

## What is the Identity of Interdisciplinarity?

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**I**nterdisciplinarity is nothing new. The earliest attempts to understand, organize, or codify knowledge and learning were infused with what today look like interdisciplinary thinking and approaches. Indeed, interdisciplinarity only makes sense if it is preceded by some system of disciplines that perceive themselves and/or are perceived to be separable and bounded. There have to be lines to transcend, categories to move between, before something can be “inter-” anything. So to call the education of philosopher kings in Plato’s *Republic* interdisciplinary is a bit anachronistic, as the current forms of interdisciplinarity are rooted in the post-Enlightenment and modern divisions within academia, well post-dating Plato. It was in that post-Enlightenment moment when disciplinary beliefs and practices made the biggest leap toward becoming disciplinary identities as well.

There are many situations wherein something *you do* becomes something *you are*. Innocuous examples abound, such as “I’m a cross-country skier” or “I’m the class clown”. Other forms of this kind of identification are more entrenched in the public discourse of some cultures, such as occupational identity. It is a cliché that the second question asked, after names, at British cocktail parties is, “where are you from?”, while in the US, it is, “what do you do for a living?” Occupation, a thing *one does*, becomes a fundamental portion of identity, who *one is*. The academic equivalent traditionally was to build one’s identity around the discipline of one’s terminal degree and/or the department in which one worked. So, to teach or research sociology meant that one was a sociologist, and vice versa. That system works clearly and well when degrees and departmental hirings line up, and when scholars have singular disciplinary identities.

What, then, is the identity of interdisciplinarity? If the discipline is the locus of academic identity, from where does an interdisciplinary scholar draw their sense of self? Much has been expressed, in this and many other journals, in books, in conference papers, panels, and hallway chats, about what interdisciplinarity is, where its place in the terrain of academia is. Less has been said about the inhabitants of that interdisciplinary terrain, though. Whether one is trained as an interdisciplinarian or works in a cross-, multi-, inter-, or trans-disciplinary space, the links between what *one does* and what *one is* remain. So are there differences among someone who is interdisciplinary, someone who is an interdisciplinarian, and someone who works interdisciplinarily?

Note the parts of speech in that last sentence...adjective (interdisciplinary), noun (interdisciplinarian), adverb (interdisciplinarily). Many people think of identity as fixed, as a noun. Thus, a statement like, "I'm a cross-country skier", or "I'm a sociologist". Because the word 'identity' itself is a noun, it is an easy assumption that the thing being designated – *an identity* – is also a noun. Fixed in form, permanent object, subject of sentences, a thing to which other nouns can and must relate, must understand their position relative to. Identities are often thought of in this fixed way, and therefore having places. What is the locus of my identity? Academically, history is that which occurs in a history department or in history journals. A historian is someone who gets their degree from such a department, works in such a department and/or publishes in such journals. Nouns have places, and identity is a noun, ergo...identity is a noun, a thing that exists in particular places, right?

Well, as it happens, no. Identity is not a thing you *have*, rooted in a place, nor is it just a thing you *do*, occurring in a place. It is an amalgamation of many inputs and interpretations of signals sent out and received, filtered through multiple epistemological lenses and influenced by multiple habituses. Constant negotiations occur between and among actors, layers of interpretation affecting the meanings that those actors assign to behaviors, beliefs, and artifacts. If I go onto a *Star Trek* fan site and make a statement about my favorite *Trek* captain, it won't be long before someone questions the validity of my fandom. How can any real *Trek* fan prefer Archer over Janeway?? The question of which captain is better (an adjective) becomes inextricably bound to the question of who is the more proper fan (a noun). Whose opinion is more properly (an adverb) formed becomes a fight over who is a more legitimate opinion maker (a noun). The resultant comment-section flame war becomes an argument about who rightly can claim the mantle of, the identity of, *Trek* fan because enjoying (a verb) *Star Trek* is conflated with being a fan (a noun) of *Star Trek*. If one pulls out of the comments section, though, and analyzes what the various actors are saying,

being, and doing, then the rest of the grammatical possibilities become obvious.

Identity is the result of several things *being done*, often by multiple entities. At best, it's a side effect of all that action. Identity is not a noun with singularity; it is an uncontrollable (at least by any one entity) result of a lot of verbs, nuanced by adjectives and adverbs, occurring between and among many nouns. There are even a few prepositions (denoting relationality) and articles (expressing specificity) thrown into the process, just to complicate it a bit more. As frivolous as science fiction fandoms may seem, academia does not operate all that differently at times. It is too simplistic to say that an academic debate occurring in the pages of a journal or the meeting rooms of a conference is just like an internet comments section. The two situations have many important differences. However, they are both instances of communication, held among various actors with their own epistemologies and habituses, and on that level at least, they operate the same. Different schools of thought rooted in different theories or theorists (nouns, all), engage (a verb) with one another to formulate the best, most valid, most repeatable, most useful (a string of adjectives) analyses that are most appropriate situationally (an adverb). Interdisciplinarity, with a broad view and openness to varying interpretive frameworks, ought to be more able to think of itself through these different grammatical lenses, but it, too, often becomes solely an identity-as-noun. An interdisciplinarian. Interdisciplinary studies. An interdisciplinary approach. To be sure, these categories are useful and sometimes necessary. They are not, however, the only way to understand interdisciplinarity.

Given identity's grammatical (and conceptual) complexity, I ask again – what, then, is the identity of interdisciplinarity? To what extent is interdisciplinarity a thing one has, to what extent is it a thing one does or has done at them, to what extent is it a way of doing things? Is it adverbial, an approach to research or teaching actions that gives them a particular form? Is it prepositional, a way to relate to a subject of study, to understand one's position in relation to that which is being explored?

It is possible, even desirable, to separate an interdisciplinarian-as-noun from the notion of doing something interdisciplinarily-as-adverb. It is possible to look at interdisciplinarity as a thing we have, as well as a thing we do. In order to dig into these nuances, this special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education* explores how the different parts of interdisciplinary academia influence one another. When someone does interdisciplinary research, how does that inform their teaching? If someone teaches an interdisciplinary class, how does that reshape their approach to university or community service? Much of the work published in the field of interdisciplinary studies focuses on teaching, or research, or collaboration, or even university service. But there is vanishingly little on how those different aspects of being an academic are affected across these categories by having

an identity as an interdisciplinarian. By looking at the different categories together, as well as moments of crossover influence between categories, this issue hopes to expand the conversation, to move it from a search for nouns and loci. Looking at influence can help us understand the verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions that also describe and define interdisciplinarity.

Toward that end, this special issue of *JISE*, “Next Steps: Research, Pedagogical, and Collaborative Outgrowths of Interdisciplinary Teaching”, collects articles that touch on moments of crossover. Static versions of identity come alive and gain motion when discussing how a research methodology influences classroom preparation. An analysis of an interdisciplinary curriculum developing over the course of time demands that nouns and verbs interact, giving us a chance to see influence and shape, adjectives and adverbs. The sense of flow, of cause and effect, that is inherent in such discussions at the very least puts nouns into sentences, and breathes animation and process into our view. In so doing, we can understand what all goes into the various ways one can have interdisciplinarity as a part of their identity.

This issue includes submissions from a range of perspectives, covering a variety of topics. Rizk explores interdisciplinary research methods that can be used to foster communication and understanding between different kinds of policy makers in education. NGOs, educational boards, and local communities each make knowledge in their own ways, and by trying to understand those different knowledge making processes from the bottom up, better communication can be fostered, resulting in better education systems, norms, and processes. Looft and Myers turn an interdisciplinary, multi-modal research lens back onto the classroom itself, in this case the university honors program classroom. By examining student reactions to team-taught classes, the authors attempt to better understand how interdisciplinary research can inform the teaching of an interdisciplinary curriculum. Pauley and McKim explore the interdisciplinary potential in the field of agriculture, food, and/or natural resources (AFNR), and its use in delivering interdisciplinary education. Azizah and Sugirin discuss the value of environment-based education in junior high schools, and explore how such educational practices can be improved through researching pedagogically successful and less successful tools. Novotny analyzes the concept of the “maker”, and how understanding that practice and identity can shape a pedagogical approach to an interdisciplinary general education curriculum at the university level. Yu and Peters turn an interdisciplinary research lens onto the classroom through the eyes of international students, to help inform teachers and advisors of the particular challenges of the integrative classroom for international students. Dennis explores the very root of interdisciplinarity as an identity, by looking at how we conceive of, and subsequently communicate, interdisciplinarity through metaphor and other types of expression. These communications

inform our own understandings of ourselves, as well as how we interact with colleagues and students to form and teach interdisciplinary education. Mendes, Leandro, Campos, Mónico, Parreira, and Gomes discuss a multi-disciplinary pedagogical framework that transcends literature and embodied teaching, to explore impacts on the values and wellbeing of students, teachers, elders, and parents. Brandenburg and Kelly propose a new centering mechanism for general education by foregrounding interdisciplinarity and integration. With integration at its core, a new approach to general education at the university level can prepare students for the increasingly multiple and varied world they are about to enter. Newell and Luckie also turn their analytical lens onto the interdisciplinary practitioner, by researching how interdisciplinarians think about their own learning and teaching.

### *In memoriam*

As many of the readers of JISE will know, William Newell, co-author (with Douglas Luckie) of one of the articles in this special issue, died recently after a long and distinguished career in Interdisciplinary Studies. Their article was submitted shortly before William Newell's death, giving that piece an unfortunate layer of added resonance. An article in a journal is a poor tribute to any scholar, especially one who has been so important, for such a long time, to their academic field. So I will not pretend that that article, or this statement, is such a tribute. It is simply not enough of an honor for the likes of William Newell. This entire special issue is, however, evidence of the depth, breadth, and pervasiveness of his influence. Our tributes should be continuing to be the intellectual troublemakers he envisioned interdisciplinarians to be.

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