

WITHIN, AMONG, BETWEEN: THREE FACES OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

(Extended Abstract)

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Introduction

The concept of "discipline" is a recent one in the history of ideas, but it has attained enormous influence over the organization and production of knowledge (Klein 1993). As we have come to understand it, the term connotes "subdivision"-that is, the separateness of various knowledge fields. The theme of CAIS '95, however, is the connectedness of information, systems, people and organizations. Can these two ways of looking at knowledge--the unity of information and the separateness of disciplines--work together harmoniously? Today, I hope to acquaint you with some of the complexities of the problem. One way of harmonizing connectedness and disciplinarity is to suggest that interdisciplinarity is the means by which we apprehend links among all the various factors that shape the world today, including our own profession. In my view, the more specialized our institutions and information needs become, the more cross- fertilization and outside stimulation we need to stay current and connected. The more gathering together we can do, the more relevant our in-depth specializations will become.

Disciplinarity

Disciplinarity can be characterized along a number of dimensions. For many people, the academic disciplines like chemistry, history, art, or sociology come to mind first. But other ways of subdividing the world of knowledge are equally cogent and equally current.

We may helpfully divide disciplines into those that produce knowledge and those that provide knowledge. Our own discipline of information science is alone in the first category of information-providing disciplines. In addition, our discipline also belongs to the category of information-producing disciplines, this time not as a class of one, but as one member of a group. Our work as information scientists is

twofold: first, we try to find efficient and effective ways of providing information to and for diverse groups. But, second, information science, like every other discipline, produces information of its own for its own use. Our ostensible work is to create ways of providing information to people in every possible situation. At the same time, we must create knowledge for ourselves.

Interdisciplinarity Using This Analysis

We may think of the various relationships this analysis creates in three ways: those within LIS itself; those among all the knowledge-seeking disciplines, including LIS; and those between LIS and every other field of knowledge production, utilization and practical action.

First, we are proud of interdisciplinarity within LIS. As evidence, we can point to interactions among computer science, library science, documentation, and the various behavioural sciences that we have melded into a discipline of our own. Anything that is informative--and that includes everything in the actual world and in the world of the imagination--can be studied as information. This is obviously a broad definition, but what would be the point of a narrow definition? It is hard to see how we would be serving our own interests or those of our sister disciplines by taking a narrow view of information, and, by extension, of what counts as information studies.

The reality, however, is that it would be easy to take a narrow view. We come from different disciplinary, intellectual and employment backgrounds, and we are not strangers to the territoriality that comes with specialization and "expertise". It seems likely that we are not as connected to each other as we could be. In my view, interdisciplinarity within LIS is what makes it possible for us to understand and to address the interdisciplinary needs of other fields.

We may next consider interdisciplinarity among all the information- and knowledge-creating disciplines, including LIS. This is a much-studied phenomenon. Some mergings between existing disciplines have become commonplace and have their own names, for example, ethnomusicology, bio-ethics, folk taxonomy, or psychohistory. Other interdisciplinary fields are less

familiar. For example, there is no term for collaboration between historians and climatologists, but the two fields have much to offer each other (Rabb 1980). Those involved in these fields need information and creative methods of attaining it.

Finally, we may address relationships among LIS and every other field of knowledge and action. Here, we find two characteristic kinds of relationships between ourselves and other fields of knowledge and action. First, cross-pollination does not occur equally between our field and others (e.g., Gatten 1991). Second, however, the literature of our discipline is widely scattered (e.g., Yerkey and Glogowski 1989).

A number of ironies seem to follow from the three faces of interdisciplinarity. We are in the best position of all the disciplines to use knowledge created by others for our own ends, but do we habitually do so? We work constantly with information in its "raw" form of a monograph, a research report, an article, a data bank, a statistical analysis. We do not, however, always absorb for our own uses the information that we handle every day. We are also expert organizers of information. But we don't learn as much as we could from the systems we create. Nor do we always highly value our own expertise. We don't make sure that others know what we do.

We need to address these issues because interdisciplinarity is growing. Clyde Kluckhohn once called the field of anthropology "an intellectual poaching license" (quoted in Geertz 1980, 167). This description now seems to fit almost every field of knowledge. How can we help foster connections through our information expertise? We have made valuable beginnings (e.g., Denno 1987; Walker 1990; Tijssen 1992), but much work remains.

Problems for Interdisciplinary Research

Of course, there are problems, both intellectual and non-intellectual, to be overcome. One problem is how to evaluate interdisciplinary work, and one practical result of this problem is the difficulty of funding it. The information professions have a particular stake in making sure that interdisciplinary research

is excellent in concept and design and that it can be judged by rigorous standards.

Conclusion

Some (e.g., Emteen 1981) value the interdisciplinary trend, but others argue against the eroding of disciplinary boundaries (e.g., Kertzer, et al. 1986). It is not necessary to agree with each other to realize that the challenges provided to our profession by, for example, the exponential growth of Internet resources, constitute an unprecedented opportunity to influence every aspect of the world of knowledge. To increase our commitment to the "creative marginality" (Dogan and Pahre, 1990) of interdisciplinarity is to ensure the prominence of our profession in the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

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