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Collaborative Review Part 3: What Makes Interdisciplinarity Unique?

Kari Zacharias Concordia University

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“And so I said to them, why don’t we just call it *education*?” This statement, delivered with an exasperated laugh and the tiniest of smirks, came from a former colleague who had recently returned from an interdisciplinary conference. He was telling me the story of a meeting of faculty and administrators who were working on integrating the arts with science and technology on their respective campuses. In the midst of a lengthy discussion about how the group ought to refer to their initiative—were they doing “STEAM”? “SEAD”? Producing “T-shaped” or perhaps “H-shaped” students? Working in the “third space”?—my colleague had issued his declaration that their ideas, which he supported, might not be so unique or radical after all.

I sympathized with his frustration, as I do with Amanda’s questioning of interdisciplinarity’s uniqueness and Sam’s troubling of the term itself. The lofty rhetoric, questionable promises, and sheer tonnage of acronyms that surround interdisciplinary initiatives can be exhausting. My fellow reviewers also correctly point out that many of the issues faced by interdisciplinary researchers are common to modern academics of all stripes. And, of course, most talk of interdisciplinarity starts from a premise of strictly defined and enforced *disciplinarity*, which itself is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, I am cautious about rejecting the notion of interdisciplinarity, or even its utility as a label. This response outlines my reasoning in two parts, one which amounts to a defense of Catherine Lyall’s (2019) book and a second which critiques one aspect of her work.

Acknowledging Interdisciplinary Skills

First, I want to acknowledge the flexibility that Lyall allows the idea of interdisciplinarity to take on. Through this flexibility, she develops a statement of interdisciplinarity’s uniqueness. In Chapter 2, Lyall identifies multiple forms of interdisciplinarity, including a “problem-solver” approach that focuses on applied research conducted by disciplinary experts working together, and an “individual career” approach that synthesizes different techniques or bodies of knowledge within a single person’s work. Lyall conceives of a broad interdisciplinarity that encompasses varied types of collaborations, institutions, and individual scholars. While her two approaches tend to manifest in different ways, they share the mindset that “the real world is not divided up by academic disciplines” (25).

The book’s subsequent analysis moves across and between the two categories, privileging the second due to the nature of Lyall’s primary interview sample but reaching overall conclusions about interdisciplinarity writ large. In Chapter 4, through her discussion of “becoming interdisciplinary,” Lyall comes to an understanding of the successful interdisciplinary scholar as one who values diversity of thought, exhibits intellectual flexibility, and is skilled in adaptation and interpretation: “the unique strength of interdisciplinarians is not their knowledge of several disciplines but their more tacit, integrative skills” (70).

Although I am far removed from the specific context that Lyall’s interviewees represented, these findings resonated with me. I have felt “interdisciplinary” since well before I was ever familiar with the term. In my own education, training, and research, I encountered

interdisciplinarity in many of the forms that Lyall describes: as an “individual career” interdisciplinary scholar who occupies space between engineering and the social sciences, as a contributor to interdisciplinary “problem-solving” teams, as a member of an interdisciplinary academic field (STS), and as an ethnographer studying interdisciplinary institutions of art and technology. As Amanda notes, Lyall’s study is restricted in one sense by the narrowness of her interview sample. Nevertheless, this did not prevent my frequent nods of agreement and recognition as she and her interview participants expressed immediately familiar sentiments. The account of interdisciplinary practitioners as experts in translation and integration rang true to my own experiences and those of my colleagues and interlocutors from many contexts.

Characteristics like flexibility and tacit, integrative, skills might apply equally well to someone working within a traditional disciplinary department and a researcher in a discipline-spanning institute, or a scholar in a field like STS. But does this render the “interdisciplinary” label unnecessary or invalid? Such traits are indeed necessary for working in interdisciplinary environments and for sustaining collaborations between representatives of different knowledge traditions. Interdisciplinary projects and institutions tend to attract people who can demonstrate these skills. Lyall’s expansive definition allows for interdisciplinarity to manifest in many different ways, but her identification of an interdisciplinary skill set - beyond popular understandings of “T-shaped” scholars or “foxes” with expertise in multiple individual disciplines - is an important contribution. She also draws attention to the fact that institutions often fail to recognize or value interdisciplinary expertise, which is especially notable considering that this book seems to be aimed squarely at administrators and funding organizations.

Placing Interdisciplinarity in Context

It is the book’s intended audience that brings me to my second point, and to an issue that I wished could have received more attention. Lyall tells us quite a bit about individual researchers’ reasons for pursuing interdisciplinarity, but she doesn’t talk much about their institutions’ motivations (or lack thereof). Readers hear about students undertaking interdisciplinary PhDs through the influence of their prior training or their supervisors, due to their choice of an interdisciplinary research topic, or because “it just sort of happened” (22). In later chapters, we learn how existing academic structures pose challenges to interdisciplinary careers, and how socialization within institutions matters. Throughout this discussion, the focus remains on individual researchers’ goals, development, and struggles. There are few details about the specific institutional contexts that Lyall’s interviewees inhabit, and little analysis of why or how their institutions promote interdisciplinarity. To some degree this is a necessary consequence of Lyall’s understandable choice to maintain the anonymity of her interlocutors. Furthermore, I appreciate the attention that Lyall pays to “soft voices,” and I don’t mean to suggest that she should neglect these points of view in favor of examining the “louder” ones more closely. However, institutional context does matter, particularly when the book’s conclusions aim to help universities build successful interdisciplinary environments.

Movement towards interdisciplinarity comes from somewhere, even when a project is “top down” rather than “bottom up.” Institutions value different kinds of interdisciplinarity for different reasons. As vaguely articulated as these reasons sometimes are, understanding them is an important part of comprehending how university initiatives interact with researchers’

lives. Just as an “individual career” interdisciplinary scholar may have different motivations and experiences than a “problem-solving” interdisciplinarian, so too might they inhabit different kinds of interdisciplinary spaces. When it comes to individuals, Lyall does an exemplary job of recognizing these differences while tracing their commonalities. Her institution-level arguments, though, left me wanting more.

Lyall’s “new logics of interdisciplinarity” recall terminology introduced and subsequently adapted by other scholars. In the original analysis by Barry et al. (2008), three logics of interdisciplinarity—accountability, innovation, and ontology—are described as “rationales that motivate interdisciplinary research.” Although the logics are not meant to be definitive, nor entirely independent of one another, they illuminate distinct frameworks for taking up and rationalizing interdisciplinarity. In contrast, Lyall’s logics of intention and commitment are more like normative guiding principles. She advises universities to “be clear about their intentions” (97) and to implement “a whole-institution approach” (98), but does not encourage them to reflect on what has prompted their actions. To echo my fellow reviewers’ points, acting with intention and commitment are also approaches that seem broadly applicable to many university undertakings beyond interdisciplinary ones.

Self-Reflection as an Interdisciplinary Trait

Lyall’s insightful book provides a much-needed account of individual scholars’ career successes and struggles. In addition to sharing individual stories, Lyall describes a set of interdisciplinary skills that begins to define what it means to be an interdisciplinary academic. Sam has built on this characterization by suggesting that interdisciplinary scholars are those who self-identify as such and who are willing and able to take the risks associated with an interdisciplinary career. My own contribution is to propose that interdisciplinary scholars invest considerable time thinking about their own professional identities. This process of reflection allows successful interdisciplinarians to situate their own projects and to pursue their work with the intention and commitment that it demands. In addition, I want to suggest that institutions that are reflective about their motivations for pursuing interdisciplinarity might be better able to produce reward structures, role models, and support that will benefit their members.

“Who are we?” and “What are we doing?” are common questions for interdisciplinary initiatives to raise, whether the programs are working groups of artists and technologists, newly established research centers, or cross-disciplinary departments. “Why are we doing it?” is a query that Lyall’s individual researchers have clearly needed to reckon with, but which seems farther removed from the concerns of the book’s “loud” voices. In order to pursue unique and rewarding interdisciplinary efforts, perhaps institutions could take a cue from the scholars that they hope to support.

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