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Collaborative Review Part 2: What Makes Interdisciplinarity Unique?

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I want to focus in on Amanda’s question: “What does interdisciplinarity look like when it is situated within a discipline, as is the case with Science and Technology Studies?” Then, I will attempt to answer her question: “What, if anything, makes interdisciplinary research and the professionals who engage in these pursuits unique?”

To begin, I should reveal my background. All of my degrees are interdisciplinary, to varying degrees (Communications and Media Studies; Communication, Culture & Technology; Science and Technology Studies). And I currently occupy an interdisciplinary postdoc (Civic Science). So, I found Lyall’s questions about when one should become interdisciplinary particularly interesting.

### **Theory/Practice, Research/Teaching/Learning, and Interdisciplinarity**

Initially, I was going to spend some time talking about STS, and the ways in which it is a discipline that is interdisciplinary. But in reading this book, I began thinking about the ways in which the distinction of “interdisciplinary” can be quite troubled. This is not because I deny the existence of disciplines, or because I don’t think it is necessary to narrow the scope of an area of inquiry for the sake of noise-elimination and understanding. Rather, it is because I think all knowledge is interdisciplinary by nature.

Disciplinary spaces, while attempting to group forms of knowledge into manageable areas of inquiry, are often cordoned off from external forms of knowledge that might be useful. Furthermore, I worry that disciplines—particularly when they professionalize themselves in limited ways—can grow to deny themselves the recognition of their own internal interdisciplinarity. This brings me to Amanda’s point about the audience for this book: administrators. The book is necessarily jargon-free and light on theory, for these reasons. However, I think we ought to imbue our conversations about this book with theory, and push ourselves to think abstractly about the anatomy of the discipline, about research questions and areas of inquiry, and about the infrastructure of the university.

My thinking on this comes from my own experience, of course. In college, I majored in Communications and Media Studies. Like STS, Communications is an interdisciplinary discipline. It is perhaps, in some ways, more recognizable as a discipline than STS. But is it really? The Communications department at my college had folks who wanted to go into video and audio production; those who specialized in marketing; some who wanted to be journalists (the English department had some journalists too, and it’s interesting to think about what might make someone choose Communications over English—and vice versa—if that is their goal); some hopeful producers and screenwriters; some people like me, who did critical theory and philosophy of film and television.

It was amazing to me how many different ways of thinking the department encompassed. Additionally, because Communications majors were required to take a little bit of everything, one always found oneself completely out of one’s element in at least two or three classes. There was also a very interesting and (mostly) unspoken dichotomy between the students

and professors who tended more toward theory, and the ones who tended more toward practice (and some who eluded categorization altogether). I learned a lot in this environment. I also felt kind of lost all of the time, because I did not have the intellectual maturity to make sense of its diversity of thought. However, even though I was still figuring out my own intellectual commitments, it made me think a lot about the complicated nature of expertise and knowledge. It formed the basis of a lot of my thinking today.

For this reason, I appreciate Lyall's characterization of *slow research* (Chapter 5). I even prefer her broader terminology, *slow knowledge*, as I think this encapsulates a kind of open-minded pedagogy, learning trajectory, or mode of knowledge-acquisition; not just a research agenda. *Slow research* or *slow knowledge*, writes Lyall, is not about some immediate clarification. Rather, it “[reflects] relationships [or, I want to add, *connections*] sustained over time” (84):

It is generally recognised that interdisciplinary research usually takes longer to produce results because, inter alia, of the extra time needed to access new literature, learn new concepts and perhaps build and foster dialogue within a new research team. Leahey et. al. (2017) have shown numerically that this slowness contributes to a ‘productivity penalty’ where interdisciplinary scholars gain greater prominence through citations but are less productive than their monodisciplinary peers with their publication output (85).

Of course, Lyall is talking about research output, and not a more pedagogically-oriented processes. However, I want to extend her thoughts about values in a research environment toward values in a teaching environment, as I believe them to be quite interrelated (and that Lyall doesn’t talk directly about this, perhaps, says something about these institutions’ commitments to interdisciplinary teaching, and to more open-minded modes of learning).

It is not just that faculty, researchers, and administrators in higher education do what they do in relation to some trajectory or acquired canon of knowledge that began at the undergraduate level. Moreso, an academia where we value research output over research process is *also* an academia where we value degrees and majors that are easy to put into boxes, metrics, and flash talks; that lend themselves to easier definition and assessment, and that are therefore easier to attach to a dollar amount (or to a pound, or to your currency of choice). Those areas of study that are not as amenable to such definition or assessment appear less rigorous or organized (an unfortunate stereotype of the Communications field, and misnomers that folks in STS may feel they must fight as well), as they do not hold up to narrower definitions of success. However, easily-definable areas of study also seem not to align with the messiness of our world.

### **Questioning Disciplinary Boundaries**

Furthermore, I want to trouble the notion that easily-definable, truly singular disciplinarity exists in the first place. Even disciplinary areas of study have their controversies and internal incommensurabilities. For instance, within the biological sciences, there’s [this contestation to biology’s current paradigm of invasive species](#), and [this debate on evolutionary biology](#). I am

not meaning to pick on the biological sciences, of course. I know, from my friendships across disciplines, that many fields have analogous debates. And on either side of these sorts of debates, there are scholars within a single discipline who occupy different ways of thinking, or different kinds of trainings (i.e. the ages-old “quantitative vs. qualitative” debate in the social sciences, or the leanings of theoretical physicists vs. applied physicists). Is this not a type of interdisciplinarity? Perhaps none of this thinking appeals to administrators. But perhaps it ought to, particularly as we begin thinking about how to instrumentalize interdisciplinarity in institutions of higher education (and beyond). Is it not much easier to think about the ways in which everyone is *already* interdisciplinary, and to work from there, rather than pretending to create new knowledge systems that we imagine are very different from what already exists? I imagine this kind of framing would change what Lyall’s *logics* of intention and commitment might look like, if actually implemented by administrators.

Admittedly, I did not plan to have a contestation with the very notion of interdisciplinarity at the outset of this review. However, the more I speculated about Lyall’s interviews, the more I speculated on the uniqueness, as Amanda says, of the interdisciplinarian. As Lyall points out, many of her interlocutor’s qualms about their interdisciplinary careers were not unique. For instance, interviewees’ “lows” and difficulties pertained to things like maternity leave and its impact on the timing of one’s career, personal struggles that interfere with dissertation-writing, unsuccessful grant applications, improper supervision, and the trials and tribulations of a tight job market (31).

These career lows are “not, on the face of it, problems unique to interdisciplinarity” (ibid), although Lyall does acknowledge that interdisciplinary pathways could exacerbate them. Additionally, Lyall’s recommendations for “better training, mentoring[,] and institutional support,” for “[addressing] administrative barriers, disincentives and mixed messages,” and for the “[sharing of] experiences, intelligence[,] and resources to foster organisational learning” (117) seem not *just* like calls for better infrastructure around interdisciplinary research. To me, they also seem like pleas for infrastructural support for any kind of research with uncertain outcomes and complicated scholarly connections. Is that not any kind of research one might embark on, that addresses some unknown? Perhaps we do not just have a problem with interdisciplinarity, but a problem with a *slow* and uncertain process.

### **What Makes Interdisciplinary Scholarship Unique?**

This brings me to Amanda’s provocation: What is unique about the interdisciplinary scholar? I will attempt to answer this (now that I’ve deconstructed it to my liking, of course). After reading this book—and after some contemplation—I’ve come to a rather self-serving conclusion. The interdisciplinary scholar takes risks, and has decided to sacrifice some career stability—in an already tremendously unstable vehicle for job security—to push boundaries, and to think carefully about the different forms of knowledge that might best address their research questions. Perhaps this scholar’s focus is on thorough process, and less on outcomes (a thing my PhD advisor, Saul Halfon, would say to me in helping me think through my own research). This is not to say that outcomes are unimportant, but to imply that a deep focus on process is preparation for unique and meaningful outcomes.

I also acknowledge the counterpoint to my self-serving conclusion: it is possible that the interdisciplinarian feels safer professionalizing themselves in this way because they have been encouraged by mentors, because they have found a way to market these leanings, or because they know of supportive funders and/or institutional infrastructure. In other words, some institutions have, perhaps, already shown logics of intention and commitment, and this is why interdisciplinary scholarship is proliferating.

All of my conclusions, I believe, fit under the umbrella of this broader one: to be interdisciplinary is to label oneself as such. If all knowledge is, to some extent, interdisciplinary, then all academics participate in *some* level of boundary-crossing research, teaching, and learning. However, to call oneself interdisciplinary is to *acknowledge* the more elusive branches of one's inquiries. In an ideal world, once one has acknowledged these elusive branches, one must attempt to follow them into uncertain collaborations; less-familiar learning, teaching, and research materials.