

A Meta-Disciplinary Framework for Interdisciplinarity

UBC Faculty of Education
Retreat Committee for Interdisciplinarity

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Committee Members

Jacqui Gingras (CSCI, PhD student) **Chair**
Marla Arvay (ECPS, Assoc. Prof)
Marcia Braundy (CSCI, PhD Student)
Deborah Butler (ECPS, CCFI, Assoc. Prof)
Susan James (ECPS, Asst. Prof)
Janet Moore (CUST, PhD Student)
Stephen Petrina (CUST, Assoc. Prof)
Charles Ungerleider (EDST, Prof)
Daniel Vokey (EDST, Asst. Prof)

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inter•disciplin•arity, n.,

In intellectual conduct, coherent, rigorous and skeptical inquiry without necessary regard to the assumptions or procedures of, or claims to domain or phenomena by, any discipline¹

Introduction

In the world of globalisation and media, the operative word is “convergence” and in the world of academia, this operative word is “interdisciplinarity.” In many ways, these two very similar concepts are meaningless, having more to do with impression management than with substantive changes. Yet in other ways, convergence and interdisciplinarity characterize the ever-imploding state of knowledge in (post)modern life. More than anything else, convergence and interdisciplinarity threaten boundaries and contradict stability. However, just as media cultures have been able to contain convergence, academic cultures have proven to be quite flexible in containing interdisciplinarity. Disciplines have readily accommodated interdisciplinarity, and even proliferated, often to the dismay of critics who have been launching a vast array of feminist, multicultural and postmodern criticisms since the late 1960s. The critics of disciplinarity point out that, nevertheless, their “bunker busters” are finding their targets: The proof is in the popularity of cross-, inter- and transdisciplinary centres on university campuses, the new journals such as *Mind*, *Culture and Activity*, and the new fields such as cultural studies, science and technology studies

¹ Bates, D. (2002). Muddling through a functional definition of interdisciplinarity. Online: <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~hendra/Muddling.html>

(STS) and women's studies. These processes of proliferating disciplines *and* interdisciplines have played out in faculties across campuses, including the faculties of education.

Some would argue that faculties of education have felt these processes more intensely than other faculties. Faculties of education have the distinction of dealing with the disciplines such as economics, law, philosophy, psychology and sociology, the interdisciplines such as cultural studies and women's studies along with the proliferation of their own disciplines and interdisciplines such as school trauma and curriculum studies. In research, graduate students and faculty members are overwhelmed with the state of affairs. Anxieties are reduced in teacher education practices, where disciplinary practice more or less rules the day. The closer to the schools that one gets, the more disciplinary practice becomes. School practice, where one speaks of integration rather than interdisciplinarity, continues to be subject-centred and disciplinary. Some see schools as the sanctum of disciplinarity; others see the schools as the next frontier for interdisciplinarity. Whether one prefers to proliferate disciplinary practice or interdisciplinarity, the problem in faculties of education is material and structural, not ideological. How do we organize faculties of education to accommodate both disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity? How do we moderate proliferation?

Currently, UBC's Faculty of Education finds itself in a state of transition. Following months of discussion and debate, the Centre for Studies in Curriculum and Instruction (CSCI) has been restructured into a Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry (CCFI). CSCI was founded in 1976 and was once a key site for interdisciplinarity in the Faculty of Education. One major change in the restructuring was the closure of admission of students into CSCI. The Faculty now finds itself grappling with the problem of dealing with the two seemingly primary catalysts for interdisciplinarity— viz., bodies and structures. Defining how CCFI might act as an incubator space for cross-disciplinary collaboration and construction of different ways of being “interdisciplinary” is now underway.

It is difficult to gauge the volume of interdisciplinarity with the Faculty. What are appropriate indicators of interdisciplinarity? Are dual appointments an indicator? Of the 126 faculty members, only two have a dual appointment. Is the number of centres an indicator? There are now eight centres and institutes, including CCFI, which have claims to expertise in a range of disciplines. However, the centres do not have faculty members, outside of the few who are appointed to administrate. Most do not have students, outside of the Masters of Education students admitted into CSCI/CCFI. Is interdisciplinarity with departments an indicator? The

departments of Curriculum Studies (CUST), Educational Studies (EDST), Language and Literacy Education (LLED) and Educational, Counselling and Special Education (ECPS) along with the School of Human Kinetics (HKIN) provide sites for both disciplinary and interdisciplinary work. Are the departments as interdisciplinary as they claim? The Faculty faces the challenge of articulating and establishing the role of the centres at this moment, while at same time increasing intradepartmental interdisciplinarity.

Like disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity demands resources. And resources are precisely what faculty members indicated as a primary detractor from research and a more interdisciplinary practice. In a survey of research practices in the Faculty of Education administered in May 2000, 93% of the respondents strongly or mildly agreed that their research suffers for lack of time (item #4). With regards to distractions, 88% strongly or mildly agreed that administrivia (i.e., admin. duties, meetings, email, phone calls) impedes their ability to do first-rate research (item #7). On the issue of funding, 96% strongly or mildly agreed that more support services were needed (item #12). The lack of support for the risk-taking of interdisciplinarity was indicated to be a disincentive, where 77% strongly or mildly agreed that there was a shortage of funds for non-traditional, risky ventures (item #16). On this issue, 69% strongly or mildly agreed that commitments to disciplinary research were the reasons interdisciplinary opportunities with the faculty are overlooked (item #13).

Can interdisciplinarity in the faculty be supported through a centralized structure, while at the same time be distributed within CUST, ECPS, EDST, LLED, and HKIN? Ought resources be made an incentive for interdisciplinarity? What structures *are currently* inhibiting interdisciplinarity? What are the conditions that *could* prevail to enable and enhance interdisciplinarity? What other structures might be necessary? These questions and others were raised during separate Graduate Student and Faculty Retreats held during January 2003. Out of these conversations and by invitation of the Dean's Office, a student-faculty committee was formed to analyse and make recommendations on the status of interdisciplinarity in the Faculty of Education.

The Challenge of Definitions

As a committee, we agreed that there are multiple ways of working across disciplines. We identified the necessity for grappling with what it means to be interdisciplinary and what the future implications might be for our Faculty (see [“Provoking Thought About Interdisciplinarity”](#)). Acknowledging that we would be unable to resolve the challenge of interdisciplinarity in our committee, we aimed to initiate a Faculty-wide discussion of interdisciplinarity. In this report we offer a structure through which this discussion might be fostered (and multiple ways of working across disciplines explored). We also identify important considerations (and possible resources) that could feed into cross-faculty discussions about interdisciplinarity. Specifically, we begin with key questions to address the role of interdisciplinarity in the Faculty, definitions that capture possible ways of working across disciplines, inhibiting and enhancing structures, and a number of recommendations. We close the report with a set of appendices that provide additional background information for a Faculty-wide discussion. We intend this report to be used as a reference for future Faculty actions pertaining to interdisciplinarity.

Interdisciplinarity in the Faculty of Education: Questions to be Addressed

One of the committee’s first tasks was to frame the problems of interdisciplinarity in the Faculty and generate a list of questions to address. From this list we then took up two specific questions that we discussed more thoroughly in our meetings. Those questions are indicated. But all of these questions are important to address as we move forward in discussing interdisciplinarity with the Faculty.

- What do we mean by interdisciplinarity?
- What does an interdisciplinary project look like?
- What forces are driving interdisciplinarity? (bottom up?)
- What are the catalysts for interdisciplinarity?
- How do we legitimize interdisciplinarity?
- What structures promote/prevent interdisciplinarity?

- How do you foster interdisciplinarity in an institution that is disciplinary in nature?
- What is the mandate of the Faculty of Education?
- How do we frame our work as a Faculty?
- How does interdisciplinarity relate to the larger mandate of the Faculty of Education, TREK (UBC)?

• What is the best way for the Faculty of Education to incorporate interdisciplinarity into its mandate?

- How much interdisciplinarity can the Faculty (and faculty) tolerate?
- Can the system handle interdisciplinarity?
- How do we recognize students who are interdisciplinary?
- What is the role of interdisciplinarity for students at the undergraduate/graduate level?
- How can we balance interdisciplinary and disciplinary content in our programs?
- How do we allocate resources to support interdisciplinary students?
- How do we create an interdisciplinary structure with equitable resources as other departments?
- What is the best possible way to accommodate interdisciplinary students/projects/methods/faculty doing interdisciplinary work?
- What are the best alternatives for interdisciplinarity in the Faculty of Education?

Definitions Revisited: Varying Ways of Working Within and Across Disciplines

As we examined the literature and resources focused on defining interdisciplinarity, we recognized that there are multiple possible ways of working within and across disciplines. We also recognized that there is not necessarily one right way of creating cross-disciplinary connections. This in part led to our recommendation that students and faculty be brought together to define for themselves how they might want to work together, recognizing that there might emerge a multiplicity of meta-disciplinary ways of working. We offer the list of definitions below to spur thinking about possibilities, and about what is “interdisciplinarity.” We also recommend the development of structures within the faculty that explicitly support development among faculty and students of interdisciplinary endeavors.

Working Definitions

Disciplinary— Practice and research located within one of the traditional or more recent disciplines, (e.g., physics, psychology, anthropology, history, and so forth) (Also referred to as **mono-disciplinary**).

Multi-Disciplinary— Practice and research in which people working in different disciplines inform and combine their results with little integration or engagement across boundaries.

Interdisciplinary—Practice and research where disciplinary boundaries are both left intact (no change to their assumptions, domains, central questions, or methods) and challenged. Involves attempts to understand, level and integrate wide-ranging domains of knowledge, including disciplinary, popular and tacit forms.

Transdisciplinary— Similar to interdisciplinary, but the process of communication across disciplines leads to changes in the ways those working within disciplines understand and pursue their inquiries.

Extra- or Supra-Disciplinary— More like performance than conventional research: performers come together for a transformative, interactive event (e.g., concert, conference, conversation) that is unique and non-replicable.

Structures/Factors *Currently* Inhibiting Interdisciplinarity

Our committee recognizes that forms of interdisciplinarity already thrive in the Faculty, both within and across departments. Interdisciplinary efforts are thriving with some structures working both for and against interdisciplinarity. Much of our discussion, however, focuses on structures that inhibit cross-talk across departments. Some of these barriers to cross-faculty collaboration (and cross-departmental definitions of meta-disciplinary ways of working) are:

- Allegiance to departments and disciplines for the purpose of tenure and promotion

- Distribution of resources directly to departments
- Hiring entitlement
- Absence of structure on which to build interdisciplinarity
- Lack of incentives (e.g., money and time)
- Students to faculty ratio (workloads)

Conditions/Programs that *Could* Enable and Enhance Interdisciplinarity

- The network of Centres and Institutes including the [Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry](#) (see more information about CCFI in the appendix)
- [Office of Graduate Programs and Resources](#)
 - Provide support for large interdisciplinary grant submissions i.e. [Major Collaborative Research Initiatives](#) from SSHRC
- FTE's for Faculty and Additional administrative support
- [Individual Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program](#)
- GAA's
- [TREK 2000](#): UBC's Vision

Recommendations for the Faculty of Education

Given the definitions of interdisciplinarity and the questions that need to be addressed by our Faculty, what are the actions that need to be taken? How do we identify our own work/research as interdisciplinary? How can we engage in further discussion with these models?

Our committee has proposed four questions for discussion at a future Faculty meeting (late 2003, early 2004). In addition to these four questions, this document provides reference information for Faculty action around interdisciplinarity, including our recommendations regarding future action.

Questions for small-group discussion at next Faculty meeting ([see worksheet](#))

1. What do these definitions mean for us?
2. Do we have an adequate amount and quality of interdisciplinary research?

3. What is it that we want as a vision for interdisciplinarity?
4. How do we get there?

Recommendations:

The next phase of the process needs to involve both faculty and students as equal contributors and must link to the larger vision of the Faculty of Education for greatest success in implementation:

1. Distribute and discuss meta-disciplinary framework document (October 2003).
2. Allocate time at a future Faculty meeting for discussion around the four questions offered above (November 2003).
3. Out of these discussions and using our suggestions as needed, faculty and students develop action plans.

Suggestions for Fostering Interdisciplinarity

1. Admitting interdisciplinary students into two departments.
2. Required doctoral student attendance at 1-2 credit professional development seminars (pass/fail).
3. Required doctoral student and faculty attendance at weekly 1-2 credit Faculty seminar where students and faculty take turns presenting their research (pass/fail).
4. Doctoral student course requirements to include 6-9 credits from outside department and/or Faculty.
5. Cross-appointments for faculty members.
6. Initiation of Faculty-wide (cross-departmental) research initiatives supported by start-up funding and administrative time.
7. Co-teaching with faculty members (and doctoral students) from across departments.
8. Explore possible relationship with IISGP for admitting interdisciplinary students with connections to other Faculties.
9. Faculty-wide social events where students and faculty can informally discuss opportunities for interdisciplinary research and teaching.

Appendices

Questions for Discussion at Next Faculty Meeting

1. What do these definitions mean to you? Do they help?
2. How are you already doing interdisciplinary work/research? How do you identify our own work/research as interdisciplinary?
3. What is it that you/we want as a future vision for interdisciplinarity?
4. How do we get there? What actions need to be taken?

Provoking Thought About Interdisciplinarity

Historical and genealogical studies of disciplines suggest the cultural and social contingency of these artifacts. These studies suggest the arbitrariness of disciplines, and identify the forms of power underlying their construction. Disciplinarity requires a fair amount of boundary-work, or practices of power for separating disciplines from other social forms. In the work of Michel Foucault, discipline is more verb than noun, where oppression is an ideological function of the disciplines. Here, disciplines are a means by which a range of actors are brought into knowledge-power relations with each other. Practitioners— human bodies— and knowledge are disciplined. Within these artifacts then, are powerful schemes for dividing and organising the world for action, emotion and cognition, communication and discipline (Klein, 1996; Messer-Davidow, Shumway & Sylvan, 1993). These artifacts clearly do have politics. In *Learning to Divide the World*, John Willinsky shows how the disciplines of English, science and geography embody a "legacy of imperialism" from centuries of European and western colonizing conquests. For example, he argues that in England during the late 1800s, "literacy-as-mass-education, English-as-academic-discipline, and literature-as-canon" developed coincidentally through efforts at socializing working-class children in modern ways of self-cultivation and civil life. When English was constructed as a discipline, colonization and social mobility became increasingly contingent on literature— the Great book.

Feminists have pointed out the gendered nature of disciplines constructed through values of masculinity and patriarchy. The natural, physical and social science disciplines are particularly important subjects of this critique. For historians of science like Donna Haraway (1991) and Sandra Harding (1986, 1991), the structured content of the sciences is reflective of the androcentric studies used in its construction. Biology for example, was constructed with a patriarchal underpinning, and much of its disciplinary structure reproduces traditional notions of gender norms and behaviours. Disciplinary structures in primatology and anthropology are similarly gendered. While one might have learned the structure of the discipline, one was also learning an ideology of western patriarchy and heterosexuality. Gay and lesbian critics point out the heterosexual biases of disciplines in western art, biology, medicine and psychology.

Anti-racist and multicultural arguments situate the disciplines in their Eurocentric and western cultures. Critics like Henry Louis Gates (1992) and bell hooks (1994) point out the

disempowering nature of structures in canonised disciplines like art, English literature and western history. The discipline of education is a western structure as well (Hoskin, 1993). The multicultural critiques note that disciplines were constructed through privilege, and continue to be supported by those with wealth and power. Here, western cultures and disciplinarity are postured as hierarchically superior to cultures marginalized, less advantaged and less concerned with disciplinary knowledge. Western knowledge is rewarded over, and is often antagonistic to, ethnic, racial, multicultural and post-modern understandings. Multiple and counter perspectives, anti-racists argue, provide a different and equally valid organisation of knowledge

Indeed, defining interdisciplinarity outside of disciplinarity is counterproductive. In the late 1960s, interdisciplinarity was defined against disciplinarity. Some of the early architects of disciplinary doctrine of the 1950s and early 1960s reconsidered their positions. Schwab, for example, acknowledged that disciplinarity was constructed under the “illusion” that disciplines were “the inevitable products of natural divisions” (1969, p. 241). While interdisciplinarity for the past thirty years has been defined against disciplinarity, it is questionable, whether disciplinarity is a necessity condition for interdisciplinarity, as many defendants of the disciplines argue.

Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry

Objectives:

- To provide a supportive structure and an “incubator space” within which cross-disciplinary collaboration can be fostered
- To nurture and encourage new forms of interdisciplinarity to emerge.
- To create a space where students and Faculty members can take advantage of structures and systems established within CCFI that bring individuals from varying perspectives together in one place to address topics or issues of common interest.

Strategies:

- Engage Faculty members in integrated sets of courses, study groups, conferences, lecture series, grant development, etc., focused on themes of interest across the faculty (e.g., indigenous education, teachers’ professional development, etc.)
- Projects will involve faculty, students, and sessionals from across the Faculty of Education, the University, and the broader scholarly and professional communities.
- Participants will define themes of cross-faculty interest that will inform the basis for an integrated sequences of activities
- Create opportunities for cross-departmental consultation for interdisciplinary students housed in departments (e.g., helping identify courses; possible supervisors from across departments).

Structural Support:

- Practical support in organizing meetings, finding space
- Support to organize and host study groups, brown bags, think tanks, or conferences focused on cross-faculty themes;
- Teach courses of cross-faculty appeal to graduate (primarily doctoral) students from across departments (sequences of courses on a common theme, taught from different perspectives; co-teaching a single course by individuals from different perspectives);
- Host annual doctoral seminar focused on a single cross-faculty theme. This course brings in guest presenters, panelists, and speakers from across the Faculty of Education, across the University, and the wider scholarly and professional communities. For example, this year's seminar is on Critical Issues in Education and will be dovetailed with a CCFI conference focused on one of the three focal issues addressed in the course.
- Provide resources on how best to get funding or support for cross-faculty initiatives (e.g., lecture series, conferences), building on connections/relationships established between CCFI and other units within and outside of the university (e.g., with Peter Wall, the Conference Centre, etc.)

The Office of Graduate Programs and Research

OGPR

http://www.educ.ubc.ca/ogpr/about_us.html

Phone 604 822-5512

Fax 604 822-8971

Email: ogpr@interchange.ubc.ca

MANDATE:

The OGPR supports the Faculty of Education in Research, Graduate Studies and Equity both internally (within the Faculty) and externally (links to the University and wider community). OGPR support includes the following, with other responsibilities at the request of the Dean:

- Development of policy
- Administration functions (e.g., grants, curriculum changes, student awards, etc.)
- Maintenance of records and data on funding and graduate programs
- Provision/dissemination of information (e.g., workshops, announcements,
- Resource binders, funding opportunities, etc.)
- Research facilitation (grant writing support, workshops and seminars, awards and grants information, etc.)
- Faculty of Education Graduate Student Council (FEDS) association
- Advice to the Dean on policy and procedures for graduate programs and research
- Links within the University (VP Research, Faculty of Graduate Studies, etc.)
- Links with the wider community (local, provincial, national and international)
- Recommendations from faculty through two committees (GCAC, Equity, described below)

Committees Overseen by OGPR

Graduate Curriculum Advisory Committee (GCAC)

The GCAC serves as an advisory committee to departments and the Dean on graduate policy within the Faculty and administers all graduate program and curriculum changes within the Faculty. The GCAC also coordinates and disseminates information on special topics courses (565 and 604) offered throughout the Faculty of Education and through the Office of External Programs (OEP) within External Programs and Learning Technologies in Education (EPLT).

Membership includes one representative from each department (CUST, ECPS, EDST, LLED), CCFI, EPLT, the School of HKIN, two graduate students and an ex-officio member from the Senate Curriculum Committee. Meetings are chaired by the OGPR Associate Dean.

Equity Committee

The Equity Committee advises the Faculty on how to carry out its commitment to an equitable environment for study and work.

Membership includes representatives from faculty members, staff and graduate students. Meetings are chaired by the OGPR Associate Dean.

Selected Web Sites

<http://www.interdisciplines.org/>

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