiment and bring creativity into the classroom.

Finally, in its collaborative iteration, this course has benefited significantly from the contribution of S M Mahfuzur Rahman, who was the course faculty at BRAC. He provided steady support and was a reliable sounding board for all my ideas and anxieties, gave valuable feedback on the syllabus, organized the field trip in Bangladesh, taught the classes and guided the BRAC students in their capstone projects. I learned a lot from him about the fragrance shops in Old Dhaka, the tea gardens, the role of scent in religious practices across South Asia, the Mughal empire, ghazal music and many other topics relevant to this course.

I am also thankful to the students at BRAC and CEU who accepted the challenge of engaging with the course, with each other and with us. I hope that *l'esprit de bonheur* imbued in me by the old *Dolce Vita* perfume ad has permeated them too.

NOTES

- 1 Hoggart, 1969 in Nelson et al. 1992
- 2 As per Lindvig and Ulriksen, 2019
- 3 Palmer et al. 2016
- 4 2012
- 5 Rhoten et al. 2006
- 6 2008, p 1
- 7 Lindvig and Ulriksen, 2019

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