

## INTERDISCIPLINARY DISORIENTATION : A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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In the past two decades, many scholars in the arts and humanities as well as the scientific community have been eager to cite the "interdisciplinary" nature of their work. However, there is hardly a clear critical consensus about what this term means. For some, it is little more than a buzz word; for others, it describes a new foundation for critical theory, historiography, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology. But whether one approaches the question of interdisciplinarity skeptically or enthusiastically, it would be difficult to deny the presence of an intellectual trend, one for which compelling explanations have begun to emerge.

As opposed to providing an application of interdisciplinarity, the theme of this paper is the concept itself and the confusion it seems to engender. I have initiated this project in hopes that it may provoke more public discussion about what actually constitutes interdisciplinary thought and research. I do not believe that complete concordance on this subject is either possible or desirable. However, I believe that the present slipperiness associated with terms like "interdisciplinary scholarship", largely due to the absence of a meta-discourse, has made it easy for more traditional scholars and institutions to embrace a dismissive attitude towards a potentially liberating, dynamic, and more comprehensive form of intellectual inquiry.

The ambivalence surrounding the concept of interdisciplinarity is itself illuminating and complex. The response of intellectuals to this phenomenon is, on the whole, polarized. Even though members of the academic community seem eager to attach the term "interdisciplinary" to their research, many concrete examples of boundary-crossing research frequently engender disdain. It is my contention that these mixed messages

reflect two different and not necessarily contradictory attitudes toward the “objective categories” endemic to the traditionally elitist academy : 1) a pragmatic and intuitive sense of their inadequacy; and 2) a nostalgia natural to a generally conservative species.

As a graduate student in a program that is selfproclaimedly interdisciplinary (there are no departments, only “areas of concentration” at the University of Texas, Dallas), I have a pressing need to promote understanding of and respect for interdisciplinary education and research. Furthermore, because of my particular circumstances, I am aware of the difficulties involved in defining interdisciplinarity. Even in a university devoted to interdisciplinary study as UTD is, most graduate students are at a loss for a consistent and serviceable definition of interdisciplinarity. And even if they have given the matter serious contemplation, they will not find many in the academy at large willing to validate their conceptual frame because the entire issue is shrouded in ambiguity. Self-doubt and accusations of charlatanry (justified and unjustified) are rampant. In the School of Arts and Humanities alone, the bickering over this issue among faculty members is so pronounced that they have been unable during the past two years to develop a set of guidelines for an introductory “core course” to the graduate program.

As a graphic example of the confusion I have detected surrounding this concept, I have compiled an index of sorts — a list of some of the methodologies in which the interdisciplinary model is currently being employed in the institution where I work. The tone underlying this circumscribed catalog is meant to encourage the reader to infer an analogy between this list and the larger issue of theoretical confusion surrounding the phenomenon of interdisciplinarity.

1) The Geertzian approach — This model commandeers the theory of Clifford Geertz, a cultural anthropologist. It is an antifoundational methodology which rejects the creation of totalizing theories altogether. Instead, it promotes one to trace the widest, manageable hermeneutical circle, enter the playing field, and produce with any available tools a “thick description” of that which one finds inscribed there.

2) The Derridian approach — Since everything in the world is a reification of an underlying “text” — the product of phallogocentric construction — all formal descriptions of knowledge are grounded in hidden metaphysical presuppositions and, therefore, lend themselves to deconstruction. The deconstructionist is (s)he who perceives the speciousness

of any disciplinary boundaries.

3) The Postmodern-Second Coming approach — This model is built upon the premise that the only thing left to scholars is interdisciplinarity because “the center cannot hold and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. Jean-François Lyotard is its theoretical patriarch.

4) The “Bild-Men-with-an-Elephant” approach — Roughly, this method corresponds to the joke about the seven blind men asked to describe an elephant; the elephant is the phenomenon to be studied, e.g., the French Revolution, and the blind men are the different disciplines. The idea is that by accumulating radically different partial descriptions (historical documents, literary texts, paintings, philosophical tracts) one gets closer to understanding the entirety.

5) The Anarchist approach — This is a post-Berlin Wall Marxist approach wherein “anything goes” as long as one follows the guidelines.

6) The “Accidental Tourist” approach — This is exemplified by the cognitive psychologist who occasionally borrows from neurophysiology, the medieval art historian who makes reference to the work of Thomas Aquinas, or a literary critic who cites the scientific metaphors in *Huckleberry Finn*.

7) The Metaphysical approach — This model presupposes an essential seed from which all disciplines have sprung and attempts to evaluate disciplinary work in terms of its relationship to a primal oneness.

8) The Panglossian-Evolutionary approach — This model treats humanistic endeavors as part of a dynamical, evolving system. The disciplines are perceived as forming a nested, organically interconnected hierarchy which maps our evolutionary past and represents a range of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge in which humans participate and to which they contribute.

9) The Ex Post Facto Approach — In the wake of present day enthusiasm for interdisciplinary, some scholars claim that their particular discipline is actually *the* quintessentially interdisciplinary discipline. They develop elaborate cases to demonstrate how, by studying social history or literature, for example, one eventually confronts all crucial scholarly questions.

10) Translation-as-Interdisciplinarity — This model defines all acts of communication as acts of interpretation and, therefore, uses metaphrasis as the guiding metaphor in promoting an associative method of research.

11) The Rortian-Ironist approach — To be an advocate of this metho-

dology, one must be certain that there is absolutely no overlap between what one practices and what one preaches. Furthermore, one's credentials are greatly enhanced by a career history that includes residency in several different academic departments and a MacArthur prize.

12) The Heideggerian approach — From this perspective, Being presences itself in the clearing of the interdisciplinary fourfold — but only in German (or possible Attic Greek).

13) Interdisciplinarity-as-Process — This precise methodology has been developed to overcome not only the restraints of rigid disciplinary boundaries but also the nuisance of deadlines and critical receptions of all kinds.

14) The Radical Feminist approach — This model is founded on the premises that scholars should explore interdisciplinarity “through the body” and all disciplines are suspect anyway because “discipline” is a fundamentally masculine praxis.

It is my contention that the breakdown within and among disciplines is, ultimately, a crisis of identity; it indicates a challenge to certain age-old explanatory frameworks, as operative in canon formation as they are in formation of degree plans. But more importantly, it suggests that, at the global level, our perception of the nature of human knowledge is undergoing a transformation. Of course, there is nothing fundamentally unhealthy about an identity crisis; it is the manner in which one responds to such a crisis which can be either fruitful or debilitating.

Having suggested the ambiguity or at least the chameleonlike nature of interdisciplinarity, I would like to close this essay by appealing to those who, like myself, have a stake in the legitimation of interdisciplinary research. Shakespeare's Juliet was quite wrong: there is a great deal “in a name”; it is an economic means for synthesizing a complex of meanings, a way of uniting plurality with the particulate. But in order for this to be the case, the relationship among the plurality of meanings ascribed to the term “interdisciplinarity” must be understood, i.e., we need to address the challenge of identification by systematically asking a category of questions, e.g.: What is the relationship between interdisciplinarity and over-specialisation? How will higher education be affected by methodical boundary-crossing? Can interdisciplinary thinking be taught? What are the cultural implications and applications of interdisciplinarity?

As a beginning, such questions can be employed to assist the reader of this essay in evaluating the relative merits of the methodologies I have

listed above. Eventually, I hope that they may serve in the future as a foundation for a more sophisticated and collective investigation of meta-interdisciplinarity.

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