

## 'WHATEVER HAPPENED TO INTERDISCIPLINARITY?' A CASE STUDY OF TEN YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT OF INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years the two introductory core units in education in the Diploma of Teaching (Secondary) being offered on the Kelvin Grove Campus were developed and taught as interdisciplinary issue based units. The development of the units, Teachers and Learners and School, Community and Society, was based on a particular view of knowledge arising out of much of Bernstein's (1975) early work.

This paper looks at the development of these units, the philosophy inherent in their construction; the constraints and possibilities associated with their teaching over the ten year period and finally their demise in 1989. It argues that there is a nexus between pedagogic and social structures and much of the resistance to interdisciplinary programs comes about as a result of resistance to alternative social and organizational structures.

### THE RISE AND FALL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES AT KELVIN GROVE

The two core units in the first year were developed by a team of three lecturers, one from each of the areas of psychology, sociology and philosophy of education. Due to resistance from some academics, the units were not as innovative as originally envisaged. The focus was to be on a central issue or problem but even the attempt to turn topics into questions was a hard fought battle. The issues were to a large extent dictated by students' comments on previous evaluation reports. They wanted to know more about what was going on in schools and felt that the material should relate particularly to adolescents. Table 1 and Table 2 set out the problems areas for each of the units.

These were an exciting if overworked ten years as on many fronts a great measure of success was being experienced. The most positive and rewarding feedback came from students.

**Benefits to Students** Students became more aware of the range of questions one needs to ask when dealing with complex phenomena in schools and education. They were exposed to the three key disciplines underpinning the units but were also exposed to the artificiality of disciplinary boundaries. They observed scholarly (and sometimes not so scholarly) controversy in action and discovered that scholarship is dynamic and open to opposing views. They were encouraged to actively participate in open debate and at times the atmosphere was quite electric. Traditional models of instruction which led students to view learning as a solitary process were turned upside down as lecturers used simulation games, case studies, role plays and hypotheticals to encourage students to a deeper involvement with the issues. The assessment became more challenging as students were sent out to do studies of adolescents in context and community research projects and then shared their knowledge.

Table 1: Learners and Teachers Unit Module

1: The Student's View of the World

What is an adolescent?

How do adolescents view the world?

How do adolescents think?

What should adolescents know about their  
body?

Module 2: Socialization of Adolescents

How much influence do your parents  
have over you?

How important is the adolescent peer group?

Is pop culture a  
significant influence?

Are adolescent boys and girls different?

Module 3: The

Teacher's View of the World

Do teachers and adolescents have different views?

Do

teachers like students?

Is teaching a 9-3 job?

Module 4: Schooling for

Adolescents

How effectively are Queensland Schools meeting the needs and  
interests of adolescents?

Would it help to organize schools differently?

Is

leaving school more difficult for some groups than others?

Table 2: School Community and Society Unit Module

1: School, Family and the Community

What influence does the family have over what happens at school?

Who decides or controls what happens at school?

What part should the community play in the life of the school?

What interpersonal skills are required of teachers in the 1980s?

Module

2: Class, Individuals and Culture

Am I prejudiced?

What is an Australian?

Should schooling take account of sexism in Australian society?

Are kids all the same no matter what school they come from?

Module

3: Teachers in their Social Context

Are Queensland teachers a special breed?

Can teachers teach anything they like?

Module

4: School, Curriculum and the Future

Why stay on at school anyway?

How does it feel to come last?

What will schools of the future be like?

In addition to the innovative content and methodological approach one of the long range benefits was that of establishing a different relationship between students and lecturers. Students participated in a dynamic learning process with their lecturers on both a cognitive and affective level.

Professional development of lecturers For a few lecturers the pressure to change not only the content of their lectures but also their approach - and all open to peer scrutiny (lecturers worked in interdisciplinary teams of three with seventy to ninety students) - was too demanding. Others were excited by the potential for growth. In the early days almost two thirds of the team were part-time but towards the end of the 80s there were few part-time lecturers

involved. Through an aggressive policy in the Department of Education Studies aimed at employing lecturers who were committed to teaching in this way an excellent gender balance and the beginnings of a more interesting ethnic mix developed. The involvement of lecturers from different cultural backgrounds had a great impact on the mainstreaming of social justice issues. Regular workshops were held to share and develop expertise.

Development of Curricular Material With an interdisciplinary approach being developed in the Australian context a need was expressed for Resource books covering the range of issues. These were to provide students with background information present a framework for lecturers participating in the units for the first time. The books included material written by lecturers (both articles and exercises), papers from outside sources and photographs taken to illustrate key points. The Student Union provided funds for an art student to illustrate the book. An increasing number of student contributions were included as the books were updated each year and the price was kept low as they were sold without profit.

So what happened? Why was it that in 1990 the two units disappeared? especially in that despite early compromises a great deal seemed to have been achieved and prospects for the future looked bright?

#### INTERDISCIPLINARITY: PEDAGOGY AGAINST SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Educationalists are inclined to treat arguments about interdisciplinarity in terms of the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of disciplinary versus interdisciplinary approaches. We are also inclined to interpret the increasingly documented phenomena of resistance in terms of a battle between those who hold competing pedagogic frameworks. However our experiences at Kelvin Grove have led us to believe that Bernstein and others have a major contribution to make towards an understanding of such resistance, with their assertion that pedagogy and social structure and values about social structure are intimately interrelated. Thus resistance to the introduction of interdisciplinary courses may in large part be due not so much to resistance to the logic of interdisciplinary work but rather to the implications that interdisciplinarity has for social structure in general and for the social structure of teaching institutions in particular.

The Conventional Debate The concept of interdisciplinarity itself is problematic in that there is no generally accepted definition. Most discussions accept the presumption that it builds on the disciplines but 'goes beyond the disciplines' and involves some sort of synthesis or integration (Newell, 1982: in Simon, 1988: 7).

Jantsch (1980) argues that words relating to disciplinarity may be arranged in a hierarchy of notions, starting with multi-disciplinarity moving through interdisciplinarity till we reach transdisciplinarity. Multi-disciplinarity is seen as a grouping of various disciplines without any attempt at synthesis. Any synthesis that may occur is left to the discretion or creative ability of the student. Interdisciplinarity aims to establish a new level of discourse. There is close interaction among two or more disciplines as they offer differing perspectives on problems or issues.

In this hierarchy interdisciplinarity is the intermediate concept. There are two interconnected aspects of this concept that need to be looked at more closely specifically in relation to teacher education programmes. The first relates to the holistic approach to knowledge and the second emphasizes the

position that interdisciplinarity starts with a question that cannot be answered by a single discipline. Our premise was that the interactions between teachers and pupils must be looked at holistically and that no one discipline can answer the questions that arise from these interactions. Despite the views of many critics such synthesis is not an easy task. It is one of the higher order skills on Bloom's taxonomy and this integrated perspective is the goal outcome from an interdisciplinary approach.

The conventional debate on interdisciplinarity to a large extent then revolves around the structure of knowledge and the pedagogy linked to different structures.

**Interdisciplinarity and Social Structures** An obvious problem inherent in the integration of knowledge is that no one subject is dominant, thus changing the focus away from teachers as subject specialist to one where the teacher has to examine "the idea which is relating him (sic) to other teachers" (Bernstein, 1975:71). Bernstein alluded to the changed complementary relationship of subjects as potentially threatening to teachers. In continuing in the 1970's to explore the implications of the movement to an integrated curricula, he argued that the social consequences of this shift will bring about disturbances in the traditional authority relationships in educational institutions and that as we move from collection to integration, the moral basis of our educational choices will become explicit and we must expect a considerable conflict of values. The less rigid social structure of the integrated code make it a potential code for egalitarian education.

When describing how such courses were to be implemented Bernstein stressed a number of factors that needed to be taken into account. Not only must there be some consensus about the integrating idea if it is to work at all but the "idea" also must be made very explicit. The nature of the linkage between the idea and the several contents must be systematically and coherently worked out. This should be done by a committee system of staff and pupils specifically set up to develop a sensitive control on the whole endeavour. Finally and of greatest importance very clear criteria of evaluation must be worked out.

#### RESISTANCE TO INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

If Bernstein's views have validity, the issue of interdisciplinarity constitutes not just a debate between cognitive frameworks but rather a debate between people entrenched in one social structure resisting the development of another. Some of these resisters do not understand the new structure and attempt to interpret the new delivery systems in terms of the current social structures. Others do intuitively understand that interdisciplinarity will bring about a new social structure and therefore overtly resist it. We need to turn now to this resistance.

At Kelvin Grove there were two clearly interrelated arenas in which resistance to interdisciplinarity developed. The first relates to methodological or epistemological constraints and the second to institutional or structural constraints.

**The Methodological/Epistemological Constraints Arena** An ongoing debate simmered as to the actual content of these units. One of the greatest concerns expressed by lecturers during the development process was the failure to identify a core set of concepts, theories or disciplinary tools which needed to be addressed by every student. One senior academic argued that "by identifying and teaching such basic content we can ensure that students are able to make

the transition from (first) to (second) level subjects without glaring gaps in their basic learning". (Discussion Paper 27.4.83). The Psychology Department went further and drew up a proposed course covering what they argued should be in one of the compulsory core units: 1. The Bases of developmental psychology; 2. Determinants of development; 3. Theories of development; 4. Physiological change of puberty; 5. Cognitive development; 6. Social-emotional development; 7. Moral development.

The difference in approach was glaringly self-evident. To complicate matters further, where these new units were arguing for the freeing up of the assessment system the Psychology Department was highlighting the move towards competency based approaches and more uniform testing that was becoming evident in the US. Differences of opinion over assessment were never settled.

During this period various memorandum and discussion papers flowed between Departments particularly relating to the fear disciplines had of being weakened. In an attempt to set this view out in the open the Preamble to one paper included the following comment "It is also important to note that this proposal does not have as a hidden agenda, the identification of the Psychology Department as a separate entity, but has as its main focus, an attempt to satisfy the needs of pre-service teacher education students in terms of the knowledge and skills that research indicates are necessary and important" (Psychology Department, 1983: 1).

There were a number of academics in each department who were committed to the concept and were viewed by others as being "'defectors' from their discipline" (Jantsch, 1980: 311). Some lecturers never felt comfortable about not establishing a clear disciplinary base before asking the interdisciplinary questions so teams continually battled with those whose preoccupation with covering the intellectual territory of their own discipline resulted in too little time to encourage rigorous critical thinking. And of course as Heller (1988a p A4) so aptly puts it the "questions of trendiness, lack of intellectual rigour and blurry methodologies" had to be continually faced. In our case the units were often accused of being "mickey mouse courses" especially by those who either did not teach on the units or were teaching them reluctantly. Teams with reluctant members often used in effect a multi-disciplinary approach, that is, lecturers merely divided up the course and taught their own disciplinary material.

Interdisciplinary work disturbs conventional academic social structures with its egalitarian assumptions and the way it ignores the boundaries and hierarchies of traditional academic roles. It simultaneously challenges epistemological and social structures by essentially questioning the dominance, validity and autonomy of each members' disciplinary models and assumptions. In short it rams people together and cuts across the normal practice of privacy in teaching. The result is that differences are brought out into the open sometimes with dramatic effect. In our case there were some spectacular clashes in the area of sexism in the classroom (which led to a flurry of publications denouncing the differing approaches) and in the area of racism and multiculturalism (which led to some unplanned heated debates among lecturers). The students reacted generally with enthusiasm to the way these lectures "lived" and reports came back from the canteen of students debating the issues avidly and those who had not "had those lectures yet" waiting for them keenly. A minority of students expressed disapproval and argued that in the name of objectivity lecturers should keep their views to themselves and not "confuse the students". However value differences underlying different epistemologies did help to compound the emotions generated by purely cognitive differences and

hence increased implicit tension. A small number of lecturers felt increasingly threatened by the whole exercise.

The Institutional/Structural Arena Institutional structures and processes provide an overall architecture which shapes interactions in a way which reinforces or conflicts with interdisciplinarity. As Heller (1988b p A12) argues, changing a specialised curriculum involves "equal doses of academic politics and educational philosophy" and that change is usually stalled by competing interests.

A number of factors are important:

1. Spatial architecture: At Kelvin Grove the various disciplinary teaching units were housed in different buildings and never met socially.
2. Reward Systems: our experience echoed that of Anderson (1988) - research and promotional structures place pressure on academics to expand their expertise in very limited areas.
3. Administrative commitments: academics at colleges were chronically overworked; interdisciplinarity made enormous competing demands for joint planning and delivery systems.

In the face of physical, budgetary, and intellectual compartmentalization interdisciplinary programmes require protection and mentoring from powerful figures within the system. At Kelvin Grove the Department Head who had mentored the system was promoted at about the same time that two other key figures moved out of the system. Without the advocacy of these figures the units were overwhelmed by both epistemological and structural forces and were ultimately abandoned.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DELIVERY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY UNITS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

In summary while much of the overt debate on the units at Kelvin Grove took place at the level of discourse on alternative pedagogies, in hindsight the explanation offered by Bernstein for such conflict is much more persuasive. There were clear indications that many of those involved found their social frameworks and the traditional relationships between them, their colleagues and their students threatened. Under such conditions interdisciplinarity will survive only when there are at least two forces present. First, current structures must confront a crisis of confidence if they are to unfreeze as they did in the early 1970s when the relevance of narrow and elite disciplinarity was challenged by students, and interdisciplinarity gained momentum. If Levine and Hirsch (HES 1990: 14) are accurate Western universities are about to face a revival of student interest in the relevance of courses. Second, such units need to be placed under senior and powerful mentors if they are to survive strong forces of resistance within the system.

In the final analysis there is a need to increasingly unpack and attempt to understand the intimate relationship between pedagogy, the structure of knowledge, the social structure and the values held about that social structure.

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