



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Exploring What Spaces of Serendipity, Identity, and Success Can Teach Us: A Review of  
*Being an Interdisciplinary Academic*

Emma Craddock, Birmingham City University, [emmacraddock1@gmail.com](mailto:emmacraddock1@gmail.com)

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Craddock, Emma. 2019. "Exploring What Spaces of Serendipity, Identity, and Success Can Teach Us: A Review of *Being an Interdisciplinary Academic*." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (11): 35-41. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4Fr>.

Catherine Lyall's (2019) *Being an Interdisciplinary Academic: How Institutions Shape University Careers* draws on research data to illustrate the 'rift between the rhetoric and reality of interdisciplinarity' (1), with the aim of stimulating discussion that can cross and ideally reconcile this rift. At the outset, Lyall draws a distinction between those who are rooted in a disciplinary home but who choose to do interdisciplinary research and those who are truly interdisciplinary—and who, as a result, do not belong or fit anywhere but instead inhabit the uncomfortable in-between spaces of institutions that, as a consequence, are perhaps less visible and more difficult to govern (3). Thus, Lyall states that the book is not about doing interdisciplinary research but about 'how to govern and better support interdisciplinary careers' (7).

In order to achieve her aim of 'inform[ing] the behaviours of individuals and the practices of institutions engaged in promoting interdisciplinary research' (6), Lyall draws on Lindvig (2017) and attempts to connect the 'loud and performative voice' of interdisciplinarity at the institutional level with the 'quiet and productive voice' of those engaged in its daily practice (8). Despite claiming to aim for a wider more generic readership, including new academic researchers considering the pitfalls of interdisciplinary careers and how they can be overcome, those who manage the governance of universities, and those who control the funding of research, as other reviewers have identified, the book appears to be more directed towards university's administration, reflected by the report style of the writing, which can feel overly dry at times.

Furthermore, because of her focus on this truly interdisciplinary academic, Lyall's sample comprises those who undertook an interdisciplinary PhD and who, from the outset of their research journeys, occupied this in-between space. She categorises this sample into 3 groups: 1) those who were influenced by prior training and education to pursue an interdisciplinary PhD; 2) those who were sensitised to interdisciplinarity by undergraduate Geography degrees (which seems very specific and raises questions about the transferability of Lyall's findings), and; 3) those who were opportunistic—taking up the opportunity that came along to do an interdisciplinary PhD (23). This third group links to the concept of serendipity which Lyall draws upon at several points throughout the book, beginning with Chapter 2 ("What am I?" The path to becoming an interdisciplinary academic).

Lyall draws out three key themes from participants' interviews: what it means to have a successful academic career; sense of academic identity; and the role that serendipity or opportunity might play in success. In what follows, I will draw on my personal experiences to explore these themes further, incorporating also the theme of space which is another key thread throughout Lyall's work, but devoting more consideration to the role played by interdisciplinary teaching, a topic which Lyall, in my opinion, mistakenly, skims over in chapter 3, and which I believe has the potential to connect separate strands of Lyall's work and offer potential solutions to the issue of how to promote interdisciplinarity within Higher Education institutions.

### **Falling into an Interdisciplinary Academic Career?**

I went to university to study Psychology at undergraduate level but soon discovered that, for a variety of reasons, it was not a discipline I felt 'at home' within. I felt intellectually constrained by the rigidity of the subject and deterred by, what I perceived to be, the discipline's obsession with defining itself as a 'hard science' that belonged 'up there' with the natural sciences, reflected by a syllabus that focused heavily on statistics, cognitive and neuroscience, which only gave a cursory (and dismissive) nod to social psychology, and perceived the history of the discipline to be largely irrelevant to its present scientific incarnation.

This obsession with being a 'real' science (I'm reminded here of the fairy-tale character of the wooden puppet Pinocchio's intense desire to be that which he imitated) was encapsulated by the palpable bitterness among academics that the physical location of the Psychology department was tacked onto the Humanities building rather than located alongside Chemistry, Physics, and Biology; demonstrating the significance of space, a theme Lyall touches upon throughout her book and which I will return to in this article. It was serendipitous that as part of my degree in the first and second years I was given the opportunity to select a module from another discipline and, in the first year, chose a Sociology module in gender, class, and the empire. This module awakened me to the possibilities of Sociology which appeared to me as a freer and more open space within which I could explore, question, and make sense of the world through academic study. I thus transferred into Sociology for the second year of my degree having completed a year of Psychology and graduated with a BA (Hons) in Sociology.

My postgraduate studies began with the process of applying for funding to universities; I initially applied to an interdisciplinary PhD programme, like that undertaken by Lyall's sample, but ended up being awarded 1+3 funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and based in Sociology. This funded a Masters in Social Research and my PhD. As a requirement of the funding body, my Masters was broad and covered both quantitative and qualitative research methods with the aim of training students as adaptable well-rounded researchers. A key feature of this was the creation of Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs), which were a network of 21 institutional and consortia level centres, comprising disciplines across the Social Sciences and specific interdisciplinary research, through which the funding and research training was delivered. My research training therefore involved mixing with a range of students in various disciplines and being taught in multi-disciplinary groups, as well as communicating and discussing my research ideas with students across disciplines including Economics, Politics, Sociology, and Geography.

Similarly to how Lyall perceives Geography to provide a fertile ground for interdisciplinary leanings, I believe that sociology, given its wide scope and flexibility, provided me with points of contact with different disciplines which I then expanded upon in my teaching career. I have taught in several departments including Media, Culture and Film; Sociology; Social Policy; Criminology; and now Healthcare. My first secure academic position was as a Lecturer in Academic Skills in the Health, Education, and Life Sciences Faculty (HELS),

supporting students with their academic writing and critical thinking across the academic subjects and levels which again exposed me to a range of disciplinary knowledge, departmental cultures, and ways of thinking and doing research. While my own postgraduate training was contained mostly to the Social Sciences disciplines, this widened my experience of the sciences and provided me with opportunities to transfer my knowledge to different contexts on a daily basis.

I returned to the Social Sciences to teach Social Studies to Lifelong Learners for a year before going back to the HELS Faculty I previously worked at as a Senior Lecturer in Health Research. This role involves teaching research methods to students across a range of healthcare postgraduate degrees, in inter-professional groups from various clinical backgrounds. Additionally, I support postgraduate research students including staff undertaking their Ed.Ds and PhDs in a wide range of subjects across the Faculty. It has also given me the opportunity to start developing research ideas intersecting sociology and health studies.

While it might seem slightly self-indulgent, I have outlined my own career pathway in order to further reflect on some of the key themes that Lyall and her participants' raise. I think my career clearly reveals the important role that serendipity plays in success (although I will unpack what is meant by 'success' a bit later), and I resonate with her participants' explanation of doing what one enjoys, even if it might not be conducive to career progression (27).

However, it is possible that some might read my career pathway as being more 'multidisciplinary' than 'interdisciplinary', and as Phillips de Lucas (<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4rD>) identifies, the book creates 'a very narrow scope of defining who counts as an interdisciplinary practitioner'. In her review, Fried (<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4s4>) widens the definition of 'interdisciplinary' by considering what makes interdisciplinarity unique, a move which carries the risk of diluting the concept beyond meaning, but which I believe also holds potential for better situating and supporting it within institutions. I have managed to carve a space for myself by specialising in research methodologies and I find 'interdisciplinary' to be an open, flexible and adaptable space to inhabit. However, this has come at the cost of a clear sense of an academic identity.

### **Identity—I am What I Teach?**

I occupy a peculiar space within my institution; my PhD is in Sociology and I have a book being published at the start of 2020 that draws on this sociological research (titled *Living Against Austerity: A Feminist Investigation of Doing Activism and Being Activist*). My current research interests cross health and sociology, and my teaching is purely within Health and Education. I am based in the HELS faculty, which is physically located on a separate campus to Sociology, and which is mostly made up of academics with a professional, clinical background. I therefore do not 'fit' neatly within this space, a point I am reminded of when those with a professional background (such as nursing) comment on my lack of a clinical professional background and identity, adding a further layer to my sense of displacement.

Therefore, like Lyall's participants, I find it difficult to describe myself in terms of identity, which comes out when I have to introduce myself to other academics; I am no longer rooted in Sociology as a disciplinary 'home' and do not teach it; so can I still call myself a sociologist? Further, is it desirable to do so? Lyall speaks of the need for those who occupy in-between spaces to 'repackage' themselves according to context; I have learnt that to be labelled as a sociologist within my current context can result in being dismissed as irrelevant (35). Yet, within a room of sociologists, rather than serendipitous, my career pathway can be interpreted as the narrative of a failed disciplinarian, as Lyall remarks, a 'second-tier academic', which is unfortunately a perception that is heightened by my positioning within a Post-92 institution (95). This sense of a loss of identity (Lyall's participant's comment "I'm losing the sociologist in us which is a bit of a shame" [33] still struck a chord, although not as loudly as it previously would have), is something I struggled with for some time. Lyall titles chapter 2 "what am I?"; a question that I was surprised to discover, in my own experience, is deeply entangled with the question "who am I?".

Lyall asks to what extent our academic identities are linked to what we teach, i.e. "we are what we teach" (48), despite paying little attention to the role of teaching in interdisciplinary careers and its interconnection with research (using the excuse, in her participant's words, that "people are still trying to crack that nut" [41]). Certainly, a central feature of my academic identity is having expertise in teaching research methods across disciplines, yet I am not prepared to throw the sociologist baby out with the bathwater, given my academic history and research interests. Lyall's consideration of teaching within the book results in a perception that there is a sharp separation between research and teaching in terms of interdisciplinarity (perhaps due to the complexities involved here), and her research focuses mainly on researchers and researcher development, rather than academic development. However, from my own experience, I believe teaching to be a key space within which questions around interdisciplinarity and how to support and develop such careers can be answered.

Significantly, Lyall notes that the links between interdisciplinary research and teaching was largely absent from interviews with researcher leaders (53). Given her intention of promoting discussion on ways forward for interdisciplinary careers in institutions, it feels like a missed opportunity to raise awareness of the value of teaching. This clearly reflects the fact that the focus of Lyall's work and her sample is on being a researcher, rather than on being an academic. I wonder whether the distinctions between interdisciplinary and disciplinary researchers are as great as the distinction between researcher and academic, and whether making more space for the interdisciplinary academic, bridging research and teaching, might be a way of widening the possibilities of interdisciplinary careers in the academy.

### **Teaching and Interdisciplinarity**

I have experience both of being taught within an interdisciplinary space and of interdisciplinary teaching. My experiences provide two different solutions (though neither are perhaps wholly adequate) to bridging the rift between the rhetoric and reality of interdisciplinarity that Lyall identifies (1). My research training provides an example of how

multidisciplinary centres can create both institutional and physical space for interdisciplinarity. Similarly, I have contributed to the teaching of interdisciplinary modules that are offered to undergraduate students across a university and based within a separate ‘institute for advanced teaching and learning’. While this solves the problem of disparate interdisciplinary researchers and academics falling between the gaps of disciplines across an institution and legitimises interdisciplinarity through the physical presence of interdisciplinary centres, it still segregates such work from the rest of the university, which can produce further barriers, and which perhaps reflects the modern disciplinary-based model of universities, with ‘interdisciplinary’ being cemented almost as its own discipline (Lyll touches upon the challenges of interdisciplinary research centres [49]).

The second solution is to instead integrate interdisciplinarity within departments; which reflects my current position as I am technically based within a postgraduate department in the School of Nursing and Midwifery but teach a research module that goes across programmes and Schools. While this has the potential to embed interdisciplinarity within Faculties, the logistical issues it throws up can result in further emphasis on disciplinary boundaries (i.e. resource budgeting for a module that does not fit neatly under one subject’s remit but which all subjects benefit from). Furthermore, there is a continual battle to prevent drift of disciplines who do not see the relevance of interdisciplinary learning and research but would rather silo themselves off.

While teaching thus raises and reinforces challenges for interdisciplinarity’s place within the institution, I believe it also provides some solutions by demonstrating the importance of space to supporting interdisciplinarity, a theme Lyll picks up at various points in the book.

### **Making Space for Interdisciplinarity**

Perhaps reflecting the prominence of geographers in interdisciplinary careers, Lyll recognises the importance of space, and raises the central question in relation to serendipity: ‘how, in our modern, metric-driven academic lives, do we retain space for chance and opportunism, which are arguably the lifeblood of scholarly creativity’ (23)? I argue that one answer to this question can be found in the classroom. The classrooms I have been in, as a teacher and student, which encourage the physical and intellectual interaction of multiple disciplines, have often created an open, exploratory space where rich and varied learning is enabled to take place.

Individuals are exposed to different perspectives, some which initially can appear alien to their own, encouraged to find ways of interpreting them and of critically engaging with and working through contradictions, which provides the opportunity to develop new ideas that emerge from the space between disciplines. Other solutions, although I have noted contain their own challenges, include the consolidation of interdisciplinary centres, which include both research and teaching and offer interdisciplinary modules to all disciplines in the wider university, preventing silos and the inclusion of interdisciplinary colleagues within departments and Schools (rather than strictly disciplines).

Again, through serendipity, I have discovered softer informal spaces for interdisciplinarity, such as the conversations in the corridors that Lyall refers to, through my experience of being physically based in an office with colleagues from across the Faculty (an occurrence mirrored elsewhere in my Faculty that came about initially through a lack of designated space when several new disciplines were created or physically moved site [81]). Such space can be manufactured through efforts to organise cross-disciplinary research seminars (although in the current climate, workload pressures can make engagement with such activities difficult). Moreover, while I have focused on physical space in this article, given its focus on the institution as a physical location, it is important not to forget the possibilities that digital space can provide for such encounters, something I have experienced through my long-term engagement with the SERRC.

Lyall seems dubious about the extent to which individuals can “learn” to become interdisciplinary, suggesting that interdisciplinarians require a wide array of skills and certain personality traits; she describes the embodiment of interdisciplinarity as a “mind-set” (69). Drawing on Berlin (1953), Lyall conceives of two types of scholars; “hedgehogs” who see the world through a single lens and “foxes” who draw on a variety of experiences, summarised by the ancient saying ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing’. Rather than this being an innate distinction, I would suggest that all students begin their academic journeys as foxes but are trained and disciplined to become hedgehogs as they progress and are moulded to focus within a particular subject and/or profession. I agree with Lyall’s conclusion that we need to stop perceiving interdisciplinarity as an epiphenomenon of disciplinarity, but instead entrench and embed it within institutions (95).

One of the biggest challenges I have encountered is demonstrating the relevance of interdisciplinarity to hedgehog colleagues who have always been rooted in a particular discipline and profession. Lyall offers less solutions for doing so, instead rather vaguely suggesting that ‘both should be possible’ (116). For me, a clear way of embedding interdisciplinarity, and of creating space for serendipitous encounters between disciplines, is to include it within teaching from the outset of undergraduate degrees. In this way, the required skills and ‘mind-set’ can be nurtured and developed from the beginning of academic journeys, (as Lyall identifies, becoming interdisciplinary is not like turning on a tap but takes time [70]) and, for some, the move towards becoming a hedgehog and away from being a fox can be avoided.

Like Lyall and other reviewers, I have used my personal academic career journey as a lens through which to engage with some of the key concepts and questions raised in Lyall’s book. I have focused mainly on the themes of serendipity, academic identity, interdisciplinary teaching, and space. However, Lyall also raises the question of what it means to have a ‘successful academic career’. While, as I have earlier hinted at, and as Lyall notes, interdisciplinarians are often regarded in disparaging terms as ‘failed’ disciplinarians, I personally consider my career pathway thus far to have been successful (95).

Again chiming with Lyall’s participants, I have followed what I enjoy, rather than what might be considered to be more strategic career moves; I left a permanent position for a one year

contract to pursue my interests and chose to leave a Russell group university of isolated silos in favour of a Post-92 institution of shared spaces (27). It is serendipitous that this move led to career progression but I believe that this was made possible and stems out of finding and creating spaces within which I can grow and thrive. For me, this is success. In the current academic climate of insecurity, I do not believe we can underestimate the success of merely being able to find, occupy, and remain in such spaces. It is often the interdisciplinary gaps and spaces in-between that are the most amenable for independent growth and flourishing, despite the challenges such an existence brings.

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