Reframing Interdisciplinarity in Pursuit of Equity and Inclusion

A.C. Bradshaw

Abstract

The dominant framing of interdisciplinarity as a logical response to the fragmentation of knowledge into distinct disciplines constrains our thinking about whether and how to approach interdisciplinary projects. Are there other framings for interdisciplinarity that are more appropriate – particularly where the goal is increasing equity and inclusion? This chapter explores this question beginning with a brief review of key terms, aims, benefits, and outcomes of interdisciplinary projects, followed by alternative framings for interdisciplinarity. These ideas are further explored by considering contexts particularly intended to acknowledge or address issues of equity and inclusion, via a critical versus instrumentalist framing.

Interdisciplinary Framing

Interdisciplinary work integrates knowledge, methods, and perspectives from different disciplines, using a synthesis of approaches, with valuable contributions emerging through the combination of disciplines as well as at the intersections between the disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is the "analytically reflective study of the methodological, theoretical, and institutional implications of implementing interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and research" (Miller, 2017). Interdisciplinary engagement is generally understood as providing opportunities
to include and consider multiple diverse perspectives, which can facilitate fuller, richer meaning making, better problem identification and articulation, more complete and accurate identification of benefits, limitations, and potential harms, and more innovative problem solving.

Several terms have been used to describe a variety of interdisciplinary configurations. Along with more extensive explanations of commonly encountered related terms, Miller provides the following concise summary of frequently associated terms:

*Multidisciplinary* approaches involve the simple act of juxtaposing parts of several conventional disciplines in an effort to get a broader understanding of some common theme or problem. *Cross-disciplinary* approaches involve real interaction across the conventional disciplines, though the extent of communication and thus combination, synthesis, or integration of concepts and/or methods varies considerably. *Transdisciplinary* approaches, meanwhile, involve articulated conceptual frameworks that seek to transcend the more limited worldviews of the specialized conventional disciplines. (p. 1, italics added)

Categorizing particular projects, practices, and modes of engagement according to these or other related terms is of limited use beyond introductory purposes. Overindulging in definition articulation and categorization and making assertions about what is “truly interdisciplinary” can lead to hair splitting, nuancing, and standardization that can lead to the paradox of *disciplining interdisciplinarity*; effectively turning interdisciplinarity itself into a discipline. The dominant framing of interdisciplinary work is that it is a necessary response to disciplinary work (Miller 2017, Choi & Pak, 2006). Perceived as part of this binary relationship, interdisciplinary work tends to be most frequently presented as engaged as one-off projects, motivated by recognition that a problem or project cannot be adequately addressed from within a single discipline (Klein, 1990). But do we necessarily recognize when our primary disciplines are inadequate?
Framing problem solving and knowledge pursuit as fragmented versus holistic, or separated versus interconnected, has consequences not only for whether we engage interdisciplinary work, but also how we engage such work. If we recognize that an interdisciplinary approach is needed, how do we know where to look for appropriate partners? How do we determine how to engage? Framing interdisciplinary work as a response to disciplines may also constrain our thinking to conceptualizing knowledge as content, which limits our abilities to recognize and articulate problems, including how we approach interdisciplinarity itself.

Other motivations to engage interdisciplinary work may be less openly acknowledged. These may include interdisciplinary team requirements in grant proposals, individuals’ desires to work with particular friends or colleagues in other disciplines, opportunities for academic publications, opportunities for paid consulting work, and so forth. With these and other instrumental motivations for engaging interdisciplinary work, there may be increased need to understand and define the variety of configurations of interdisciplinary work, and to distinguishing between tailored solutions to particular real problems that span multiple disciplines, and contrivances designed to be sufficiently interdisciplinary to meet a more compelling priority, such as funding. In some contexts, “interdisciplinary” may be used as a legitimizing label that – whether intentional or not – may serve as a tool of appropriation, colonization, cultural invasion, or disciplinary eradication.

[[tied to academic contexts: a growing trend in higher ed contexts to (sort of) distribute resources across remaining domains after eliminating those that most challenge the toxic emerging status quo. (STEM fields getting ever more funding, as humanities and ed philosophy / ed foundations receive less.)]]
Bring in axiological considerations already in operation in the combination of mechanistic frames that prioritize efficiency and wealth production for the few to the detriment of the many and the environment.]

Are there other framings through which we can consider and engage interdisciplinary work that might be more conducive to our axiological priorities of justice, equity, human rights, environmental sustainability, etc.

II. Reframing Interdisciplinarity

[[This section is still too messy to share, but some of the topics and themes are provided below. The file will be updated as soon as possible.]]

Interdisciplinarity offers the possibility of breaking through constraints on our thinking imposed by our disciplines [[[relate to epistemologies of ignorance)]].

How we define interdisciplinary influences how we engage it, and how we engage it influences how we define it.


“Recognizing, in particular cases, what ought to be done from among the many things that can be done requires that value judgments be built into the social structure through a process of open and critical debate aimed at discovering what is required by reality.”

Rigorous (Penny, 2009)
Interdisciplinarity both allows for and demands “a level of critical autonomy from the discursive contexts of the supporting disciplines.” (Penny, 2009, 51)

**Deep** (versus shallow? Broad?) Interdisciplinarity (tied to critical pedagogy)(McClellan & Johnson, 2014)

**Broad, Deep, & Critical** (Frodeman & Mitchaum, 2007).

“But if knowledge is to be genuinely interdisciplinary, it needs to do more than simply reach across campus. Interdisciplinarity must also pursue its own distinctly interdisciplinary depth, moving beyond the academy into dialogue with the public sector, the private sector, and community and stakeholders including religious groups. Our academic research portfolio must include an account of how to effectively integrate knowledge within the decision-making context faced by governments, business people, and citizens. Critical interdisciplinarity requires a horizontal and vertical axis. The contemporary knowledge society represents a multi dimensional challenge, involving not only the horizontal axis that stretches across the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities, but also a vertical axis where academic research is self-consciously integrated into the multiple contexts of contemporary life.” (Frodeman & Michaum, 2007, p. 513)

**Critical versus Instrumental** (e.g., Welch IV, 2011) [[Explanation and comparison]]

Interdisciplinary work (Purpose) **should be critical by definition** (e.g., Fish (1991).
“Interdisciplinarity is a way of life. It is basically a mental outlook which combines curiosity with open mindedness and a spirit of adventure and discovery … it is practiced collectively … It teaches that there can be no discontinuity between education and research.” (Apostel et al, 1972)

What is the purpose of interdisciplinarity-ness? If responding in binaries,

- To respond to / overcome disciplinary-ness? or to reinforce/strengthen disciplines?
- To reinforce/strengthen existing systems, or to transform them into something new.
- To reinforce existing power structures, or to disrupt a harmful status quo?

In what ways have the epistemic foundations of the contributing disciplines and partners been interdisciplinarily vetted?

Interdisciplinary for its own sake (like innovation for its own sake or technology for its own sake. – why interdisciplinary?)

Tie to teaching for transmission versus teaching for transformation

Tie to necessarily contextualized nature of critical pedagogies, critical literacies, critical approaches

The impetus for interdisciplinarity (still holds) We must be mindful to do justice to that impetus

Criticalist approach is key – not just looking for a meshing, bit looking critically to seeing what is problematic from each and seeking new whole. Viewing humanity as a whole that includes everyone, not just the powerful and privileged
The criticalist approaches most needed, yet also most difficult to apply or impose

Critically Questioning the Purpose / Motivation for the interdisciplinarity-ness

Interdisciplinarity has multiple dimensions (not just multiple topics, not just multiple configurations)

Analogies for the importance of redefining the terms (and reframing engagement) and connections to other (more familiar) constructs

We should be taking a criticalist approach to even our interdisciplinariness.

Don’t use interdisciplinariness the way too many people use “technology” or “innovation” or “collaboration” – as a means that is also the end unto itself.

Rather, use it for a larger, more compelling purpose. Why are you using interdisciplinariness in this specific context? If the interdisciplinariness is to bring two fields together to accomplish this thing, question how is the way we are combining these fields accomplishing that thing? – rather than saying, it’s interdisciplinary, therefore it’s good. (like, technology is good.)

Limitations and affordances of various interpretations of the terms

Call for new ways of engaging online learning that prioritize engagement and authentic human interaction (instead of prioritizing content and equipment. What does it take to support emotional growth?)
III. Interdisciplinarity as Pursuit of Equity and Inclusion

[[The remainder of the chapter discusses issues of teaching, learning, and research related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The author expands on two general approaches to this challenging learning domain introduced in the previous section, contrasting criticalist approaches to interdisciplinarity with instrumentalist forms. Contextual details are drawn from events during the last several years related to equity and inclusion efforts at a large public university. A summary outline of the section is provided below. This file will be updated as soon as possible]]

A. Beyond Content

Designing for Equity and inclusion – or teaching how to design for equity and inclusion –

Handling in the same way as the required annual training in handling hazardous materials, and fire safety (in the form of online modules that take X minutes to complete, and are essentially declarative knowledge and recall exercises) is not effective or appropriate. (Might be seen so from a purely instrumentalist perspective.)

While questionable when applied to Title IX training, downright foolish when applied to issues of equity and inclusion. Why content and declarative approaches are not sufficient to increase equity and inclusion.

While the facts of inequities are certainly not common enough knowledge, remaining at the factual knowledge level is in adequate. This is a problem involving declarative, cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, and social dimensions.

B. Intersecting Power & Positionality

C. Practicing Critical Interdisciplinary (Welcoming discomfort, etc.)
References


