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Sustaining collegiality through the imperative of interdisciplinary practice

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Contemporary universities in the developed world face a plethora of increased – and changing – responsibilities. We are the global university, responsible for the production of worker citizens who will be 'prepared' for an extraordinarily diverse set of challenges across all facets of their lives. Much of our research concentration in the academy necessarily requires a plural, diverse approach to developing the appropriate capabilities for our students. Multidisciplinarity is the simple reality of the professional world. Universities have at their disposal sophisticated self-aware multidisciplinary practitioners. Or do they? How is multidisciplinarity perceived and understood in university departments and research teams? What are the tangible measures of successful multi-disciplinary practice? Drawing on a cultural studies framework, this paper will consider the challenges to academic identity and collegiality which reside in the assumed move to multiple ways of knowing in discovery and scholarship. How do we open to, and learn from, each others' disciplinary tools, traditions and epistemologies? How are such collegial approaches – concrete collegialities – embedded in our starting discipline? What are the understandings and limitations we face in seeking to move to a rich meaningful *inter*disciplinary practice? I will explore these questions in relation to the UN Decade on Education for Sustainability and Sustainable Development.

Keywords: disciplinarity; interdisciplinary practice; collegiality; sustainability

During the Northern summer, while residing at an English university, I was making tea in the communal kitchen and reflecting on issues of interdisciplinary practice (IDP) when a young graduate student entered the kitchen. Her M.Phil thesis is due in October and she displayed all the states of preoccupation, stress and anxiety which characterises such a time in our lives. I sympathised with her and she seemed surprised. 'Oh', she said. 'The thesis is fine. I'm enjoying that part. No, it's the not *belonging* anywhere that's getting me down'. With familiar bells ringing in my mind, I enquired after her meaning. 'Well, you see', she said, clearly expecting that I would not understand, 'I'm not really a proper musicologist, because I do ethnography. But the ethnographers don't really think musicology cuts it, you know. I can only share bits of it with anyone. There are no other ethno-musicologists here. And you know what musicols are like. You must be loyal to the discipline, or…' I observed dryly that I hope the scholars in her field would wish her to be loyal to the emerging knowledge. She was resigned. 'Not if it isn't straight musicology, because then it isn't fully… knowledge? It's some other… thing'. Off she went to the imminent supervision she was dreading, precisely because she had to defend an ethnographic epistemology to a *fellow* musicologist, within a discipline which encourages or at least permits *multi*disciplinary engagements. My friend's experience of her chosen field is that *tacit* primacy is given to the comfort zone of the local (and hierarchical) epistemological territory.

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While I was not particularly surprised by the scenario outlined above, I was disappointed that three years after my own graduate experience concluded, so little progress in IDP had been made. Certainly, this conversation occurred in a highly elite institution where the disciplines are ranked in terms of prestige and power, as clearly as teams in a premier league. But the issues of urgency to universities – to the world, surely? – are increasingly of a nature which necessitates an interdisciplinary response. We are being exhorted, urged, begged, to address complex problems with an integrated discovery which recognises multiple, overlapping dimensions of social and environmental, not to mention economic, problems.

This paper will explore some of the manifestations of IDP in scholarly enquiry. I will consider the pressing contemporary imperatives of IDP for change projects in universities, focusing on education for sustainability (EfS). I explore a particular intellectual understanding which claims IDP as crucial to a collaborative and collegial research culture. Some failures and absences of IDP will be examined, in the light of implications for collegiality in academe, especially since so many claimed goals and initiatives depend on an embedded IDP. Finally, I will propose some ways forward in terms of a deep, performative IDP and the benefits which will likely flow.

The philosophical framework underpinning this paper is an eclectic one. In considering the lived impact of the status order of knowledge and research practice in universities, I am persuaded by a post-structuralist perspective which gives primacy to issues of subjectivity and self reflexivity (or its absence) as a powerful means to interrogate complex notions of identity formation and aspiration. Equally, this discussion is informed by an interest in the role of power relationships in identity and the maintenance of the socio-political and economic 'status quo', given the central role played by the higher education institutions (HEI) in terms of the reproduction of social arrangements.

Interdisciplinary research varies widely in form and content across HEI in the western world. The understanding of IDP which informs this paper recognises 'a cooperative effort by a team of investigators each expert in the use of different methods and concepts who have joined in an organised program to attack a challenging problem' (Hall et al., 2006).

Few problems we face could be as challenging as the move to a sustainable future. Sustainability as a concept and as a set of practices has arguably reached its zenith in recent times, mostly due to the urgent environment and social crises with which we are faced. This trajectory is reflected in the adoption of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014 (UNESCO 2007). The definition of the term sustainability which informs this paper and which I bring to the rubric of 'education for sustainability' (EfS) is: 'sustainability means that as a society we are aware of the impact of our actions on others and on the planet, that we take responsibility for these actions and are transparent in our processes'.[1]

Increasingly, the skill set mandated by the knowledge economy and urgently sought by governments and industry includes knowledge *for* sustainability: environmental, social and (already privileged) economic activities, known as a 'triple bottom line' model of measures of performance and management (Goldie et al. 2005). EfS is a maturing academic field which offers theorisations and practice models to assist in embedding sustainability knowledges across all education sectors.

Many EfS practitioners have highlighted the role of IDP, in terms of integrated knowledge, as well as generic and transferable skills for graduates, as one of the most pressing challenges facing sustainability studies. (Dale and Newman 2005; Domask, 2007; Moore 2005). Recognition of the nature and complexity of many sustainability problems indicates the logic of utilising IDP, but as with so many of what might be termed 'change projects' imposed on universities, the embedding of IDP has been anything but straightforward. By change projects, I refer to the various 'continuous improvement' endeavours which central and governmental bodies request of universities and academic staff. I include those instrumental quality assurance initiatives, as

well as those which I construct as holding deeper significance, such as the academic development project exemplified in the Dearing Report, and my own area of interest, education for sustainability(Dearing 1997).

The arguments for and advantages of IDP are not new, but they are certainly more urgent and it may be argued more pragmatic than at any time in history. Increasingly, the knowledge economy's hunger for appropriately skilled workers has forced the recognition that discipline, professional or content knowledge forms only *part* of the skill set urgently required by global workers. The Bologna model responds by extending capability enhancement through linked, interdependent undergraduate and postgraduate tracks; the Prague Declaration seeks to embed integrated, transferable graduate skills, exemplify the preferred configuration of equal stakeholders in the knowledge economy, best understood as the 'triple helix model' (described by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997; Ciurana and Filho 2006). The strands of the helix equally represent the triumvirate of university, government and industry, the three partners in the knowledge economy, all with their respective sense of the role and process of undergraduate education. The Bologna and Prague models, and the Dearing Report of 1997, may seem somewhat dated; however the underpinning respective emphases and sensibilities are only now making themselves fully felt as government and industry increasingly call for the graduate attributes to which these models speak (Sanchez 2006; Dearing 1997). Such models exemplify the integrated disciplinary knowledge and embedded IDP so crucial to a global knowledge economy. It is the increasing parity, in recognition of the roles of government and industry as regulators, employers and markets, which characterises this model. Universities are stakeholders therein, but they no longer hold full ownership or definition of what undergraduate education must be; this lived reality is troubling to many traditional scholars, as they decry the pressure placed on universities from without, when those 'without' cannot possibly understand the true and definitive purpose of universities (Considine 2006). The 'triple helix' model, which engages openly with a sense of external accountability, reflects a number of the values of what Gibbons et al call Mode 2, or socially distributed knowledge, where the focus is no longer wholly on an internal conversation of discovery with others in one's discipline, but rather emergent and purposeful, validated not only by peer review and scholarly community but by social usefulness and performativity (Gibbons et al. 1994). Mode 2 knowledge is very likely to be produced and discovered through deeply interdisciplinary modes of research practice; it is characterised by trans-disciplinary links between academia and industry and such links are 'solution focused' and 'design oriented'. This model values a constant 'flow back and forth' between pure and applied discovery, between theory and practice. Indeed, the Prague Declaration explicitly states that a core priority for universities should be the development in graduates of *interdisciplinary* capabilities (Sanchez 2006).

Hall et al., reflecting on skills needed in the health sector, consider interdisciplinary skills to be the core capability currently required by the Canadian Government, but they are scathing about academia's capacity to deliver, citing the insistence of scholars on assessing skills through disciplinary frameworks as an obvious and ironic impediment to the development of IDP (Hall et al. 2006). The rationale for this priority is that without such skills in graduates across professional disciplines, the deep changes sought will lack depth; they will be superficial rather than embedded. This is especially urgent in relation to capabilities for sustainable futures.

One of the primary drivers towards IDP is the role it arguably plays in building thriving research cultures, which recognise and experience themselves consciously as 'communities of scholars'. Research culture is recognised as an enabling factor in successful discovery – considerable energy has been expended to identify what enables higher degree research (HDR) students, for example, to hasten their completions. Overwhelmingly, HDR students have identified being part of a scholarly community, having their research valued and being

included in the intellectual life of their department as factors enabling productivity (Barnacle 2002a, b). As universities' research concentrations are forced to change and adapt, the need for IDP in research training becomes urgent. Yet the potentially enabling role played by IDP does not necessarily translate into practice. Hall et al argue that IDP is in fact inimical to academic cultures, as the latter are disciplinary-bound. The culture is expressed through and by the discipline and therefore cannot adapt to the shift in practice and intellectual exchanged required for IDP (Hall et al. 2006). Becher et al. argue that even where IDP is claimed and attempted, the underpinning assumptions of the scholars involved will express the values and attitudes of their disciplines of origins, along with the behaviours associated with inquiry in that field. (Becher and Trowler 1989, 2001) This is reinforced by recurrent practice, thereby contributing to the maintenance of disciplinary borders and identity formation.

> In our school, the head thinks it's interdisciplinary if someone from physics turns up to a meeting with someone from chemistry. (Anecdotal comment, early career researcher, RMIT University)

The experience of a strained, or non-existent, IDP is disheartening and dispiriting, particularly for young scholars who may be drawn to a field or enquiry precisely because of apparent (or hoped for) IDP. Those of us who seek to undertake scholarly projects in the field of tertiary teaching and learning must contend with multiple sites of rigid disciplinarity; both in terms of approaches to knowledge generally, and attitudes to teaching, specifically. Theorists of pedagogy have acknowledged the way disciplines determine teaching and learning practice in HEI (Moon 2004; Shulman 2004). This 'fierce deeply entrenched territoriality' (Becher and Trowler 1989, 2001) becomes a determining factor; knowledge and practice are only valued in terms of their consistency with the approaches of a given discipline; an impossible task if multiple disciplines are represented. Quite aside from the considerable practical difficulties which result, the subject position offered the interdisciplinary practitioner is precarious and often painful, as the sense of belonging – of being part of a community of scholars – which is crucial to healthy collaboration, is endangered. As Bauman states, 'life lived in the absence of community is precarious, in any form' (Bauman 2001).

Blattel-Mink et al urge practitioners of sustainability studies not to underestimate the epistemological – and practical – difficulties posed by a deep interdisciplinary practice. They see a real obstacle to a meaningful IDP in the 'personal factors' which arguably effect scholars' sense of, and engagement with, other disciplines (Blattel-Mink and Kastenholz, 2005). These personal factors may be too great for a feasible transdisciplinary engagement to be realistic; they may undermine intended engagements or projects in a way that can be quite insidious and unspoken. Blattel-Mink et al. caution that it is very difficult to 'abandon the epistemological security of one's own discipline' and I would further argue that this is a largely unconscious process for all involved. Kane et al. argue that we construct notions of rigour from within our own disciplinary perspectives and project them onto the Other, whether that be discipline or colleague (Kane et al. 2002, 177). Surely rigour must in fact be a situated notion? The idea that the rigour of a theorisation of teaching and learning would be addressed from the epistemological framework of environmental engineering should be deeply concerning. By this I mean that the means of enquiry and the culturally normalised, local, 'ways of knowing' will often be unintuitive – and sometimes downright absurd – to such disparate disciplines. By judging thus – by adding disciplinary apples and oranges – we put at risk the many crucial projects which can only be furthered through a deeply thoughtful and openhanded (and open-hearted!) IDP.

Many EfS practitioners have written of the central importance of interdisciplinary approaches as having an inherent role to play in moving towards the goals of the sustainability project. Moore makes a distinction between what is termed 'true' rather than 'surface' interdisciplinarity, cautioning that the latter takes time and effort (Moore 2005), both of which are also

identified as organisational obstacles to EfS in universities. The educational theorist Jennifer Moon suggests that academics learn how to construct knowledge and meanings within their beginning disciplines and they bring this methodology into whatever collaborative practices might ensue; this practice is arguably the constituent problematic of IDP – that we are all working from base meaning structures which are inimical to the project at hand. Collaboration as a scholarly practice seems simple enough, but the scenario described above goes a long way to explaining some previously tacit experience many academics have had (and which has characterised my own experience in EfS). This may be what Moore refers to when urging us to beware of 'naïve assumptions about the ease of collaborative enquiry' (Moore et al. 2005, 65) and this insight offers validation for many who have been perplexed by not only vastly different approaches to epistemology but to the silence and unchallenged assumptions which often underpin that difference. However, Gudz reminds us that interdisciplinarity is in fact the way of the real world. Issues and problems we face are interconnected, often across a messy and blurred boundary. It is a profound responsibility of the EfS project to seek and honour a deep IDP in our scholarship even where the challenges to that practice are considerable and even disheartening.

Given the imperative of IDP for both the EfS project and the triple helix engagements of the knowledge economy, it is necessary to find some meaningful, empowering points of entry for an authentic IDP, which builds as it means to go on. While the literature offers rich descriptions of the absences and challenges of IDP and their etiology, it is rare to find accounts of successful IDP projects, which highlight the building blocks which enable change (Blattel-Mink and Kastenholz 2005; Hall 2007; Hall et al. 2006). What has to be done to facilitate and instill deep interdisciplinarity? Gudz offers some insight in critiquing the positives and negatives of IDP for the EfS project, describing the 'territoriality' which is associated with sustainability (and therefore, potentially, with EfS) as a necessary evil (Gudz 2004). Surely sustainability is about the interconnectedness of things and the need for integration and recognition of interdependence? Territoriality would seem to be at odds with such values, reflecting more the kind of calcification which has so obstructed IDP. But what of a third way? Most scholars emerge into interdisciplinary areas having commenced their academic lives within one discipline or another. Even those areas which are ultimately interdisciplinary in nature, such as women's studies, or cultural studies, might be said to have their own 'parent' disciplines, and absolutely their own customs, practices and characteristics. I am a graduate of both women's studies and cultural studies programs and I am deeply grateful for what I see as rigorous epistemological tools afforded me in those (inter) disciplines. However, I am conscious that I imbibed considerable intellectual snobbery in relation to what were constructed as 'hands on' or empirical disciplines, such as engineering. The irony here is that my original disciplines failed to reflexively apply their much-celebrated analytical tools to their own practice and assumptions. I argue that while cultural studies et al. are *trans*disciplinary in their intellectual focus, it is a rather shallow praxis which does not build deep IDP, because the building blocks are not present. We continue to focus on the epistemology of the other, rather than the discovery which results. The research tools are the subject of critique, rather than the outcomes. It is in the shift by which we focus on and value the outcomes enabled by diverse epistemologies and pedagogies that we foster IDP, simply by a show of faith in the disciplinary choice and passion of another scholar and their capacity, and that of their discipline, to bring their own measures to rigour and excellence. The fundamental building block of IDP is to recognise that all disciplines pursue rigour, but that we lack the capacity to assess the rigour of another discipline's epistemological tools. Yet the entrenched and often fierce territoriality of disciplinarity renders this process extremely difficult.

This is a crucial point in relation to the project of embedding EfS in HE. What if this territoriality of which Gudz speaks is in fact a reflection of a deep values commitment to EfS, which

reacts with defensiveness and hostility, often mistaken for disciplinary hubris, to the less integrated expressions of sustainability studies? These variations in approach to the core values position and content of EfS have been described by Selby as the 'firm and shaky ground' of EfS (Selby 2006).

We have seen that IDP is considered to be definitive of EfS and that the core scholarships which must characterise sustainability studies – integration, values, deep learning approaches, rely on interdisciplinarity for their implementation. So while the challenges and absence in IDP might be the agony of EfS, there too we might find the ecstasy, in the deepest, most enabling means to not only integrate the core knowledges of sustainability, but to honour the deepest sense of EfS through our ethics of practice, enquiry and delivery of knowledge.

While there is much disquiet expressed in the literature as to the effects of the negative traits of IDP, equally this insight offers us the way forward. The authentic practice of EfS, and of sustainability more generally, throws into relief the qualities and values which underpin a meaningful interdisciplinarity; deep sustainability by definition cannot be practiced any other way. This is the urgent and emerging theme pursued by many in sustainability studies – we must do sustainability in a way that is consistent with what it asks of the world; we must model it, but not merely in a pragmatic, instrumental way. The deep values of sustainability must be visible and resonant in EfS practitioners, in moral and ethical terms. We must be clear as to the ways in which EfS will characterise academic practice and all the activities of universities. This is much more than practicing what we preach. It is engaging with and opening to questions about just how inflections of sustainability will reshape and redefine life as we know it. In terms of IDP, we have clear ways forward, much more so if we are drawing deeply on a sustainability ethic of practice as our (inter) disciplinary base. In seeking ways in which sustainability might be deeply embedded in higher education operations, Gudz speaks of the inclusion of sustainability and EfS goals in universities' academic and strategic plans, meaning that HEI should have aspirational goals as well as dated targets and outcomes (Gudz 2004). I would suggest that this expression of the 'shared endeavour' Gudz seeks should also inform our local, communities of practice around research and teaching. Aspirational goals are admirable and necessary but they do not often result in short term concrete outcomes. An aspirational goal of a more deeply thoughtful IDP needs to be grounded, through explicit means by which that practice will be implemented and measured. What are our objectives for IDP? How do we seek to fulfill them? How do we measure our success? Along with research outcomes and the ticking off of goals of sustainability studies, surely we must include the expressive well-being of our colleagues, the sense of democratic process and epistemological respect which must be characteristic of deep interdisciplinarity? I argue that such a focus will move us much more surely and steadily to our higher EfS goals. We must offer the open engagement and acceptance of disciplines and scholarly practices with epistemologies we might find impenetrable or wholly bizarre. We cannot seriously achieve a goal of embedding sustainability across all disciplines until we meaningfully and respectively engage with the knowledge forms and practices of those disciplines.

How do we characterise our engagements to demonstrate respect and acceptance, even where the cultures of other disciplines are so foreign and even threatening? Gudz has already articulated the forms of an interdisciplinary engagement characterised by sustainability value and ethical practice. IDP involves planning our dialogue, to be 'non-adversarial', facilitated to demonstrate a level belief in the equal value of all disciplines, in order to 'generate trust and encourage diversity'. No judgments may be made of the approach to enquiry or the aspects of a phenomenon on which each discipline chooses to focus. If philosophy scholars choose the logic of sustainability, psychologists focus on construct validity and literary studies scholars on identity, these enquiries will all still produce outcomes which contribute to the maturing EfS discipline and project. So much more is enabled than diverse triangulation and multiple

outcomes of scholarly projects. The tools to a deep interdisciplinarity are forged. The excitement generated through a deep, collegial engagement on shared goals and projects enables bigger vision and creates the climate in which we become braver, hungrier scholars. Those enquiries which may progress only through the depth of IDP are enabled. An integrated IDP is modeled to students, thereby enabling the normalisation of an interdisciplinarity which not only addresses the issues of (lack of) belonging and intellectual community, but which will create the 'urgent intellectual capital' which will most likely – and meaningfully – address situated, real-world problems. Sustainability – and education for it – is incumbent on academics. Reflective, permeable IDP is crucial to the realisation of sustainability and its goals.

Notes

1. Derived from the Sustainable Living Festival, Federation Square, Melbourne February 2007.

Notes on contributor

Kathryn Hegarty is a Research Fellow at RMIT University where she has worked since 1995, while also working at various times as a secondary English, ESL and Careers teacher. Her roles have involved change projects in relation to tertiary learning and teaching, equity admissions in higher education, theorisations of academic identity and subjectivity, research training practice and university governance. Kathryn received her doctoral degree (on conflicting class identities for academic women) in 2004. Kathryn's current research focuses on broad notions of sustainability in relation to curriculum development, graduate attributes, assessment and the role and purpose of universities in social democratic states. Kathryn is currently involved in projects on academic identity and the self-constructs which academics bring to their roles, the ways in which those constructs and assumptions are formed, and the implications for learning and teaching in higher education.

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