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Identifying strengths and challenges in interdisciplinary graduate supervision

Abstract: This poster introduces the methodology and presents preliminary results from a pilot study of faculty, student, and administrator perspectives on graduate supervision in an interdisciplinary environment. The research team surveyed doctoral students and conducted in-depth interviews, focus groups, and reflective exercises with graduate students and faculty at one Canadian university.

Résumé : Cette affiche présente la méthodologie et les résultats préliminaires d'une étude pilote auprès de professeurs, d'étudiants et d'administrateurs quant à leurs perspectives sur la supervision d'étudiants en contexte interdisciplinaire. Les chercheurs ont sondé des doctorants et ont mené des entrevues en profondeur, des groupes de discussion et des exercices de réflexion avec des étudiants et des professeurs d'une université canadienne.

Acknowledging that the search for creative and innovative solutions to complex problems is best addressed through collaborative efforts, Canadian research funding agencies and research-intensive universities are increasingly encouraging interdisciplinary research projects and graduate programs that draw upon concepts, methods and expertise from a variety of disciplinary areas. Interdisciplinarity is a particularly salient issue in LIS, where arguments have long been made (e.g., Smith 1992, McNichol 2002, Holland 2008) that the field is exceptionally dynamic and interdisciplinary. There has been a great deal of attention in LIS to the needs and challenges of interdisciplinary scholars (e.g., Palmer and Neuman 2002), and Haythorthwaite et al (1999) note that interdisciplinarity poses particular challenges to students preparing to be researchers and teachers in library and information science (LIS). However, there has been surprisingly little attention, either in LIS and elsewhere, to the challenges of interdisciplinarity in graduate supervision (Spelt, 2009).

While the supervisory relationship is the backbone of most graduate research programs, current research focuses on faculty development programs for supervisors of graduate students (McCormack & Pamphilon 2004), conditions that encourage interdisciplinary work for students and supervisors (Spelt et al 2009) and challenges for students (Mitrany and Stokos 2005, Golde & Gallagher 1999). Graduate supervision remains a poorly understood phenomenon (Grant 2005). This may be due, in part, to the fact that the relationship between supervisor and student has been considered "essentially privatized and personalized" and traditionally conducted behind "closed doors" (Lee and Green 1995, McWilliam and Palmer 1995). There is limited research examining institutional challenges on interdisciplinary supervision-related challenges and successes for supervisors. Recent research has called for the development of

comprehensive criteria appropriate for assessing the quality of interdisciplinary work (Boix-Mansilla 2005, Wickson et al 2006), processes to help students advocate for working in interdisciplinary ways, and exploring institutional frameworks to facilitate university-wide discussions for modifications to allow improved practices (Manathunga et al 2006, Mitrany and Stokols 2005, Mitchell and Willetts 2009).

The research team's own anecdotal experience with interdisciplinary graduate supervision suggests that, among other things, it may include cross-disciplinary co-supervision; varying expectations in terms of timelines, practices, and paperwork; multiple theoretical orientations within supervisory committees, and epistemological and paradigmatic tensions across disciplines. This poster describes the methodology and report initial findings from a pilot study of interdisciplinary graduate supervision at a large Canadian research university.

Our three major research questions are:
- How do interdisciplinary supervisory relationships unfold?
- How are epistemological and paradigmatic borders negotiated?
- What structures support and constrain the practice of interdisciplinary graduate supervision?

This poster reports results from three methods of data collection that took place between January and April of 2011.

1. Survey of current doctoral students. The survey gathered basic demographic information including program, research topic, the interdisciplinary nature of the project, the student's stage in the program, and whether she or he would be interested in participating in an interview.

2. Preliminary semi-structured interviews with 20 students selected from the survey respondents, 20 faculty active in interdisciplinary supervision, and 10 administrators in academic units hosting interdisciplinary graduate programs or students. Guiding questions for interviews included:
   - How did you become involved in interdisciplinary research?
   - Tell me about your experiences working as a graduate student/supervisor in your graduate program(s) in an interdisciplinary way.
   - What has gone well?
   - What could have gone better?

Interviews were audio-recorded and are being transcribed and member-checked for accuracy.

3. Focus group sessions held in April 2011 as part of a half-day session designed to bring participants together to further discuss the themes and issues that we identified arose in our review of the literature or that arose in the preliminary interviews. We used a variety of innovative data collection methods at this session, including
   - Focus group discussions with students (led by student members of the research team) and faculty (led by faculty members of the team)

- A "graffiti wall" that displayed compelling excerpts from the interviews and invites participants to write their responses to them;
- A lunch during which the focus-group groups were dispersed to multiple tables, each hosted by a member of the research team, so that mealtime discussion could focus on the similarities and differences across focus groups.
- An imaging activity in which participants viewed and were invited to respond to visual images that reflected metaphors used in the interviews.

The poster reports on the use of these novel data collection methods and presents initial findings.

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