

Reflections on the interdisciplinarity project: A response to an interview with Carl Mitcham and a keynote address by Stephen Frosh
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Carl Mitcham notes how we need to “raise the concept of interdisciplinarity for greater thematisation ... for further reflection”.¹ I hope to contribute to this aim in the following piece. I explore the challenges that interdisciplinary work poses, alongside possible solutions to such problems, by reflecting upon an address by Stephen Frosh alongside the interview exchange with Carl Mitcham and my own experiences.

As a graduate student exploring interdisciplinary practice what strikes me on reading the interview with Mitcham is that interdisciplinarity’s appeal — spanning across disciplines and boundaries — may lend its demise. Whilst many aspects of interdisciplinarity certainly have merit, the worry surrounding interdisciplinary studies seems precisely that they are not tied to a particular discipline. Mitcham refers to the importance of crossing boundaries, but the risk of doing so is that one falls into the gaps between disciplines — an academic no man’s land. Indeed, Frosh argues that once we leave the safety of our disciplines “we lay ourselves open to the problems faced by all amateurs and migrants: we do not really belong anywhere; we have no safe space to stand upon”.

As Stephen Frosh stated in his keynote address at the Enquire conference this year, “Disciplines are reassuring things”.² Boundaries allow us to organise knowledge in a particular, ‘tidy’ way. Furthermore, they provide us with a sense of belonging, of knowing who we are as academics and where we fit in. Indeed, disciplines are comforting things, offering containment. However, as Frosh rightly points out, the downside of this is that we are also constrained. Indeed, the interview with Mitcham highlights the need to sometimes step outside of the boundaries of a discipline in order to achieve a greater understanding of it and to address particular issues.

The idea of branching out from one’s own area and comfort zone is an exciting prospect and a valuable process to experience. However, the phrase that springs to mind here (perhaps wrongly) is of being a “jack of all trades, master of none”. I suppose that is where the doubt (and maybe even fear) towards interdisciplinarity enters. For within academia it certainly seems to be the case that becoming an expert in your field is the ultimate goal, with expertise affording respect. Indeed, Frosh reinforces this idea by noting how expertise can only exist within a limited area. He argues that “diluting it by moving too far away from our training and area of competence is a way to introduce error and misunderstanding, and perhaps also professional panic”.³ Mitcham admits that he will “never be a real expert”, but also that “this is okay”, which seems to suggest it is not

¹ Carl Mitcham, interview by William Davis, Interdisciplinarity and pedagogy: Disciplining collaboration in academia, *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, February 10, 2012.

² Stephen Frosh, “Transdisciplinary Tensions and Psychosocial Studies” (keynote address ENQUIRE Postgraduate Conference, University of Nottingham, England, September 11-12, 2012).

³ Ibid.

possible to be an interdisciplinarity expert.⁴ Mitcham bravely admits and accepts such a stance, one others would not readily make, giving a reason to perhaps avoid interdisciplinarity. This may especially be the case within the current academic and economic environment where such discomfort and inexperience may turn into insecurity. Given this, why should interdisciplinarity be pursued? And, indeed, where does interdisciplinarity fit?

Frosh's stance is that the current push towards interdisciplinary work within universities and funding bodies reflects a wider discourse concerning the desire to produce 'a unified knowledge of everything'. He acknowledges that we live in a fragmented world, with the need being perceived as one of drawing together disciplines in order to solve common problems. However, he questions what these 'problems' may be and to whom they are concerning. Furthermore he is suspicious of where the cause of such a need to achieve a unity of knowledge grows from — is it political, psychological or scientific? The route Frosh decides to pursue is that of questioning this seemingly intrinsic impulse to unify knowledge and understanding. This impulse, he argues, can detrimentally lead to simplification of issues and reductionism — both of which lead to errors. In fact, his main argument seems to be that this need to connect a fragmented world arises from a desire to be comforted and consoled in the face of uncertainty. Yet this desire contradicts the very nature of human beings, who are themselves fragmented, and "never a whole". Frosh summarises: "Interdisciplinarity is a response to the demonstratable inadequacy of single discipline approaches to this complex fragmentariness, but it carries within it the same hope — that of achieving unity of knowledge".⁵ I can certainly recognise the downfalls of pursuing such an unattainable project, especially as to focus on such a goal serves to ignore the power relations at play which actually maintain separateness, given that some positions dominate others.

Frosh certainly presents a convincing and complex argument about the "fantasy" of a theory of everything and its effects, an argument that is too intricate to fully untangle here. However, in response, I would argue that the interdisciplinary project should be a relational one, rather than one which seeks to attain an all-encompassing theory of knowledge. Indeed, I believe in encouraging and fostering relationships between and across disciplines by immersing oneself within disciplines other than your own (of course, without losing your roots within your 'home' discipline). Building relationships between and among disciplines may be the best way forward in the current academic culture and a step towards avoiding falling into the gaps between disciplines when attempting interdisciplinarity. My own experience suggests as much.

Interdisciplinarity is encouraged by combining students from different disciplines to attend modules that supposedly span across the disciplines (in my case, in regards to

⁴ Carl Mitcham, interview by William Davis, *Interdisciplinarity and pedagogy: Disciplining collaboration in academia*, *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, February 10, 2012.

⁵ Stephen Frosh, "Transdisciplinary Tensions and Psychosocial Studies" (keynote address ENQUIRE Postgraduate Conference, University of Nottingham, England, September 11-12, 2012).

research design and practice). Assignments were designed to foster communication between disciplines and to produce self-reflection of one's own discipline. Group work asked students to consciously reflect on, and explore, the similarities and difference between disciplines and to approach topics from an interdisciplinary perspective. For example, during a qualitative methods module groups of five or six students were composed where each student came from a different disciplinary background, including nursing, politics, psychology and sociology. The task was to then select a methodological issue and to produce a poster that encompassed each discipline's perspectives and yet combined them into a coherent whole. Perhaps inevitably, when the posters were presented, the number one criticism was that they did not draw together the disciplines satisfactorily, instead relating them to one another rather than producing an all-encompassing, over-arching framework. For me, this reflects Frosh's concerns with interdisciplinarity being interpreted as a way of pursuing a unified knowledge and understanding and emphasises that disciplines need to be regarded relationally.

I found this experience both useful and eye-opening, but with significant drawbacks. The main problem I encountered is that whilst modules are, in theory, meant to span across disciplines and be relevant to all, they are often taught from a particular position. Here we get caught in the trap that the university is intrinsically designed to support separate disciplines rather than interdisciplinarity. This is highlighted by the story of how, despite attempts to resist, science and technology studies became its own discipline and how Mitcham struggled to find a publisher for a book that did not fit neatly within a disciplinary box.

Within the university, instructors come from a certain discipline, with a specialised background and often (unfortunately) an inability to step outside of their training. I came across this within a research design module where the instructor was a politics professor. Despite the class being described as exploring many different approaches to research, including qualitative methods and constructivist epistemologies, it was clearly focussed on a strictly positivist, quantitative notion of research. The views of the professor were clearly revealed by comments concerning how any research that does not deal with cause and effect and assess this quantitatively is "not proper research". In all, this can be an extremely frustrating experience, as well as a lost opportunity for the growth of interdisciplinarity within the university. However, I acknowledge that these are beginning attempts to move towards interdisciplinarity and as such, are prone to 'teething problems'. Following feedback this module will be jointly convened this academic year by professors from several disciplines who will aim to work together to provide a more interdisciplinary experience for the students. Taking into account interdisciplinarity's relatively new position in the university should we then accept that maybe something is better than nothing?

Rather than falling into the gaps between disciplines, perhaps interdisciplinary work can be conceived as bridging these gaps, a position demonstrated by science journalists, for example. For despite neither possessing the same subject area knowledge as the experts they interview, nor understanding the intricacies of their theories, the science journalist's

unique position and abilities can bridge the gap between the often inaccessible knowledge of experts and the general public. A key point here is making knowledge accessible, as well as offering a different approach. Examples can be found in science journalism's use of metaphor as a way to communicate the complexities of science to a wider audience. The following submission won a competition to produce a metaphor describing DNA: "DNA is the web that spins the spider" (2009: 154). A rather charming and engaging description, it perhaps demonstrates how reflections on subjects with which you are not comfortable and not expert can create a refreshing way of thinking.

Academics seem unnerved by moving outside of their disciplinary boundaries. It means moving outside of one's comfort zone. Interdisciplinarity, then, is currently seen as an uncertain, cloudy area that risks disappearing in between the cracks of disciplines or over-reaching itself by attempting to produce a unified "theory of everything". I suggest that a way forwards is to approach interdisciplinarity in terms of relationships, and perhaps most importantly (as well as most dauntingly), we need to be braver in following Mitcham's lead and "accepting not being comfortable".

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