

Interdisciplinarity - possibility and challenge, an International seminar

12 September, 2014, Helsinki Congress Paasitorni

Within the academic world interdisciplinary research projects have become increasingly common. The advantages of working across disciplinary divides are numerous. It can be an ideal means of achieving common concepts, better conceptual or practical products overall and increased understanding of other disciplines. It is not always, though, smooth running; there are conflicts, problems with commitment and differing views regarding concepts, theories, data collection and analysis of results. Being aware of these pitfalls while entangled in an interdisciplinary project may even out some of the bumps in the road ahead and will produce better research results. Working together efficiently and constructively requires very particular resources in terms of time, personal qualities and attitudes of project members and structures around which the work is organised. It entails openness and a willingness to embrace new ways of thinking and working.

A fair number of articles have been written on conceptual and theoretical issues surrounding inter- or multidisciplinary, but far fewer have dealt with the praxis of working in this manner. There is a lack of phenomenological accounts of the project process, challenges faced and solutions identified and put into practice. There are many lessons to be learnt from these processes and it is vital to tap into this resource. With this in mind the Mind and the Other project in collaboration with the Mind Programme of the Academy of Finland are organising a one-day international seminar on the 12th of September that aims to bring together researchers working in interdisciplinary projects of the Mind programme to discuss and explore possibilities, challenges and the practical work involved in running interdisciplinary projects. Some of the central questions to be discussed are;

- How should research design take into account interdisciplinarity already in the planning stage?
- What can be done to ensure that researchers have an equal input into the design at all stages in terms of key questions, basic approaches, and the kinds of methods, data and analysis to be employed?
- How to maintain intellectual, social and practical equalities throughout the whole research process?
- How to learn about the basic approaches, methods, data and analysis used within each disciplinary field?
- How to ensure that researchers feel confident that their disciplinary identities will not be denigrated or appropriated during the research process?
- How to account for different temporal needs of the various disciplines in terms of data collection and analysis?
- How to use and incorporate various types of data that leads to reconceptualization of the original project hypothesis?
- What type of particular resources (time, funding, supporting staff) need to be allocated to facilitate the process of working in an interdisciplinary manner?

The seminar day is divided into a morning and afternoon session. The morning session will be dedicated to a workshop run by two facilitators Dr. Angela Woods, Co-Director of the interdisciplinary project Hearing the Voice (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/hearingthevoice/> and <https://www.dur.ac.uk/school.health/staffmembers/staffprofile/?username=vzjh71>), University of Durham and Mary Robson, Associate for Arts in Health and Education at the Centre for Medical Humanities (<http://www.maryrobson.co.uk/en/index/a1>), University of Durham. The aim of the workshop is to provide the Mind Programme projects with hands-on tools for initiating dialogue on

interdisciplinarity within their individual projects (a more detailed description of this process will be provided at a later stage).

The afternoon session will consist of two lectures (also open to a wider public) by Professor Veronica Strang, Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Durham (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/ias/staff/?id=10491>) and Professor Jussi Pakkasvirta, University of Helsinki, Department of Political and Economic Studies (<http://blogs.helsinki.fi/pakkasvi/>) on the challenges and possibilities inherent in interdisciplinary projects. The lectures will be followed by a discussion.

Lecture abstracts

Prof. Veronica Strang

Interdisciplinarity and Cross-Cultural Translation: making use of social skills in collaborative research

This presentation considers how we might make use of anthropology in interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research. It suggests that our discipline has considerable and largely untapped potential to assist interdisciplinary collaborations within and outside the academy. It proposes that – with holistic and inclusive theoretical models, a deep appreciation of diverse perspectives, skills in cross-cultural translation, and an underlying concern for equity – anthropology is particularly well equipped to help bring different disciplinary approaches together.

Prof. Jussi Pakkasvirta

Interdisciplinarity? What is there between the sciences? Blue sky – or just nothing?

The selected sources and the nature of different research materials have always defined the academic disciplines. Researchers learn to use certain materials and analyze them in accordance with the traditions of their disciplines, which also determines research tactics and attitudes. Such academic manners and traditions are often based in the differences between qualitative and quantitative analysis. The distinction and dichotomy is nevertheless rather artificial and should be crossed, even more so in an interdisciplinary study. This also helps to combine different research strategies and tactics. An interdisciplinary alteration of viewpoints, and an effort to imagine and analyze the world even upside down, helps the researcher in creating interesting and different hypotheses. Trans- and interdisciplinarity are not new methods, disciplines or 'theories without discipline'. They are research strategies, standpoints and epistemological frameworks. In a best case, inter- and transdisciplinarity signify the art of bringing into the research arena new and unconventional research questions, different hypotheses and heterodox or even controversial perspectives. The interdisciplinary 'utopia' also stands for a multidimensional and holistic understanding of knowledge, in the same way as the most extreme form of transdisciplinarity. Likewise, interdisciplinarity is more than tactics to go around or look inside the disciplines. True interdisciplinarity traverses various paradigms – with an unassuming attitude of trying to learn more.