Interdisciplinarity within an Academic Career

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Outline

• Project and methodology
• Defining disciplines and leadership
• Problems
• An exercise with data
• Solutions?
• Conclusions
The project

Increasing calls for interdisciplinarity

But

• Structural
• Socio-cultural
• Epistemological differences

Some academics engage - why and how?
Methodology

• Literature review
• Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews of interdisciplinary leaders at KCL and Melbourne
• Appreciative inquiry
  • why engage?
  • what works?
  • principles for effective practice
Disciplines, interdisciplinarity

“any comparatively self-contained and isolated domain of human experience which possesses its own community of experts”  
(Nissani, 1997)

Knowledge, methodology, community

“a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches”  
(Klein, 1990)

Requires integration
Framework

Jarzabkowski’s (2005) activity-based strategy as practice method

Practice:
Interdisciplinarity as a situated, socially accomplished flow of organizational activity

Practices:
Administrative, discursive, episodic

Practitioners:
Skilled, knowledgeable actors inside and outside the university
System level - funding

- Difficulties writing interdisciplinary grants
- Fitting interdisciplinary work into national assessment schemes (RAE/REF in UK)
- Challenges of aligning interdisciplinary work with national funding councils for grants
Institution level - recognition

Issues with traditional discipline-based reward systems:

- mode of publication: e.g. government report rather than journal article or book
- location of publication: generalist rather than specialist journal
- time frame: interdisciplinary work takes time to develop
- publication in peer-reviewed journals using unfamiliar literatures

A risky business best left till later?
Faculty, school, department level

• Tribal academic disciplines
• Administrative issues:
  • finance
  • course registration
  • time-tabling
  • computer systems

“It is quite difficult to teach interdisciplinary courses … with different timetables, for instance, or different habits, different expectations, different cultures, perhaps of contact, or different entry level requirements.”
An exercise with data!

What structures and processes would assist and promote an interdisciplinary career
Exercise

Divide into small groups
Read the quote sheets provided
Discuss the questions in relation to the interview quotes and your own experience
Report back to the full group in 15 minutes
Conclusions: Challenges

- Interdisciplinary work challenged by practices
  - lack of culture of going outside one’s own department
  - current academic fads and trends
  - budget crunches
- Administration often organised on disciplinary and departmental lines
  - financial and prestige awards
  - course scheduling
  - computer systems
Conclusions: Challenges

- Interdisciplinary work usually requires extra administrative support
- Computer systems often lock staff into one school or department
- These issues pervade the university at all levels
Conclusions: Promoting interdisciplinary work

• Incentive structure (promotion and tenure) criteria important for early career academics
• Flexible study leaves can be a springboard for innovative research for mid-career academics
• Ability to go sideways in the university and maintain status is crucial for all academics
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References


Thank you and questions

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