Challenges facing early career interdisciplinary researchers

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Outline

• Project and methodology
• Challenges
• Challenges into opportunities
• Choices, decisions, options
• Questions
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
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 and reward

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
• Times of financial difficulty, departments often prioritise core functions i.e. circling the wagons
Challenges into opportunities I

• “And every time you change field, you lose momentum. You have to reestablish yourself. You’re an unknown. You have to fight for that space. So you are doing worse than your compatriots, in the short term. In the long term, you have got long term, you have a future, the person stacked with technique in a question, has a date line on them.”

• “Well, I know that these people said that usually you do this in mid-life or later but, for me, I always did it. It was something that I was always interested in and I write a great deal and I’ve got lots of publications, many of them in interdisciplinary journals, and I found it gave me a level of excitement and curiosity and general output that I would not have had if I’d stayed within a traditional discipline.”
Challenges into opportunities II

• “It heightens that risk, so you, to be reasonably good in a number of disciplines or two disciplines, get’s nowhere near the recognition and academic sort of progression value that being excellent in one discipline.”

• “The willingness to compromise with other people, the willingness to accept uncertainty, a willingness to accept that you’re not going to be able to see the world in the same way.”

• “The trick is to get people, it’s not so much getting people interested in working in an interdisciplinary environment, it’s getting them interested in the subject you’re interested in building an interdisciplinary approach.”
Challenges into opportunities III

“The dean warned me that, if I was working in this sort of field I should write about my contribution to the discipline and that there wasn’t really a discipline of medical law, so that one of the things I should do in my professorial application was to make out my arguments for believing that medical law was a discipline and that I’d helped to found it and to develop it. So I wrote quite a lot about, what is a discipline, what is medical law, how it crosses boundaries, the sort of skills that you have to have to do it, and he said if I were to apply I might get knocked back and people might think... but none of this happened. And, in fact, my rise through the academic ranks was very rapid. So, it didn’t do me any harm but this doesn’t necessarily mean that this applies to other people.”
Summary of challenges

• Many academics recommend interdisciplinary career be postponed until mid-career due to challenges, even though they did not

• Help to define, defend, promote your area of research and your career
Choices, decisions, options

- Career path options
  - Follow disciplinary career, be interdisciplinary later on
  - Stay housed within a traditional discipline, pursue interdisciplinary career (through teaching and/or research)
  - Join an applied or related field
  - Find an interdisciplinary home (e.g. research centres, subject-based departments)
  - Pursue work in an alternative academic career
- A philosopher turned to a career in leadership and organisational theory in a business school to maintain an academic career
Choices, decisions, options

- Sometimes one needs to be less interdisciplinary and more problem-focused
- Methodology-based and subject- or topic-based conferences and journals can be more open
- Partner and co-author with others to speak to the right audience
- Money talks: how can you get your research funded
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