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Warm Encouragement and Sharp Analysis for Interdisciplinary Scholars: A Review of *Being an Interdisciplinary Academic*

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Being an Interdisciplinary Academic: How Institutions Shape University Careers

Catherine Lyall

Palgrave Pivot, 2019

134 pp.

Catherine Lyall's *Being an Interdisciplinary Academic: How Institutions Shape University Careers* (2019) describes the lives of early-career interdisciplinary scholars and analyzes the difficulties and systematic problems they experience. Lyall lends encouragement both to these researchers and to those considering entering interdisciplinary study. She imparts confidence to interdisciplinary scholars about their decisions and offers clues about their future careers. I found her book quite helpful.

Lyall begins by telling the story of her academic trajectory from Chemistry to Science and Technology Policy (STP) and to Science and Technology Studies (STS). On this trajectory, she confesses that she did not feel any particular disciplinary affiliation. As I followed a similar path—from Aerospace engineering to STP and to STS—I identified with Lyall and recalled a memory from when I left Aerospace engineering. At my first STS conference, a professor welcomed me with a smile to “mixed disciplines” after having left a well-defined academic background. This experience gave me a faint clue about my future as an interdisciplinary scholar who, like Lyall, did not have a strong disciplinary affiliation. Yet, the book presents straightforward recommendations to those considering entering interdisciplinary study.

Lyall analyzes the misalignment between the “soft voice” of individual scholars and the “loud voice” of institutions. This distinction underscores the difficulties and problems that interdisciplinary researchers regularly experience. Lyall suggests a systematic approach to reducing this misalignment. She seeks to create an understanding between scholars who pursue interdisciplinary study and university leaders and funders.

Lyall offers meaningful discussion points about interdisciplinary study and the path of early-career interdisciplinary research. In this review, however, I will focus on three points. The first point regards the expectation and reality of interdisciplinary scholars—the new *zeitgeist* versus reality. The second point takes up the meaning of interdisciplinary scholarship—the generalist versus the specialist. The third point examines the inevitable misalignment between individual scholars (soft voice) and institutions (loud voice).

The Expectation and the Reality of Interdisciplinary Study

Interdisciplinarity persists as a hot topic in academia. Many academic programs with interdisciplinary titles and funds for research have been established. However, the “paradox of interdisciplinary” is prevalent. The encouragement of interdisciplinarity on the policy level does not accord with the academic ecosystem (3). Although society claims to want more interdisciplinary study, and that interdisciplinarity is the new *zeitgeist*, interdisciplinary scholars experience difficulty both finding research funding and a place where they can

work. This problem occurs given the confusion between interdisciplinary research and the interdisciplinary researcher. The policy level focuses on interdisciplinary research without supporting interdisciplinary researchers. Although many programs for training interdisciplinary researchers exist, what policy-makers really want is not “interdisciplinary people” but “disciplinary people with a strong background in a discipline who can work in an interdisciplinary environment or an interdisciplinary team” (62).

Interdisciplinary researchers are made to address the question “Are you one of us?”(47) from disciplinarians. Being an interdisciplinary scholar leads to the loss of academic identity. To be an interdisciplinary scholar, one must leave a home discipline or not have a strong disciplinary affiliation, feeling of belonging, or a familiar way of researching and living an academic life. As interdisciplinary scholars, we remain situated somewhere among disciplines. When a discipline serves as an institution, interdisciplinary scholars wanderer among institutions without a home.

Although people continue to declare interdisciplinary a highly desirable trend, such enthusiasm extends only to interdisciplinary research itself. Interdisciplinary scholars must struggle to determine in which the institutions they will stay, how they will live as institutional wanderers, and how they will define themselves. Lyall depicts interdisciplinary scholars who struggle mightily but do not regret their choice and come to find their place.

Generalists vs. Specialists

Lyall asks: Who is an interdisciplinary scholar? It is not an easy question to answer. As a graduate student in STS, I have witnessed the difficulty of defining an identity. At the 2017 annual meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), the biggest conference in STS, I attended a heated exchange regarding “How can we define STS?” After a lengthy back-and-forth, there was no working agreement. I often say that STS is the academic field that studies topics in science and engineering through the perspectives and methods of the social sciences and humanities. But that is not enough. I add that STS includes, but is not limited to, the history, sociology, philosophy, and policy of science and technology. Wikipedia defines STS as “the study of how society, politics, and culture affect scientific research and technological innovation, and how these, in turn, affect society, politics, and culture.”¹ Still, that definition is insufficient in helping people understand STS. Because it is interdisciplinary, STS covers a wide area. Perhaps we might try to explain what we study based on research topics rather than on disciplines.

Interdisciplinary researchers appear simultaneously to be too general and too specific. A topic-specific identification limits how to understand an interdisciplinary scholar. I find the best advantage of being an interdisciplinary scholar is freedom. Since I do not belong in a specific discipline, I can apply theories and methodologies from various disciplines and can choose various topics in which I am interested in without limitation. Yet, when defined only

¹ “Science and Technology Studies,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_and_technology_studies (accessed 28 September 2019).

as a topic-specific researcher, interdisciplinary scholars give away a certain freedoms. And still, defining an interdisciplinary scholar more broadly leads to misunderstanding. People see interdisciplinary scholars as generalists who have a shallow knowledge of many fields (66).

The expertise of interdisciplinary scholars resides in integrating knowledge and understanding rather than simply producing knowledge. The doctoral experience, for example, serves not only as the process of gaining knowledge but also as a process of socialization. In this process, an interdisciplinary scholar gains knowledge of particular theories, facts, and expertise that are discipline specific, and the experience to use the differences of knowledge and understanding among disciplines to mediate among disciplinary resources that include knowledge, theories, and even people (69). These abilities take time to develop; moreover, interdisciplinary scholars have their own expertise that is not the second-best of other disciplines.

Institutions vs. Individual Scholars

Although discussions occur surrounding issues of institutional-level support and funding, little consideration appears to be given to the career of individual researchers. Many new interdisciplinary programs do not focus on the future of individuals; rather, they focus on research programs. These programs see only the forest without considering each tree in the forest. Although institutions argue that they provide enough support for interdisciplinary research, it is impossible to give support without a proper understanding of the relation among interdisciplinary research and interdisciplinary researchers. Each interdisciplinary scholar takes on the burden of work without the safety net of a particular discipline.

Of course, each individual and institution has a different view. The range of considerations and priorities is also different. As institutional leaders say, they should consider “balance” among disciplines. While they should consider balance among disciplines, institutions should know that different disciplines need different kinds of support. As the natural sciences and engineering have different support structures and outputs, interdisciplinary study also needs different support structures. Regrettably, institutions frequently consider interdisciplinary study as complementing disciplinary research and, so, do not provide proper support.

The core of interdisciplinarity is freedom. There is no exact right way to study and no quick way to achieve a good outcome—interdisciplinary research is informal, slow, serendipitous work. Small and unimportant aspects in the view of the institution could result in a great achievement and enormous resources cannot guarantee outcomes (83-84). Outcomes cannot be achieved by forcing scholars through top-down mandates. Outcomes should be pursued by researchers with academic freedom. Although interdisciplinary research is “high risk and high-reward” (46, 84-88), this characteristic should be rewarded and not used as a reason to discard it.

Interdisciplinary Research by Interdisciplinary Scholars

There are two aspects of interdisciplinary research. One is the interdisciplinary individual and the other is the interdisciplinary research group. In interdisciplinary research groups, each researcher keeps their disciplinary identity and works together to solve the problem in an interdisciplinary way. However, when these researchers come together to address a research problem how do they determine the direction in which they should go, and how do they know that their decision is right? It is difficult to understand other disciplines' cultures and tacit knowledge.

In my first two years in STS, what I heard most often from my committee members was that I should pare back the influence of engineering and be an STS scholar. I had a strong will to be an interdisciplinary scholar and spent my time reading, thinking, and writing in STS. However, my committee continued to remind me of my new identity. My experience speaks to how difficult it is to come from another discipline and how the role of the interdisciplinary scholar is important in the research of an interdisciplinary group. It is not easy to understand other disciplines and to work in the same way as disciplinary practitioners. However, in interdisciplinary research, scholars should understand the research and work together as a team.

Our understanding tends to be based on what we already know (71). If a person knows one discipline, the understanding of other disciplines cannot escape from this established perspective. The expertise of researchers from one discipline remains as interactional expertise. A scholar can understand another discipline from their point of view and explain it, but they cannot be contributory experts because they do not possess the necessary tacit knowledge (70). On the contrary, interdisciplinary scholars can be contributory experts because they have an understanding across the disciplines and the tacit knowledge of those disciplines. Interdisciplinary research, then, needs interdisciplinary researchers in order to be successful.

Warm Encouragement for Interdisciplinary Scholars with Sharp Analysis

Here is the reason that I titled this review "warm encouragement for interdisciplinary scholars with sharp analysis." The book's interviewees demonstrate the real condition of early-career interdisciplinary scholars. These scholars have difficulty establishing their academic positions, struggle to identify themselves, and suffer from lack of support. However, they do not regret their choices and eventually find a place to stand. The book shares a good model for new interdisciplinary researchers. Lyall also provides suggestions and meaningful discussions about the condition of interdisciplinary scholars based on a clear understanding and sharp analysis. Lyall does not discourage interdisciplinary scholars and conveys hope and, so, I recommend this book.