

# II.7

## Challenging Orthodoxy

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### INTRODUCTION

When William Melody came to Simon Fraser University in Canada, he faced a fractious department with an uneven record of teaching and research. By the time he was ready to turn his attention elsewhere, he had laid the foundations for a department with the profile and content of single field of study. Melody's challenge was far greater than, and quite different from, what any new Chair of a dysfunctional department might face. The job to be done was complicated by the fact that Communication was not a discipline, but an interdiscipline. The stresses and strains faced by established departments are multiplied many fold when interdisciplinarity is involved. The new field must be cut from fresh cloth, even while its faculty members define their work mainly in opposition to whatever discipline they have escaped from. Melody had to confront not only the entrenched interests of faculty members and students long accustomed to having their own way, but also the significant challenge of identifying a common bond and securing allegiance to it. That he succeeded in laying the foundations for a genuinely interdisciplinary department is without doubt, given that the Department of Communication grew, over time, to have an international reputation. This contribution explores what it is about interdisciplinarity that makes his accomplishment so noteworthy.

### ALL DISCIPLINES BEGIN AS INTERDISCIPLINES

Some things look obvious but are not. The value of interdisciplinarity is one of those things. Any student of the history of disciplines knows that nothing is inherent in the collection of themes and approaches that today characterises disciplines (see Salter and Hearn 1996; Chubin et al. 1986; Klein 1990; Messer-Davidow et al. 1993; and Whitley 1984). Boxer (1998: 387) describes Women's Studies thus:

Women's studies is both a discipline and an interdisciplinary field. This seemingly oxymoronic statement can be seen on closer examination to reflect the pervasive confusion within higher education between departments and disciplines, the evolutionary process through which subjects (such as economics, political science and psychology) come to

be considered disciplines, and the multiplicity of subject matters and research methods now housed in fields (such as anthropology, biology and classics) that are commonly called disciplines.

All disciplines began as interdisciplines. Even today, disciplinary fields are characterised by internal variety, by individual faculty members straining against the prevailing assumptions of their discipline to define new sub-fields and approaches. Battle lines are drawn to support the appearance of coherence.

The history student would also know that interdisciplinary scholars are only following in the footsteps of the great social theorists when they carve out new territory and bring up new topics for study. The story of interdisciplinarity is simply this: some academics want to break free from the labels and conventions of disciplines, and think they should be given licence to do so given that the academy is committed to supporting a restless and boundary-less search for knowledge. Seen in this light, interdisciplinarity should be less of a bold venture than the natural process of evolution in academic life, an example of academics fully engaged with ideas and social problems.

Theory and practice often diverge, especially when institutional constraints intervene. Universities in Canada fall over themselves to endorse the concept of interdisciplinarity, but jealously guard their resources in support of established disciplines.<sup>2</sup> They typically, but foolishly, cross-list courses without any regard for the different cultures associated with each field of study, or the operational problems posed for cross-appointed faculty members and students alike. They cast young faculty members into the role of institutional pioneers, asking them to challenge the entrenched interests of the established disciplines at the very moment when these young scholars must build a record of teaching and publishing to achieve tenure. They import senior faculty members from a variety of departments into the new interdisciplinary field, usually those on the margins of their existing department for one reason or other. Then they make no provision in terms of workload for the time needed to create intellectual credibility. They create so-called new units for no other reasons than administrative convenience, and wrap their actions in the cloak of virtue by reference to interdisciplinarity. When the result is a mish-mash of courses in a department without departmental status, or legitimacy and resources, the weakest students enrol. Interdisciplinary offerings are widely perceived to be ‘bird courses’, further lessening the possibility that something strong, in an intellectual and institutional sense, could ever be built. Simon Fraser University went against the grain in establishing several interdisciplinary fields of study as full departments with dedicated faculty

members. Its foresight has been rewarded today with Schools and Departments of international repute. The path taken at Simon Fraser has not been followed in most other universities.

The difficulties of establishing interdisciplinary fields of study are intellectual as well as institutional, so much so that, even if universities were to change their priorities, serious obstacles would remain. Interdisciplinarity is tempting for poor scholars. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to turn one's attention to the intellectually fashionable, social problems of the day or to play with brilliant twists of logic in high theory (see Salter and Hearn 1996). Interdisciplinarity also gives licence to the hurried and careless, to scholars who dip, with impunity, into various literatures unaware of the historical meaning of their concepts and the long-standing debates among their practitioners. Vivid metaphors, an important component of scientific reasoning at its best, become excuses for not working through the implications of what is being said. The importance of the issues and the panache of theory become rationales for poor scholarship. Misrepresentation and distortion result. As Friedman (2001: 505) suggests, 'The dangers of epistemological and cross disciplinary travel are great, just as they are for spatial travelling – the tendency to misunderstand the other, appropriate the other, misuse the other or decontextualise the other'.

## METHOD IS CRUCIAL

Method is crucial and in this, an interdisciplinary field of study is no different from a topic area within a discipline. In both cases, broad scope of inquiry and breadth of knowledge are important, but only if they can be achieved without sacrificing depth. Interestingly, Melody promoted interdisciplinarity, but his own work fits neatly within a single paradigm and a long-established tradition of scholarship, institutional economics. His is not the only method for achieving intellectual rigor in interdisciplinarity, but it is one of the more credible ones.

Unlike many interdisciplinary scholars, Melody did not think of interdisciplinarity as intrinsically connected to particular subject areas, such as Gender Studies, nor to metadisciplines, say Cultural Studies, nor even to new approaches to theory, for instance, postmodernism. He understood the content of interdisciplinarity much more loosely to mean the intellectual churn and challenge to the authority of established hierarchies within the disciplines. It was his contention that interdisciplinarity lent vibrancy to the academic enterprise. At its best, it forced serious scholars to reach beyond the confines of their narrow worlds, to use knowledge as well as collecting it. But Melody also understood that challenging orthodoxy would not be enough to establish the coherence of a field of study, nor

the scope of its intellectual endeavours. Melody's phrase for what was needed, beyond a contrary and rebellious turn of mind, was 'a common bond'. He argued vociferously that those of us in Communication who wished to see it gain intellectual legitimacy needed to do some boundary work of our own (Gieryn 1983). A field of study that encompasses everything without focus or distinction has, by its very nature, no centre, he said. Nothing other than personal friendships would sustain a network of scholars beyond the point where going to conferences was still an exciting thing to do.

The process of constituting the subject matter for a field of study is not an easy one, of course. While it need not require exclusion (even the most well established disciplines have people on the margins continually challenging orthodoxy), serious work needs to be done to identify the particular purchase of the field of study within the academic enterprise. Communication competes with Cultural Studies and Media Studies and Journalism. While the insiders to the competition appreciate the subtle differences amongst these three fields of study, the inside view is not good enough. The common bond of any field of study must be intelligible not only to the institutions that provide support (universities, granting councils, etc.) but also to colleagues and prospective undergraduate and graduate students. It must have intellectual weight.

In Communication, these difficulties were complicated yet again because several of the established disciplines claim some or all of the same intellectual resources. For example, Sociology has widened its span of interests to include such topic areas as media, interpersonal communication, cultural theory and the like. It is easy to envisage a situation where fully two-thirds of the curricula of Sociology and Communication might overlap, and where the same books and articles are represented on the two sets of course outlines. No one field of study should be able to claim property rights over the kinds of ideas that are the stock and trade of universities. Within the universities, however, intellectual resources often are treated as intellectual property. What Sociology or Economics have, Political Science and Communication must ignore, and so on.

At Simon Fraser, these problems were resolved, more or less. The common bond of Communication was eventually deemed to be technology and policy. Media Studies were included in the Department's offerings, as anyone would expect they should be, but the defining characteristic of Communication as a subject of study (at Simon Fraser) lay in the connection between media studies, on the one hand, and policy and technology, on the other. From this core focus, it was then possible for the Communication Department to expand its intellectual horizons outward,

encompassing Cultural Studies and Publishing as integral but not defining components of the field. The lessons for others from the Simon Fraser experience are these: defining and agreeing upon a common bond for any field of study, whether interdisciplinary or not, is very time consuming, contentious and intellectually demanding. It matters little whether the same reference material is used in different fields of study if there are different angles of study, different focal points for each one. Finally, gathering a variety of loosely related research topics under a single umbrella, without identifying the common bond among them, is an excuse for poor scholarship, whatever the value of interdisciplinarity. Established disciplines face the same problems as interdisciplines, but they have an advantage in the struggle. Their institutional histories and privileges mask their lack of coherence. Interdisciplinary fields of study have to create and re-create themselves continually, and justify their efforts time and time again.

#### INTERDISCIPLINARITY

The emergence of interdisciplinarity is not helped by the fact that the word 'interdisciplinarity' can be an ideograph. The notion of an ideograph is McGee's (1980), and it requires some explanation before it is applied here. McGee's goal was to take account of ideological predisposition, specifically how predisposition is established in the face of a vast array of competing ideas and images in society. McGee argued that the crucial variable in ideological formation is language, or rather, individual words. Some words become more akin to pictographs than words (hence the term ideograph). That is, a single word can be used to stand in for whole philosophical or ideological approaches. Ideographs are used as handy linguistic shortcuts to convey a host of ideas; they represent a paradigm wrapped up in a single word. Adopt and use these words, thoughtlessly, and the result is that the paradigm, philosophy or ideology is adopted too, McGee argued. Ideology can thus be written into conversation carelessly, and without a single reference being made to the speakers' underlying assumptions and political messages. Words can be used as strategic resources in ideological battles never made explicit.

McGee had a much larger intellectual agenda than appreciating the fate of interdisciplinarity, but it is useful to think of interdisciplinarity as sometimes being an ideograph. Doing so allows us to appreciate that there can be more at stake in the fights about interdisciplinarity (and the institutional battles about the status of interdisciplinary fields) than is first apparent. Truth be told, new fields are created all the time, without much fuss. No-one sees the need to mount a campaign about the value of cognitive psychology or management of technology, yet Communication and Gender Studies would never have gained recognition without

battles having been won. Something is happening when battles break out over interdisciplinarity, and McGee's notion is helpful in locating it.

One sees evidence of the ideograph when the label 'interdisciplinary' is claimed by those who see themselves dealing primarily with social issues (the environment, black or gender studies, etc.) or as intimately connected to politics (including the politics of knowledge) and policy making. What is on offer with this use of interdisciplinarity is not so much a new field as it is a serious challenge to the philosophy of the university as currently practised. In these instances, interdisciplinarity is not associated with new subject matter, nor with a common bond for a new field of study, nor even with new methodologies, so much as it is with a challenge to the intellectual priorities of the university. The challenge is this: while no-one seriously doubts that curiosity-driven research has social and political (and practical) implications, interdisciplinarity means reversing intellectual priorities. Politics and the pragmatic objectives of interdisciplinarity should be the driving force, and curiosity-driven research should be the instrument of their realisation. The long-standing self-image of the university as a seeker of untainted knowledge should be cast aside in favour of what William Melody, Dallas Smythe and others called a critical approach.

The second example of interdisciplinarity being used as an ideograph requires a little background information about events at Simon Fraser long after Melody had left. Faced with the dissolution of the catch-all faculty unit that had previously housed all of the evolving interdisciplinary departments, the Communication Department elected to join the Faculty of Applied Sciences, not the Faculty of Arts. A monumental battle culminated at Senate. In retrospect, it could not have mattered less where the Department of Communication was located within the University. The argument put forward by the Department (about working with colleagues who truly understood communication technology) had merit, but it was neither strong nor weak enough to carry the day. The real issue was that Communication had chosen a common bond that put it outside the social sciences/humanities nexus, where everyone expected it to be. Indeed, Communication had elected to perch itself on the cultural divide between the natural and technical sciences, on the one hand, and the social sciences/humanities, on the other.

The conventional wisdom at Simon Fraser, as elsewhere, is that the 'two cultures' mentality is a bad thing. The battle about the location of Communication at Simon Fraser tells another story. University bureaucrats argued that it was 'unnatural' for Communication to be located in the Faculty of Applied Sciences. In doing so, they drew attention to distinctions in the intellectual landscape that they

regarded as unproblematic. This was no merger of natural and social sciences, as happens in cognitive psychology, for example. Rather, Communication was demanding that the traditional distinction between science and social science be put aside in favour of a new organisation of knowledge, one based upon 'interest groupings'. Communication researchers were saying that 'we have more in common with engineers studying communication technology than with sociologists studying the family'.

Simon Fraser is not a special case. The dividing line between the two cultures remains firm everywhere, despite protestations about the importance of interdisciplinarity. Each new interdisciplinary field of study is placed in its 'natural' home within the university, and no-one thinks anything of it. Social studies of science and technology are located within Faculties of Arts, for example, ensuring that science students are not really exposed to them. Science students take a token course in the humanities, but otherwise confine themselves to subjects within the sciences. University administrators create special faculties units to house everything that does not fit. Thus Urban Studies is grouped with Mass Communication and Gender Studies as if they had something in common. All are distinguished from disciplines like Political Science and Geography. This has the effect of ensuring that the new does not contaminate the old. Of course there are exceptions, but they are rarer than one might expect, given the almost universal support accorded to interdisciplinarity even by those who sequester it within the universities.

## CONCLUSION

The Communication Department at Simon Fraser has now become the School of Communication, garnering strong institutional support despite its unusual faculty placement and its pride in being interdisciplinary. In the last 25 years, universities everywhere have rushed to embrace interdisciplinarity. But the reality is not very encouraging. What seems to be a smooth transition from discipline-based knowledge to interdisciplinarity is anything but. Environmental Studies is under siege in at least one Canadian university, and its enrolments are falling. By and large, Women's Studies has done well, institutionally speaking, but in almost every case, Women's Studies lacks departmental status (even though it often has graduate programmes) and dedicated faculty resources. Many other 'Studies' programmes have fared poorly, fading out after the initial burst of enthusiasm that gave them birth. Meanwhile, the granting agencies everywhere seem to believe that interdisciplinarity is a simple matter, something accomplished by team research, huge and unwieldy research centres, and partnerships with industry or by conveying research results to the public.

When he called for interdisciplinarity, Melody expected trouble. He relished a fight about important intellectual issues, then and now. He did not mind that interdisciplinarity represented something more than invigorating challenges to orthodoxy, that it was an ideograph as well as an idea. He liked the fact that the conceptual map informing university planning could be challenged even as new fields of study were created. He was quite prepared to use interdisciplinarity as a strategic resource to promote worthy intellectual and institutional purposes. Melody appreciated the fact that interdisciplinarity was (and is still) carelessly flung about in university Senate meetings, in their public relations and grant proposals, even though it bespeaks ideological conflicts of some magnitude. In this context, he equated the ideograph with opportunities to do more than the granting councils ever believed possible. The results of his efforts speak for themselves.