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Review: *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature*

Edited by William H. Newell, New York: College Entrance Examination Board, © 1998, 563 pages. ISBN 0-87447-600-3 (cloth); ISBN 0-87447-608-9 (paper).

Reviewer: Marion Brady

In fairness to authors and readers, reviewers of scholarly books should make clear the perspective they bring to their evaluation of a work. I come to the task of reviewing *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature* as a long-time critic of interdisciplinarity.

That said, I believe that advocates of interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum bring a far more sophisticated perspective to the task of helping the young develop useful mental models of reality than do those who continue to think that exposing students to a random mix of academic disciplines adequately educates.

What the authors of the essays in *Interdisciplinarity* share is an awareness that the traditional, distribution-driven curriculum is fundamentally flawed. That curriculum has no overarching aim except the implicit one of passing along to the next generation the accumulated knowledge of today's experts in a few selected fields of knowledge. That curriculum does not merely ignore the systemically integrated nature of knowledge, it insists by its very organization that the integration of seemingly disparate fields is not possible. That curriculum dumps on students a volume of information far in excess of that which is intellectually manageable. That curriculum treats the static assimilation of existing knowledge rather than the dynamic creation of new knowledge as the purpose of general education, thereby making itself increasingly dysfunctional as the pace of change accelerates. That curriculum is so at odds with how the brain ordinarily functions that students must be held forcefully in place by threats and promises—laws, grades, social expectations and other powerful extrinsic motivators.

Readers of *Interdisciplinarity*'s thirty-one essays—contributions selected for use in a reader for the Institute of Integrative Studies—will find these kinds of issues explored, but they cannot help but be struck by the lack of agreement among interdisciplinarians about strategies for dealing with them. There are general suggestions for action, but those looking for guidance in establishing or expanding interdisciplinary programs may come away from the essays overwhelmed by the complexity of the task.

In an "Overview" co-authored by William H. Newell and William J. Green, the difficulties are admitted:

"The term 'interdisciplinary studies' itself is so loosely and so inconsistently used that almost any course which does not fit neatly within disciplinary departments is apt to be labeled 'interdisciplinary.' Second, the liberal arts objectives of interdisciplinary studies are vague at best; even where practitioners can agree on what they mean by the term, it is unclear what they are trying to accomplish. Third, there are no widely accepted canons of interdisciplinary scholarship by which to judge excellence. Finally, it is not

certain what the appropriate relationship is between interdisciplinary study and the academic disciplines themselves.”

These are serious problems. And when contributors throw into the mix the terms “a-disciplinarity,” “crossdisciplinarity,” “multidisciplinarity,” and “transdisciplinarity” (terms defined differently by different essayists) the picture becomes even more confused.

This is not surprising. Given the raw materials with which the interdisciplinarians are attempting to work—the academic disciplines—confusion is inevitable. The traditional disciplines focus on different kinds of phenomena, approach that phenomena with different analytical and descriptive methodologies, have different aims, employ different conceptual frameworks, use different vocabularies, operate at different levels of abstraction. The disciplines did not take shape as parts of a thoughtful effort to parcel out responsibility for describing and analyzing the whole of reality, and they cannot now be made to mesh in any logically coherent way. Even if some wise scholar could devise a way to cobble them together, the result would surely be out of the intellectual reach of students.

Most contributors to *Interdisciplinarity* appear to believe that across-the-board integration of the disciplines is not possible. They choose instead to search for useful disciplinary parallels and intersections and bring them to bear on problems, themes, topics, questions, issues, ideas, persons, historical periods, or regions. Readers who find this rather random approach to the integration of knowledge appealing will find in the book useful ideas, illustrations, and examples.

I am not one of those readers. In his introductory essay, editor William H. Newell identifies the dissident group into which I fall:

“Transdisciplinists . . . take as an article of faith the underlying unity of all knowledge. This assumption, that everything is related to everything else, makes the division of knowledge otiose from the outset and leads to the search for a superdiscipline . . .”

Newell sees a superdiscipline capable of logically integrating all knowledge as a highly desirable but distant, perhaps unachievable, goal. I see such a discipline as already in place, underlying all thought and action. In our attempt to understand reality, we use just five “master” conceptual frameworks — those for time, environment, humans, action, and cognition. All descriptions and analyses are but elaborations of the conceptual frameworks of these five or of their systemic relationships.

Those seeking an overview of on-going dialog within the interdisciplinary community will find it in *Interdisciplinarity; Essays from the Literature*. Those seeking guidance in establishing an interdisciplinary program will probably be disappointed.

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