

*Syracuse University Graduate Research Symposium
MARCH 22, 2014*

Keynote Address

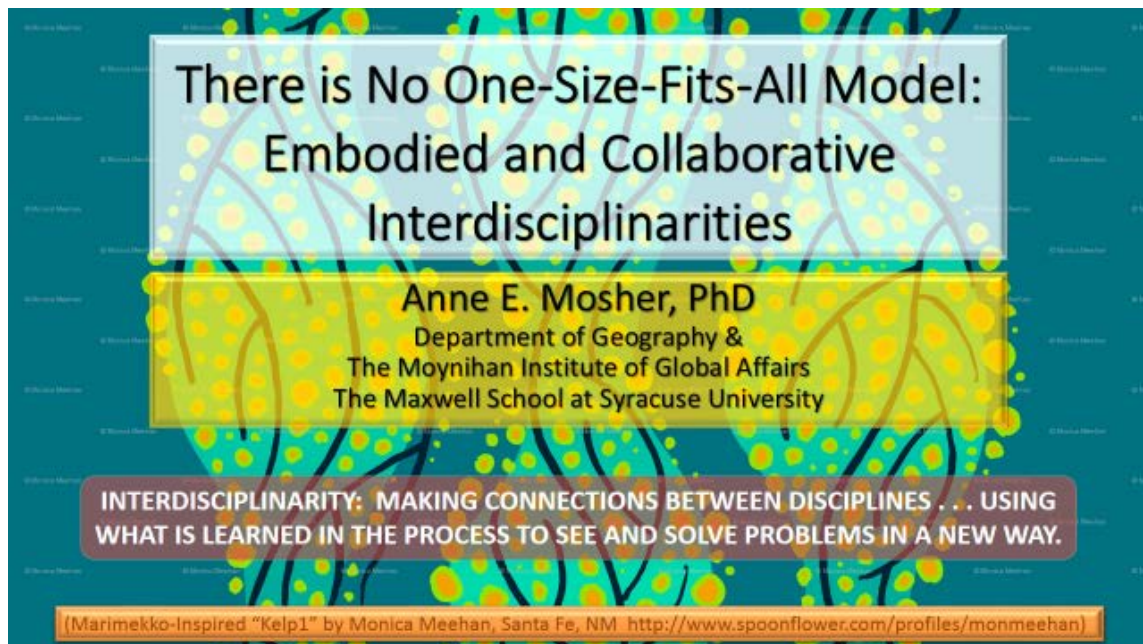
There is No One-Size-Fits-All Model: Embodied and Collaborative Interdisciplinarity

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*Sponsored by the Syracuse University Graduate Student Organization and the Syracuse
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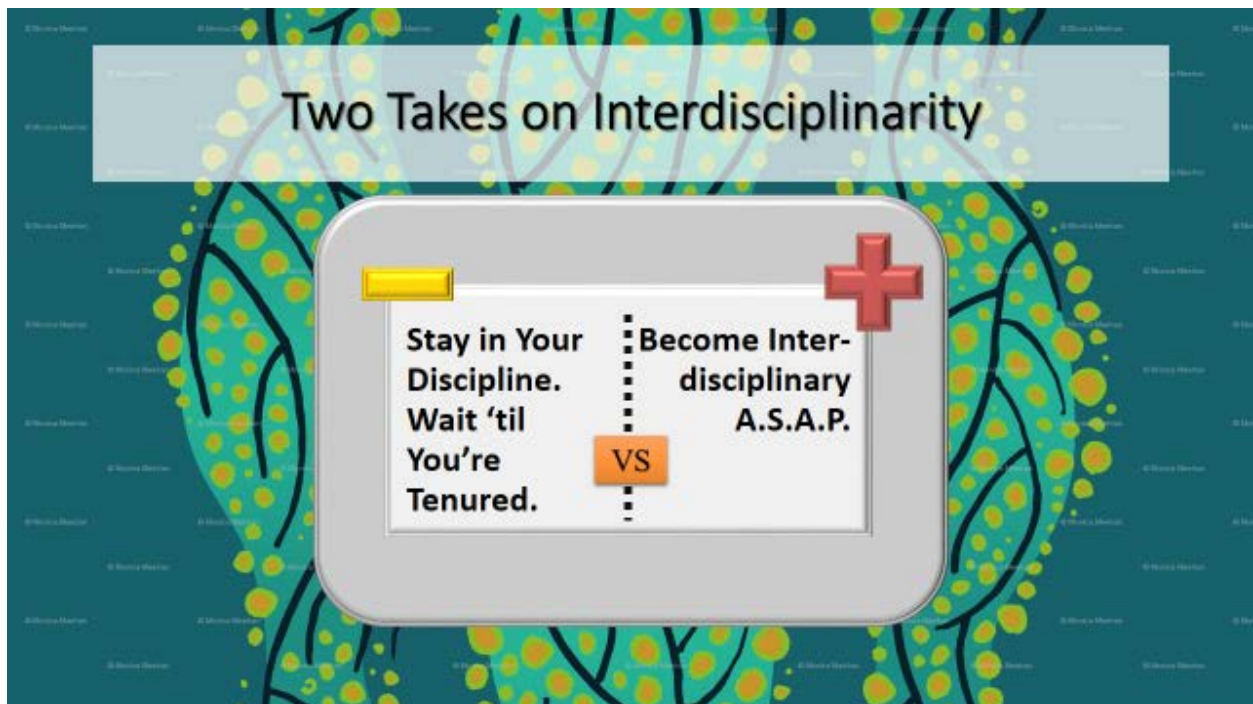
Interdisciplinarity has been a part of my life for a long time now. As an undergraduate, I dual majored in it.

I define interdisciplinarity as *the practice of making connections between disciplines and using what is learned in the process to see and solve problems in new ways*. I see it as being of two types: *embodied* and *collaborative*. My first undergraduate major—geography—exemplifies the first type.

Embodied interdisciplinarity encourages a single learner-researcher-teacher to explore the things that make their home discipline unique. They then are asked to become familiar with perspectives, methods, and concepts associated with another discipline . . . or two, three, or four. In my case, geography's uniqueness revolves around a combination of concerns for the process of "spatial thinking" as well as the concepts of space, place, landscape and human-environment relations. The other disciplines that I have gravitated toward are history, anthropology, sociology and, recently, political science. Therefore, I embody an interdisciplinarity that might be called socio-cultural-political historical geography. Even though geography-as-an-academic discipline is one of the most in-your-face examples of embodied interdisciplinarity, I'd like to suggest that most academic disciplines encourage something similar in the students they train at the Ph.D. level.

The other type is collaborative interdisciplinarity. I was exposed to this through my second undergraduate major: international studies. Not only did I take courses related to global issues and international affairs from a number of different departments (political science, history, anthropology, economics, Spanish, English, geography), but I also participated in team-taught seminars to see how different fields could put their heads together and talk to each

other about a common interest. It is this kind of interdisciplinarity I've since lived out in my professional life—working with historians, political scientists, archaeologists, engineers, architects, anthropologists, information science people, and environmental scientists. It is also the kind of interdisciplinarity about which the presenters are arguing in the two clips that Glenn just showed.¹



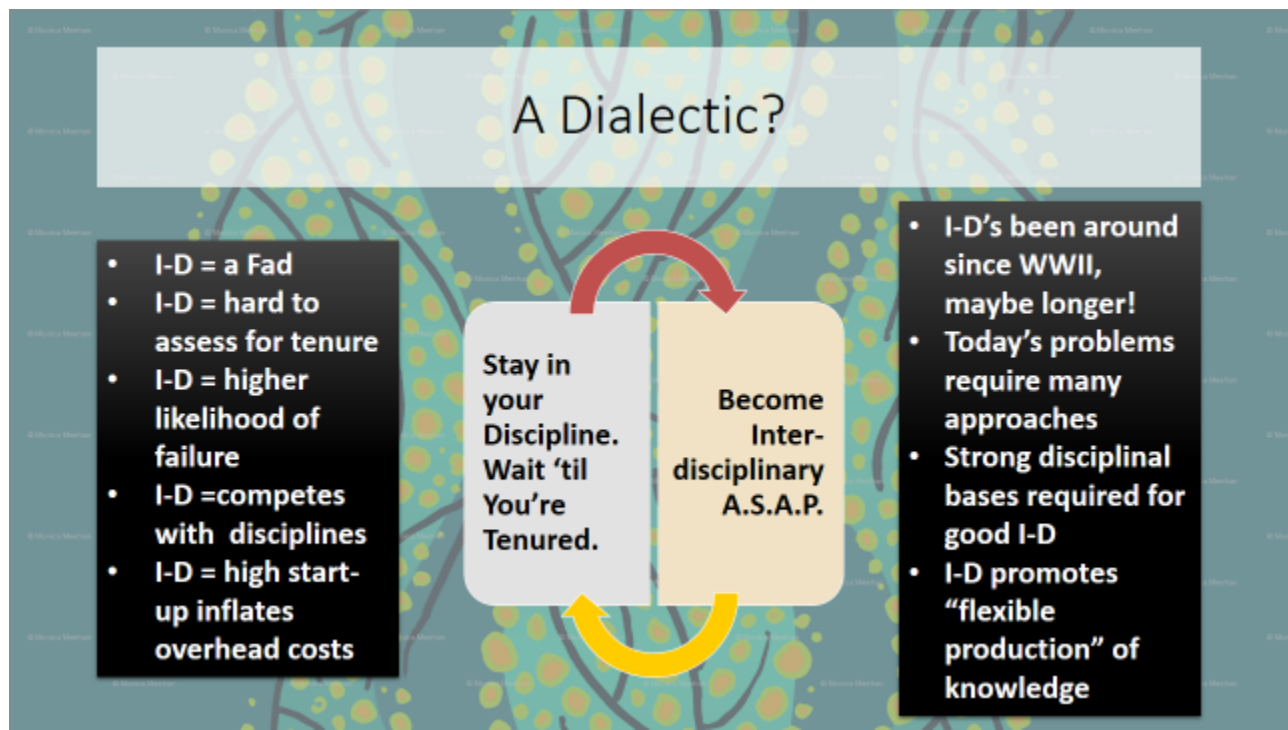
The issue the two speakers raised for graduate students concerns timing: when to start practicing collaborative interdisciplinarity. Now? As an early career or pre-tenure professional? Later? We heard two conflicting bits of advice:

1. Stay in your discipline. Wait 'til you're tenured.
2. Become interdisciplinary ASAP.

¹ [Challenges, Changes, and Opportunities in Scholarly Work and the Implications for Doctoral Student Preparation](#) 32:30-33:52

[How Big Changes in Higher Ed Are Changing Grad Students' Career Options](#) 37:42-39:47

I won't take sides, because I believe that both positions are both right and wrong. Instead, I'd like to explore this question: Do they constitute a dialectic?



As you undoubtedly know, a dialectic forms out of an ongoing relationship between two things that seem to be in tension with each other. Yet, these two things also need each other in order to exist. They are mutually constituted.

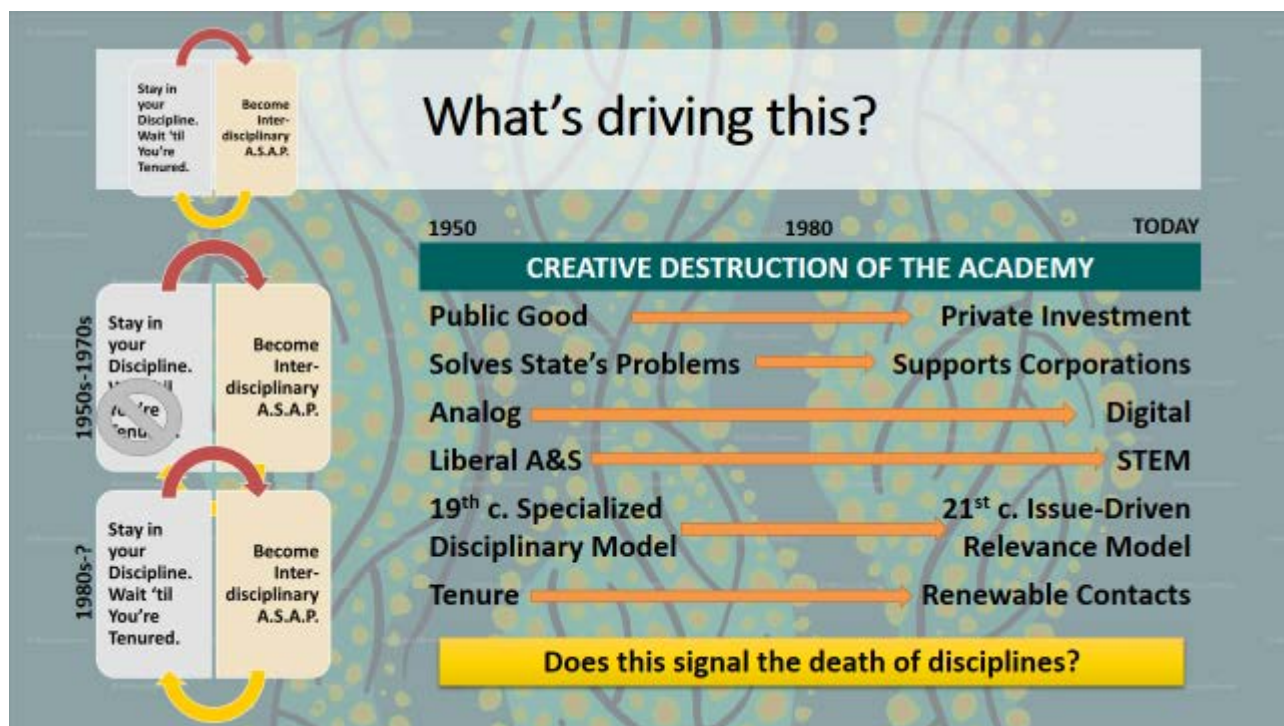
On one side of the dialectic, we have those in favor of interdisciplinarity—who believe that being in a single discipline, or attacking a problem from a single perspective, is going to be less effective in solving problems than if we adopt multiple perspectives or get many heads together. This side of the dialectic exists, therefore, in reaction to the downsides of disciplinarity.

On the other side, there's the disciplinarians—who believe that interdisciplinarity is not everything it's cracked up to be. They've witnessed it at work and here's their assessment: It's a fad with value that is hard to measure—particularly at tenure time. They contend that there's a higher likelihood for failure, that it presents administrative and institutional challenges, etc.

To which the other side has a rebuttal: 'We're no fad! Some things we are studying can't be tackled alone! Take for instance, climate change. Besides, we need you disciplines to train the people who are going to help us out. And the Administration thinks our position makes sense, because we can grab different researchers and put them to work on common problems and use that base to go after external funds in many different places and do it fast.'

And the other side counters. On and on it goes.

So my next question is . . . What's driving this dialectic into being?



I've been discussing this for a long time with Peg Hermann, the Director of the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs in the Maxwell School. Moynihan is an interdisciplinary unit with a number of ongoing projects, so in the course of that work we talk a lot about the relevance of interdisciplinarity.

Peg is also trained as both a clinical psychologist as well as a political scientist. She is the quintessential example of embodied interdisciplinarity.

What Peg has helped me see is that this debate about interdisciplinarity is nothing new—it morphs as it comes and goes and comes back again. For example, when she was a graduate student in the 1960s, one particular form of interdisciplinarity—“area” or “regional” studies— had been around for about a decade in response to the Cold War. “Urban studies” was also just emerging in response to the Civil Rights Movement. By 1980, however, these initiatives were being questioned. Were they needed? Should universities be funding them? Gradually, some area and regional studies as well as urban studies programs were closed. Today, the debate involves the wisdom of dedicating scarce university resources to new interdisciplinary initiatives that tackle pressing problems, like ‘sea level rise’ or ‘living in a post-peak oil world’ or ‘digitalization.’ Some within the academy and the funding community are in favor; others are against.

What that historical sequence leads me to believe is that the dialectic surrounding interdisciplinarity is driven by *the ongoing creative destruction of the academy*. Old things are being phased out in favor of the new. This list isn’t exhaustive, but here are some examples.

- From the 1950s to 1970s, university education was considered a public good.
- Academic researchers were largely funded by the state.
- Students were encouraged to take a liberal arts and science curriculum.
- Academic units were organized around a 19th-century Germanic disciplinary structure.
- Academic freedom and job security were protected by tenure.

Around about 1980, that began change—and change fast. Tax revolts, starting in California, questioned public expenditures. Should taxpayers be subsidizing wealth creation in individuals?

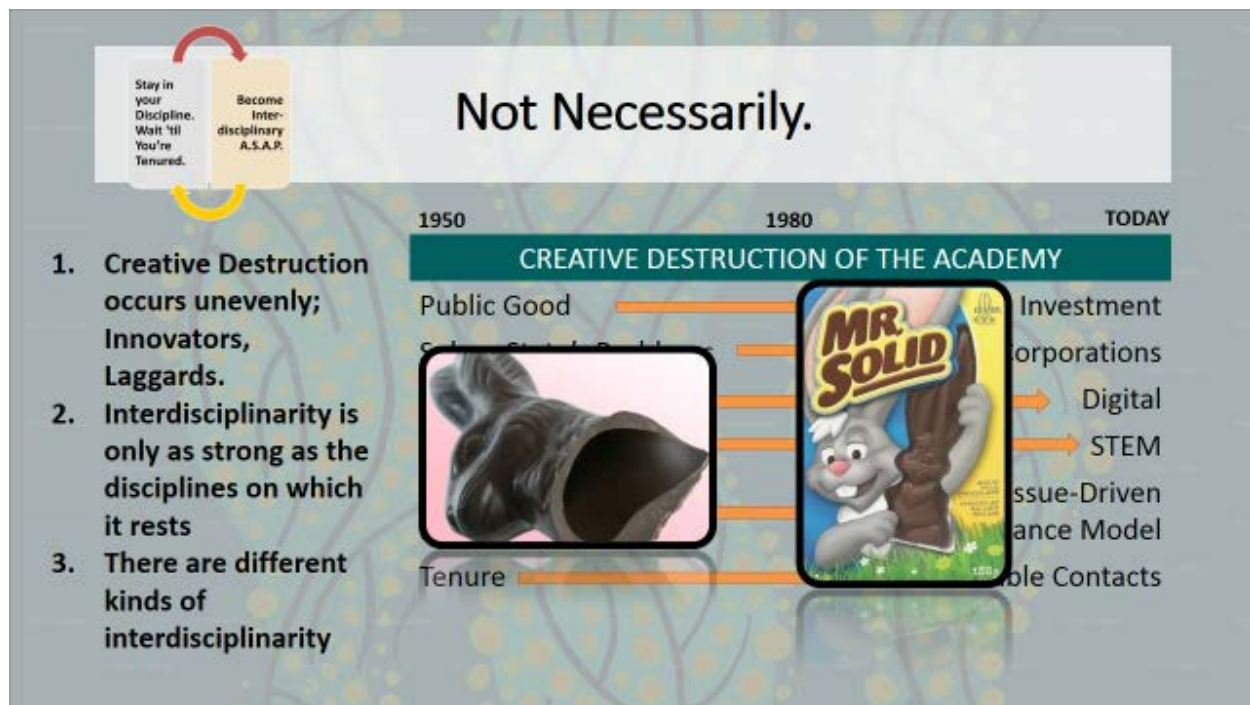
Shouldn't parents and students be paying for Higher Ed themselves, given the higher salaries that would eventually be earned with a university degree? Shouldn't parents and students be paying the state back in full?

And with that, a number of additional changes kicked in.

- More university research was conducted in support of the private and not-for-profit sectors with funding *from* the private and not-for-profit sectors.
- Universities faced the challenges of incorporating new digital information technologies into existing campus infrastructure.
- The humanities came under siege with the rise of STEM.
- Relevance became the word of the day.
- Taking cues from the business world, university administrations began implementing more flexible hiring practices and thus started limiting the role of tenure.

We could probably spend an hour alone talking about the ways in which these transitions have fed into the “interdisciplinary dialectic.” Nevertheless, I think the “Wait ‘Til You’re Tenured” stance on interdisciplinarity is part of these shifts. In some fields (and at some universities), discipline-based departments are pitted in stiff competition with interdisciplinary centers and institutes for resources. In fact, in some places, it is the overhead generated by the centers and institutes that subsidizes the continued existence of departments. Some worry: does this signal the death of disciplines?

My answer is: not necessarily.

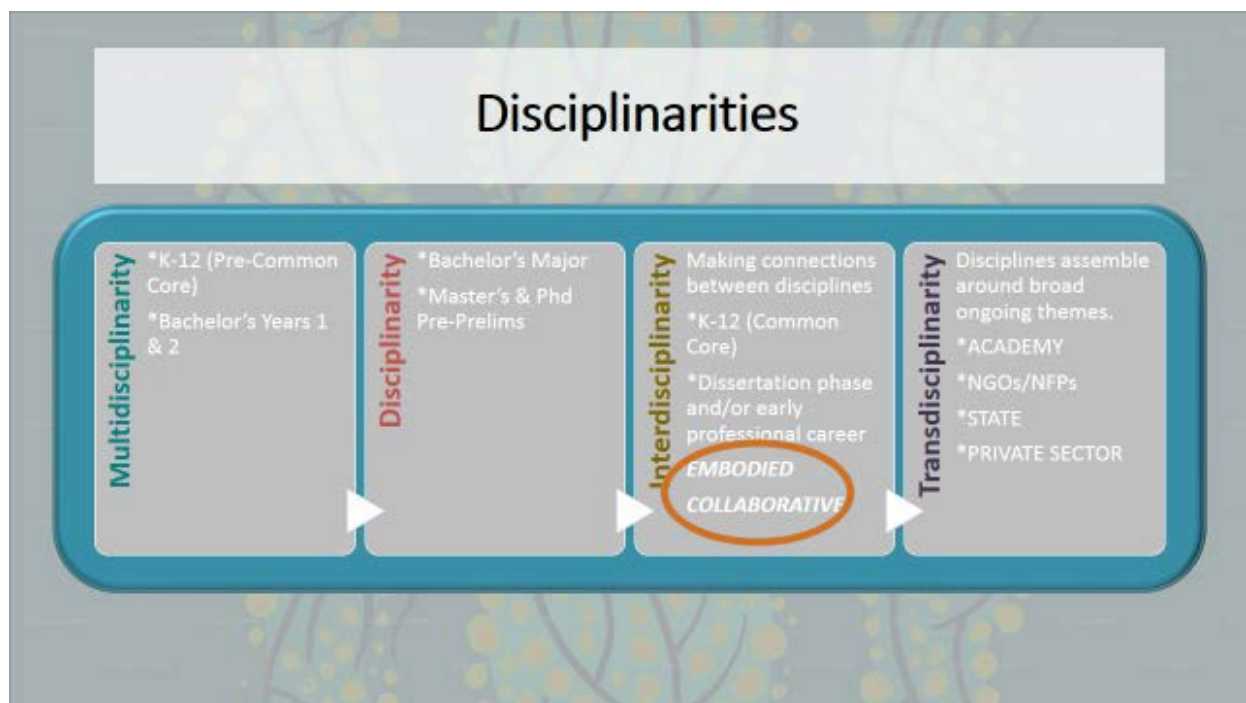


First, I study the geography of creative destruction. What I've learned about creative destruction in the process is that it is not quite as inexorable and all-encompassing as Josef Schumpeter's gale-force rendition seems to suggest. Some institutions are going to be Innovators and get rid of the old quite quickly. Others will wait around and see how things pan out, and be Laggards who learn from the mistakes of the Innovators and the Early and Late Majorities in the process. However, they run risk being "too late to the party" in the high stakes competition between colleges and universities that now exists in the U.S. There will also be other schools that simply do not have the resources or the intestinal administrative fortitude it takes to move to a more interdisciplinary university model. They will never change and could become anachronisms.

Second, the directors of most institutes, centers, and interdisciplinary degree programs will tell you that the quality of interdisciplinary work that can be accomplished under their purview rests on the strength of the discipline-based departments from which their units draw. How can you have interdisciplinarity if the participants aren't coming from strong disciplinary backgrounds? A friend at

Berkeley who has run an interdisciplinary research center has called interdisciplinarity that doesn't have a strong disciplinary base the "Hollow Chocolate Bunny Model." It looks great on the outside because it is studying something that is seemingly relevant, but when it comes to really getting down and doing some work, where's the substance from which to draw? For many reasons, she likes "Mr. Solid Chocolate Bunny Model" better—where many disciplines contribute a richness of language, methods, concepts and pre-existing knowledge.

Third, and as I mentioned at the outset, there are different kinds of interdisciplinarity, which, I think, we are all sort of fostered to embody as we go through the educational system. What I'll talk about next relates mainly to the U.S., but after teaching a course on Education Geographies that examined other countries, I think this will ring true for those of you who received the bulk of your education somewhere besides the U.S.



All of us started our academic lives in a multi-disciplinary world. Reading, Writing, Arithmetic. Then History, Geography, Social Studies, Chemistry, Bio, Algebra, Calc, Trig, Literature, Government,

Foreign Languages, etc. With the notable exceptions of social studies and foreign languages in the U.S., much of that education was carried on in disciplinary silos. Students scurry from course to course to get exposure to a wide variety of content, but how much of a connection are they being helped to see between the silos? Thus lots of different kinds of content; not many connections made between that content: that's multi-disciplinarity.

Then, when a student declares a major in college, or moves into a Master's program, or is getting ready to sit prelims or comps, they move out of that multi-disciplinary world into one where they are really focused. Immersion is the name of the game. Becoming "a master" of their field. The question then becomes—after this, will they have the opportunity to reemerge and ever become interdisciplinary?

For most of us, the happy answer is: YES! It can happen during dissertating—through formal coursework, and through informal channels. By simply getting to know other graduate students from other fields at gatherings like this. These sorts of informal encounters are invaluable, because they force us to resurrect what we learned before college and during the first couple of years of our general college educations. They help us put our disciplinary training back into a broader context. And who knows, they may even lead to interdisciplinary collaboration.

Finally, there is an end goal: transdisciplinarity. This is actually a term that was popularized by the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. He believed that transdisciplinarity occurs when researchers and teachers from different disciplines assemble their collaborative work around specific problems or themes. Through continued interaction the group learns so much about each other that they can easily identify and delegate subtasks to members and then expect the results to seamlessly integrate back into the larger working whole. (This seamless integration could be called the "Namaste Moment"—"We are One"; to put it another way, we could also say that the group has achieved maximum "interoperability.")

Getting to this place, however, is difficult. I've been involved in a couple of projects that fell apart right when we were on the verge of the breakthrough into true transdisciplinarity. I believe those projects failed because the participants began feeling a tug-of-war between their disciplinary identities and this new thing toward which we were moving. It was all-consuming. Still, I wouldn't trade those experiences for anything; they have been the happiest moments of intellectual growth for me since grad school.

Before closing this talk, I'd like to return to the basic concepts of embodied and collaborative interdisciplinarity for a moment. They constitute a realm to which most of you are being called right now in your professional lives. Should you answer the call? Frankly, I'm not sure to what extent you have a choice in the matter.

Embodied and Collaborative Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity
Making connections between disciplines
*K-12 (Common Core)
*Dissertation phase and/or early professional career
EMBODIED
COLLABORATIVE

EMBODIED INTERDISCIPLINARITY

- Cognate specializations
 - Geographer who also uses theories and methods from political science = political geographer
 - Anthropologist who also does evolutionary biology = physical anthropologist

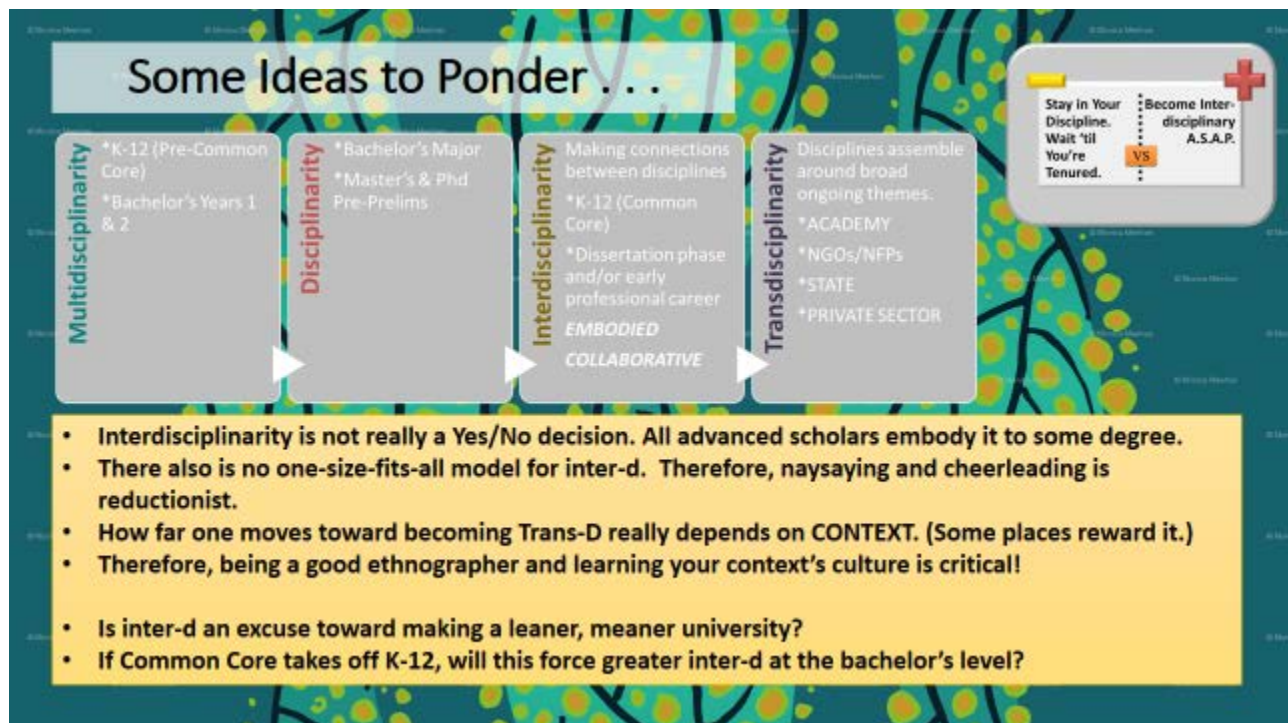
COLLABORATIVE INTERDISCIPLINARITY

- Team membership to tackle a problem
 - Political geographer and physical anthropologist team up to study urban vs. rural culture, public policy and childhood obesity

To review, interdisciplinarity becomes embodied when an emerging scholar begins to graft theories, methods, concepts and knowledge from other disciplines onto the theories, methods, concepts and knowledge they are learning in their home discipline. Here, I've given a couple of examples of what that might look like. You can probably think of your own examples from your own

fields. And if you can't . . . Then that is interesting . . . And perhaps reveals something about the ways in which interdisciplinarity has moved unevenly through Syracuse University.

Collaborative disciplinarity: that's when researchers or teachers from different fields come together to form a team. Their purpose: to tackle some problem that they would have had trouble tackling on their own. Again, this is the form of interdisciplinarity that the presenters in the two video clips were, on the one hand, advocating, and, on the other hand, criticizing.



So here are a few ideas to ponder about those forms of interdisciplinarity . . . Some conclusions that aren't really conclusions but hopefully starting points for discussion this morning.

First, the way I see it: interdisciplinarity isn't really a Yes-I'll-Do-It or No-I'll-Avoid-It decision. All advanced scholars have grappled with it to some degree during their training . . . it is part of the tug of war that we face between coming masters of our fields as well as specialists of some little sub-niche (which often involves the grafting on of some cognate discipline to what we do). We are expected to do it all. Right?

Second, there really is no one-size-fits-all model for interdisciplinarity. So, saying it's something to avoid or something to embrace is rather . . . Hmmm . . . reductionist and dangerous.

Everything depends on context. Some of you will find it easy to pursue collaborative interdisciplinarity because you'll be going to work outside the academy in a research think-tank where knowledge is produced through team work. Some of you will be at universities where it is rewarded, too. The trick in any situation, however, is to operate as a good ethnographer and learn the culture of where you are. What is rewarded and what isn't? What are the costs of entry in this environment? What will it take to convince others that interdisciplinarity is valuable?

Others of you will be frustrated in your attempts to keep this side of your academic life going, particularly if you land a job that is primarily focused on teaching. Some graduates from my own department are in that boat, and they tell me that what has sustained their enthusiasm has been to put together courses that embody interdisciplinarity—through the readings, guest lecturers, etc. One of my former students tells me that his interdisciplinary course on environmental sustainability is turning out to be one of the most popular classes at the college where he teaches. He did it because he was bored with the discipline-based courses he was contractually obligated to teach. Thankfully, he had had the presence of mind to have a “course of his choice” built into his first contract.

But this raises a couple of other questions, that really have less to do with all of you and your graduate training, and more to do with the academic world in which we all currently exist.

We laud interdisciplinarity, but . . . Could it be? Is interdisciplinarity actually an excuse toward making a leaner, meaner university? Are interdisciplinary efforts a way to test for relevance? Are they a prelude to cutting courses and departments? Do we need to keep an eye on interdisciplinarity? Or is this just one of many necessary mechanisms that the university invokes to creatively destroy itself and maintain its societal relevance?

And finally, one of the big changes afoot in primary and secondary education in this country is the adoption of the Common Core Standards in 45 U.S. states. That new curriculum, which is being rolled out NOW, places a high premium on both embodied and collaborative interdisciplinarity. Students are expected to use active learning strategies to connect seemingly disparate subject matter. They are also supposed to learn to do group work that brings different discipline perspectives to bear on a problem at hand. Ultimately, math will get taught in Reading class. Literary interpretation will incorporate social studies. Etc. For those of you who will go into the professoriate in the U.S.: those Common Core students will be in your classrooms in a few years. Will you, and your departments, be ready for them given the interdisciplinary experience they've had?

Just a thought.

Thank you!

