

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

In 1989, Stanley Fish, a renowned English and Law professor at Duke, published an article in the *Modern Language Association* journal *Profession* titled “Being Interdisciplinary Is so Very Hard to Do.” He opens with the assertion that interdisciplinarity “seems to flow naturally from the imperatives of **left culturalist theory**” -- deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, neopragmatism and new historicism -- all of which “are alike hostile to the current arrangement of things as represented by (1) the **social structures** by means of which the lines of **political authority are maintained** and (2) the institutional structures by means of which the various **academic disciplines establish and extend their territorial claims.**” He writes:

At the heart of that argument is the assumption that the lines currently demarcating one field of study from another are not natural but constructed by interested parties who have a stake in preserving the boundaries that sustain their claims to authority. The structure of the university and the curriculum is a political achievement that is always in the business of denying its origins in a repressive agenda. Knowledge is frozen in a form supportive of the status quo, and this ideological hardening of the arteries is abetted by a cognitive map in which disciplines are represented as distinct, autonomous, and Platonic... Disciplinary ghettos contain the force of our actions and render them ineffectual on the world’s larger stage. (15-16)

A more recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, Mark C. Taylor’s “End the University as We Know It,” presented a similar sentiment. The lingering dissatisfaction with disciplinary work is suggestive of a pervasive criticism of academic work, one that is aligned not only with a leftist questioning of power but with a more bi-partisan suspicion of professionalism and the widespread belief that academic work is out of touch with real-world problems, that it is sterile and economically wasteful.

Such beliefs appear to motivate new thinking on interdisciplinarity and the need to promote it in academia so as to allow academics to take part in a wide network of corporate and governmental efforts to deal with social, economic and global problems. In the “Introduction” to *Investigating Interdisciplinarity*. Scott Frickel, Mathieu Albert and Barbara Prainsack explain that the call for interdisciplinary work has become more urgent than ever before:

Echoing through university faculty and administrations, funding agencies, and policy domains, this call is grounded in the assumption that interdisciplinary research generates more nuanced and robust understandings of the social and natural world than knowledge emerging from within traditional disciplines, and that it will lead to more innovative or more holistic solutions to “real-world” problems (Hadorn et al. 2010; Klein 1990; National Science Foundation 2011). Programmatic statements such as these often cast interdisciplinarity as an antidote to the limitations of disciplinary knowledge and as a panacea for the myriad problems facing our societies and our planet.

What is evident here is that the idea of interdisciplinarity is grounded in the understanding that disciplinary knowledge sustains and maintains power structures, that it is sterile in that knowledge is not circulated but held hostage by specialists and that it has no real world-use.

Three principles lie behind the concept of interdisciplinary research:

1. Interdisciplinary knowledge is Better Knowledge –

The use of “better” here is vague - but it appears to suggest that the kind of knowledge in question is better because it has greater practical value. This is certainly supported by academic work currently practiced in the UK where the **operationalization of “impact”** as an assessment criterion has become central to the national research evaluation framework. The distribution of public funding to universities is based on claims to levels of impact that academic product has on people’s lives – an impact that expresses itself in economic, social, medical or other quantifiable products that better society in some form.

2. Disciplines Constrain Interdisciplinary knowledge –

The common perception here is that disciplines are inward-looking or self-referential research enterprises accountable only or primarily to themselves. This is often true in the way that peer-review works in the allocation of grants, promotions and so on. Disciplines are also seen as curtailing the production of interdisciplinary knowledge by limiting the circulation of knowledge and keeping it firmly within their own discipline. Jargon renders the work opaque or inaccessible to people outside the discipline.

3. Interdisciplinary Interactions Are Unconstrained by Hierarchies –

The premise that underlies this principle is that academics should or can contribute equally to the creation of knowledge regardless of their place in the academic hierarchy. No one exerts predominance over anyone else. The expectation is that interdisciplinary work will weaken power asymmetries that isolate researchers and prioritize certain research questions or fields over others.

The assumptions underlying these three principles show that the ideological formation and promotion of interdisciplinary research is aligned with an implicit attack on disciplinary research. It puts disciplines in a defensive position. Disciplinary work must defend itself economically, socially and epistemologically in order to prove that its existence is warranted and beneficial.

This, in turn, places disciplinary and interdisciplinary in the uncomfortable position of warring factions on questions of knowledge and the future of academia, a kind of binary that we might not feel comfortable with and that we might not wish to promote.

A possible solution is proposed by Rob Moore in 2011 when he coins the term “hyperinterdisciplinarity.” The term is offered as an alternative to the two – and is seen as a radical break from existing forms of knowledge that grows in response to current social, cultural, technological and political climates. This is a new idea of knowledge formation that is fed by and in turn feeds current developments in the world.

The Barbara and Morton Mandel Doctoral Program in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Even as we stand behind our own interdisciplinary program, we believe that some of the assumptions outlined above are incorrect and perhaps even dangerous.

First – there cannot be multiple viewpoints on a problem unless there are multiple bodies of knowledge, multiple disciplines that tackle questions from different angles and use different language and different methodologies to answer these questions. **There cannot be interdisciplinary research without disciplinary research.** And in that sense the two must be seen not as competitive but as complementary bodies of knowledge.

Second – research shows that problem-oriented research does not sustain itself over time as well as disciplinary research does.

Third, each of us believes that disciplinary work is in itself always already interdisciplinary. All of us read beyond the bodies of knowledge produced by our peers. We study adjacent bodies of knowledge where relevant and make the discursive leap where necessary. None of us think in a vacuum. And we hope that our work together in the course of the years of the fellowship will sustain this openness and allow us to excel both within and outside our field of study.

Works Cited

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