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WHITHER INTERDISCIPLINARITY?

by

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Abstract: This essay comments on Stuart Henry's important contribution to our thinking about the administration of interdisciplinary programs. Though I quibble with a few of the arguments he makes in the last volume of *Issues*, I focus my remarks on adding to Henry's suggested strategies for defending interdisciplinarity. I conclude with brief observations on the question of academic appointments and on teaching and learning.

Stuart Henry has performed a valuable service to the interdisciplinary mission by clearly articulating the dangers faced by interdisciplinary programs. He is entirely correct in suggesting that we not be lulled into complacency by the fact that our enrollments are increasing in both absolute and relative terms. Interdisciplinary programs are particularly vulnerable in times of budgetary stringency. While the attendance and comments at our roundtable at the national 2005 AIS/AGLS conference suggest that his concerns resonate widely, I likely have a more Pollyannish outlook on the future than Henry.

I also quibble with a few elements of Henry's argument. I think we have to be exceedingly careful with respect to arguments that interdisciplinary programs are inherently more costly. They vary widely in form and structure. For example, I have created interdisciplinary programs under the administrative constraint that they not be more costly than disciplinary programs. I agree with Henry that we should continue to argue (as should disciplines) for the advantages of team teaching and interactive pedagogies that work best in small classes. But an interdisciplinary education is valuable for its content, not just the way it is taught. I would also disagree with Henry's characterization of the rise of interdisciplinarity as a return to the situation of the 18th century: that situation is better described as pre-disciplinary. Hume and Smith are wonderful to read because of the breadth of their inquiries, but they did not have to struggle with disciplinary discourses designed to be understood from the inside. While I agree with

Henry that interdisciplinarity is occasionally identified with postmodernism, I would urge interdisciplinarians to carefully distinguish our work from the more nihilistic versions of postmodernism that deny the very possibility of enhanced scholarly understanding or communicating across disciplinary or other boundaries (Szostak, 2005). [This is a point Henry has made elsewhere; e.g. Henry, 2006.] Conversely, it would be manifestly unfair for interdisciplinarity to be implicated in any backlash against (at least skeptical) postmodernism.

I would like to focus my remarks, though, on adding to Henry's suggested strategies for defending interdisciplinarity, and conclude with brief observations on the question of academic appointments and on teaching and learning. Foremost, I would emphasize the need to clearly articulate a shared vision of interdisciplinarity and how it is best performed. This task is admittedly a challenge for interdisciplinarians. Our very openness, desire to integrate across diverse perspectives, and recognition of the disciplining effects of disciplines, leave us wary of codifying our practices. Yet the AIS community has successfully walked this tightrope for years, developing best practices and consensual definitions that are flexible but substantive. We need these shared understandings if we are to combat disciplinary hegemony both locally and globally. Thus textbooks such as Augsburg (2006) and Repko (2008) are important not just pedagogically but strategically as well.

I would stress a few elements of these shared understandings that are of particular strategic importance. We need to stress "integration" and thus distinguish ourselves from multidisciplinary. This is our only defense against the malign administrative cost-cutting strategy identified by Henry whereby so-called "interdisciplinary" units are created from the remnants of downsized disciplines, and the results used to assert that the institution cares about interdisciplinarity. I think we need to put some meat on the concept of integration by identifying (at least some of) what it is that we integrate across (I emphasize phenomena, theories, and methods, and stress the importance of clarifying what is meant by disciplinary perspective [Szostak, 2003]). And we need to stress that integration involves not the simple adding up of disciplinary insights, but that it is a *process* of critique, extension, and identification of common ground.

We interdisciplinarians need to stress that we thus build upon the specialized research of communities of scholars who use some subset of theories and methods to examine some constrained set of phenomena. We can then counter the misplaced fears of disciplinarians that we do not value them, while simultaneously remaining free to point out the

limitations of disciplinary inquiry. I would provocatively suggest that we stress the words "specialized" and "integrative" rather than "disciplinary" and "interdisciplinary"; the latter pair hints that interdisciplinarity is an (optional) add-on to the core of disciplinary analysis, while the first pair implies a symbiotic rather than hierarchical relationship (Szostak, 2004).

We need to celebrate the various efforts to outline idealized processes of interdisciplinary analysis (e.g. Klein, 1990; Szostak, 2002; Newell, 2007; Repko, 2008). We cannot distinguish good interdisciplinary analysis from superficial interdisciplinary analysis unless we can identify particular characteristics of the former. Semantically, though, I would shun reference to an "interdisciplinary method" but prefer to speak of "integrative processes" that, among other things, integrate across the methods employed by different disciplines.

Now to some more pragmatic observations from my two years, eight months, and three days as an Associate Dean responsible for interdisciplinarity. I think we as a community must think more carefully about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of academic appointments. Not only can staff that are fully appointed to interdisciplinary programs devote their full attention to those programs, but they can also offer an important practical obstacle to program closure: there may be no obvious place for them to go (Sadly, of course, this obstacle vanishes when instructors are hired on term appointments). Most of those with disciplinary PhDs can be transferred to their discipline's department (if such exists), although they may not be welcomed with enthusiasm because of their interdisciplinary orientation. Those with interdisciplinary PhDs are more problematic. Cross-appointed faculty are naturally easier to re-deploy in the event of program closure. Yet such faculty can alleviate one of the key problems identified by Henry: It is much more difficult for those with joint appointments to be seen as "the other" by departments. The programs established at my institution rely (too much) on cross-appointed faculty, and moreover are governed by broadly-based advisory councils.¹ Thus most departments in my college contain several faculty members with some official allegiance to one or more interdisciplinary programs. This hardly eliminates the dangers Henry speaks of but inevitably alters the discourse in a very constructive direction. If instead these programs were entirely managed by a different set of faculty members, suspicion—especially in times of budgetary stringency—would be almost inevitable. Maybe, then, the best structure for an interdisciplinary program will most often involve a mix of fully-appointed and cross-appointed faculty?

Another wrinkle: In my college the Dean's Office has instituted a college-wide triennial competition for available faculty lines. Collaboration is

encouraged but not required. The result is that most department chairs welcome opportunities to design faculty job descriptions that would serve another department or (more often) an interdisciplinary program. If the value of cross-appointments is recognized, then this sort of process is worth recommending to senior administrators at other universities. As a scholar of institutional change, I recognize that those in positions of power have often set in motion processes of institutional change that had the unforeseen effect of weakening their power. I would thus hypothesize that there are a host of other institutional changes that can be welcomed (or at least accepted) by disciplines out of self-interest but that nevertheless work toward changing the incentive structure in the institution in ways that benefit interdisciplinarity. A competition for resources for team-teaching, for example, might be hard to oppose, even though interdisciplinarians are likely to excel in such a competition. In such a way, interdisciplinary programs might receive extra funding without raising (as many) concerns about fairness.

We would be better able to identify a set of such institutional innovations if we had a clearer vision of our ultimate goal. Departments serve the purposes of disciplines very well. As Henry notes, even interdisciplinarians have been disciplined to accept departments as the obvious organizing principle for a university. Yet isolated departments do not obviously serve the integrative interests of interdisciplinarians as well as they serve the specialized interests of disciplines. Giving interdisciplinary departments an official mandate to collaborate with others is a useful step, though questions remain of how to administer and fund such collaborations. We perhaps need to think a little bit outside the box on this issue.

I close with some thoughts on teaching. As I have argued more than once in the *AIS Newsletter* and at AIS conferences, we need to teach our students about interdisciplinarity: what it is, what disciplines are and do, the history of both, how to perform interdisciplinary analysis, and so on.² Beyond the manifest pedagogical advantages of doing so, I would stress here that this practice is strategically critical. How can we hope to convince senior administrators that there is an important difference between interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary, and that there are ways of identifying good interdisciplinary practices if we do not convey such arguments to our students? Administrators may well be bemused by an argument that there is an essence to interdisciplinarity if this is nowhere explicit in our curriculum. Yet if we think that integrative analysis is an essential component of the scholarly enterprise, we should not just teach this material to our own students. We should argue that it has an obvious

place within general education programs (Szostak, 2003), for it can both provide coherence to college education by tying the pieces together, and impart invaluable critical thinking skills. There is perhaps no greater source of security for the future of interdisciplinarity than embedding courses about interdisciplinarity itself in general education programs.

Biographical Note: Rick Szostak is Professor of Economics at the University of Alberta. During a recent term as Associate Dean he helped create new interdisciplinary programs, courses about interdisciplinarity, and an administrative structure to support interdisciplinarity. He is the author of eight books and 30 articles, many of which address the theory and practice of interdisciplinarity. He is at present pursuing an interdisciplinary analysis of economic growth.

Notes

¹ A warning: With respect to some interdisciplinary programs—environmental studies leaps to mind—where there are strong differences of opinion about how an interdisciplinary program should be structured, care must be taken in developing a fair process for determining who sits on such a council. In less contentious cases, all interested faculty can be invited to serve.

² I address the issues of why, why not, and how to teach this material in Szostak (forthcoming). See also Augsburg (2006) and Repko (2008).

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