

Literature Review of Learning Assistants in Interdisciplinary Higher Education

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Summary

This literature review examines the role of Learning Assistants (LAs) in interdisciplinary higher education, situating their use within broader research on interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary project work. The review is based on the premise that higher education must prepare students to address complex societal challenges that require collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. As a result, universities are increasingly seeking ways to develop students' interdisciplinary competencies, including communication, collaboration, critical thinking, perspective-taking, and the integration of knowledge from different fields. The literature suggests that interdisciplinary project work is one of the most effective approaches for developing these competencies. Educational models such as Interdisciplinary Problem-Based Learning (iPBL), Interdisciplinary Project-Based Learning (iPjBL), and Problem-Oriented Project Learning (PPL) all place students in interdisciplinary teams where they learn to navigate disciplinary differences while addressing complex, real-world challenges. Research consistently shows that these learning environments can strengthen teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, reflective thinking, and employability skills. However, interdisciplinary learning does not occur automatically. Successful outcomes depend on well-designed learning environments, clear expectations, and effective facilitation.

Unlike traditional teaching, interdisciplinary education often requires educators to guide discussion, support collaboration, and help students manage uncertainty rather than simply transmit knowledge. Students frequently encounter challenges related to communication, disciplinary differences, ambiguity, and group dynamics. Within this context, Learning Assistants appear to be a promising but under-researched resource. While extensive evidence exists from STEM education showing that LAs improve student engagement, confidence, participation, and learning outcomes, much less research has examined their role in interdisciplinary settings. Existing studies indicate that LAs may be particularly valuable in interdisciplinary education because their primary function is often facilitation rather than instruction. They help create safe learning environments, encourage dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, support reflection, and assist students in navigating collaborative processes.

Evidence from interdisciplinary programs such as NTNU's *Experts in Teamwork* suggests that trained LAs can successfully facilitate teamwork and reflective learning processes. Similar findings from interdisciplinary curricula in medicine and other fields highlight the importance of near-peer facilitators in supporting communication and knowledge exchange between students with different backgrounds. Across disciplines, the literature consistently emphasizes that effective LA programs require clear role definitions, pedagogical training, and institutional support. Overall, the review concludes that Learning Assistants have considerable potential to support interdisciplinary learning and project work. However, despite strong evidence for their value in higher education generally, there remains a significant gap in research specifically examining how LAs contribute to interdisciplinary competence development. Addressing this gap represents an important opportunity for future research and forms the foundation for the present study.