

Susanne Ådahl: Disciplinary sub-cultures

On a sunny September morning a group of researchers affiliated with the Mind Programme of the Academy of Finland were invited to attend an international seminar titled Interdisciplinarity - possibility and challenge organised in Helsinki by the Mind and the Other project in collaboration with the Academy of Finland. The morning session consisted of a workshop facilitated by Angela Woods and Mary Robson from the Hearing the Voice Project of the Centre for Medical Humanities, University of Durham. In the afternoon lectures were delivered by Professor Veronica Strang of the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Durham and Professor Jussi Pakkasvirta of the Department of Political and Economic Studies, University of Helsinki.

The interdisciplinary Hearing the Voice Project of the University of Durham is an exceptional project in many senses. Around 20 researchers collaborate to provide answers and explanations to the question of what it is like to hear voices. Some project researchers work in close collaboration and meet on a daily basis, while others attend project seminars and events but work largely independently. Methodologically there is an innovative twist to the way things are done; the project actively seeks to get out of the ivory tower of academia and engage with the public, medical practitioners and voice hearers. They regularly offer facilities and physical space to groups of voice hearers and clinicians who want to meet and discuss issues of importance to them.

Voice Club is the name given to the project's research meetings which are held fortnightly in the Institute of Advanced Study. The meetings are run by Creative Facilitator, Mary Robson, who helps build the community of researchers in ways which foster creative and interdisciplinary thinking. From the outset, Mary sought to create equality between Voice Club participants (levelling disciplinary and academic hierarchies, while also being sensitive to the different expertise brought by academic researchers and voice-hearers). A prerequisite for the sharing of ideas is openness, curiosity and a willingness to learn about other perspectives, approaches and worldviews. Being approachable to each other is also key to creating good communication. These things underpin the experimental methods used in Voice Club – where academic presentations from team members and visitors are enlivened by experimental explorations involving games, mapping exercises and role-playing. The team has found that researchers are more curious and willing to see the phenomenon of voice hearing from a perspective that is outside of their own comfort zone if they are confronted with new, interactive methods of articulating and exploring their main theories, methods and modes of data analysis. The importance and success of the Voice Club method is attested by the fact that the project researchers are highly committed to the Voice Club and accept that these things may happen in a very different manner than elsewhere in academia.

In the workshop session of the seminar Angela Woods and Mary Robson introduced the theme of interdisciplinarity by pointing out that when researchers talk about their own disciplines they tend to use metaphors of space and territoriality, as if they were parochial guardians of a land with borders that need to be controlled. Although researchers know that trespassers will not be persecuted, it can be difficult for us to leave the comfortable nest of our own disciplines and enter the territory of other disciplines. According to Woods and Robson we should indeed take the plunge into the unknown because that is where the magic happens. We were then given practical tools with which to initiate or maintain discussions on interdisciplinarity in our respective projects. In order to give us a taste of one of these practical tools the facilitators engaged us in creative map making to facilitate our navigation through the somewhat thorny landscape of interdisciplinarity.

In the lectures of the afternoon Veronica Strang talked about how an anthropological approach can help us view interdisciplinarity as a cosmological perspective where each discipline is seen as a sub-culture, each with its own norms, roles, activities and values. Jussi Pakkasvirta provided definitions of interdisciplinarity and the historical background of the term.



A main message of the Voice Club method is that science can and should be fun. One's understanding of other sciences is increased by thinking and doing 'outside of the box'. I believe it is important that we, as reading, writing and thinking-focused professionals get to engage in other types of methods, so called hands-on methods, to make our thoughts visible and to, quite simply, draw and paint our ideas and visions of the world. It is also about breaking spatial stasis, getting out of our chairs, crawling on the floor, discussing in small groups in a totally new environment. A change of scenery and of the way we are in the world helps us develop innovative thoughts precisely because we are out of our 'boxes'. There is a clear and proven parallel between doing innovative things (eg. cycling a different and unexpected route to work) and thinking innovative thoughts.

All too often we assume that we know what the 'Other' (the other disciplines represented in an interdisciplinary project) is about; where the Other is, so to say, coming from. We make assumptions about the terms we commonly use in a project, thinking we define and understand the terms in similar ways. It is only by dissecting and opening up how each disciplinary representative defines a specific term, method or analytical approach that we may realise that we actually are slightly 'off the page' in terms of having a shared understanding. We need to get back to basics because simplification is the key to understanding and it allows us to ask stupid questions of our fellow project members. It allows us to be learners of the other disciplines represented in a project. It feeds our curiosity and brightens our eyes; seeing with someone else's eyes brings clarity to one's vision.

Working in a truly interdisciplinary manner does come with a price; it requires more resources than single discipline projects. A certain amount of groundwork needs to be done before the project starts. Defining terms, theories and data used by each discipline represented in a future

project and reaching a common understanding of a joint direction in the project needs to be part of the project planning process, which in turn means a greater commitment of time and money for this stage. Once the project is up and running it is highly productive and motivating to have a creative facilitator building the researcher community. This insider, who is an outsider at the same time, helps researchers reflect on the research process and outputs. More time needs to be spent on discussing together, attending workshops and working meetings to follow the shared process one has embarked on. This means less time to spend on actual research work and all the other duties that researchers are required to engage in – extending project funding periods to allow for this shared work, time wise, would be necessary. Money invested into these aspects of academic work is, I believe, well spent because it can lead to truly innovative results.

We are all familiar with the saying 'curiosity killed the cat', but if we want to embark on successful interdisciplinary projects it is more appropriate to say that curiosity broadens the cat's territory and makes it venture into areas it would not have seen otherwise. Let us all be cats with nine lives and an extensive territory (= worldview). Let us listen to the stories of other cats with wide open ears and even broader minds. Let us stalk the borders of other gardens (= disciplines) until they feel like home territory to us so that we want to stay there for a while and ask the native animals to fill us in on the essential details of their culture. We can then trek into the garden heartlands. Let us as cats share the best of what we know of being cats so that we can better face the day when we meet the dogs, the rabbits, the guinea pigs and why not also the mice! I warmly recommend a stroll in the territory of interdisciplinarity with your goggles off and your eyes bright.

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