ISSUES IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES
No. 14, pp. 1-5 (1996)

Guest Editor's Introduction

by
William H. Newell

Institute in Integrative Studies
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

IN "THE GENERALIST AND THE DISCIPLINES: The Case of Lewis Mumford," Guy Beckwith sets out to demonstrate that "Mumford provides a classic example of rigorous and effective interdisciplinary thought." This alone would make a worthwhile contribution to the literature on interdisciplinary studies, since there is a dearth of serious scholarship on exemplary interdisciplinarians. But Beckwith's article does much more. By grounding his study in the scholarship on interdisciplinary studies as well as in the historical scholarship on Mumford, Beckwith is able to use his knowledge of Mumford to probe several fundamental questions about the nature of interdisciplinary study: (1) What is the appropriate relationship between the disciplines and interdisciplinary study? (2) What is the nature of interdisciplinary synthesis? and (3) What is the relationship between the generalist and the interdisciplinarian?

Through a close examination of Mumford's method and what Mumford says about that method as it is applied to specific interdisciplinary projects, we gain a richer, more complex appreciation of the appropriate interplay between disciplines and interdisciplinarity. We see detailed examples of interdisciplinary syntheses and learn not only how Mumford achieved them but why he used the methods he did. We come to see Mumford as a generalist and an integrative scholar, appreciating both dimensions while seeing their distinctive elements.

Beckwith completes the hermeneutic circle, using theoretical discussions from the professional literature on interdisciplinary studies to guide his examination of Mumford, while using the details of Mumford's method as it is applied in specific situations to probe the meaning of those theoretical constructs. Thus, he employs the disciplinary tools of the historian to advance our understanding of interdisciplinary study.

Mumford's direct usefulness as a model interdisciplinarian is limited by his status as an independent scholar who deliberately and sometimes scornfully stood outside the academy. Nevertheless, his respect for the knowledge claims of disciplinary scholarship and his willingness to put in the hard work required to master specific disciplinary tools as he required them, while harnessing them toward ends too large-scale for most disciplinarians to contemplate, set a standard that today's interdisciplinary scholars within academia would do well to emulate.

In her article on "Interdisciplinary Writing and the Undergraduate Experience: A Four-Year Writing Plan Proposal," Carolyn Haynes draws upon several years of experience as director of the writing center in Miami University's School of Interdisciplinary Study and several summer presentations to participants in the Institute in Integrative Studies on teaching interdisciplinary writing. Unlike other articles I am aware of that deal with pragmatic interdisciplinary tasks, Haynes grounds her suggestions for creating interdisciplinary writing assignments on a solid theoretical foundation as well as in practical experience. She combines composition theory (of both the traditional and the writing-across-the-curriculum varieties) with interdisciplinary studies theory *and* with theories of learning stages from educational psychology. Specifically, she draws upon "Marcia Baxter Magolda's theory of cognitive development in college students, recent social trends in compositional theory and rhetorical criticism and Julie Thompson Klein's theoiy of the integrative process." Even bits of educational theory à la Dewey pop up once in a while. All are integrated with an eye to developing writing assignments that take into account what students need to learn about writing and about interdisciplinary study while being responsive to how they learn.

The result is a proposal that pays as much attention to underlying rationale as to the details of specific assignments. Haynes sets out "a carefully sequenced set of writing experiences which progress steadily from engagement with expressive modes to an increasingly critical awareness of and proficiency in disciplinary forms to the development of interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry." Each step in the sequence concludes with lists of objectives for students and professors as well as suggestions for possible assignments.

In "An Exploration of the Interdisciplinary Character of Women's Studies," Nancy Grace takes on the challenge of examining how interdisciplinary women's studies really is. Advocates of women's studies routinely accept as self-evident the claim that their field is interdisciplinary, but like most self-evident assertions, this one is seldom subjected to close scrutiny. As a long-time teacher in a women's studies program and former participant in the Institute in Integrative Studies, Grace is well qualified to ask the unask-able and then provide an assessment which is penetrating yet clearly sympathetic to both fields.

After an extensive review of the literature on the interdisciplinarity of women's studies, Grace starts with questions from the "Guide to Interdisciplinary Syllabus Preparation" prepared by AIS and the Institute in Integrative Studies and recently reprinted in the *Journal of General Education*. Taking the guide as "reflecting an emerging consensus within the interdisciplinary profession and thus an appropriate standard with which to evaluate women's studies courses," she utilizes its key questions to determine whether a given women's studies course is interdisciplinary as well as the quality of its interdisciplinary focus. She then applies them to "the exemplary syllabi included in the National Women's Studies Association 1991 report to the profession."

Through this procedure, she identifies seven categories of women's studies courses, some readily identifiable within the boundaries of current thought on interdisciplinary work but others clearly operating in new ways. Her conclusion, that "what we do in women's studies *is* both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, and that some of what we call interdisciplinary work *is* interdisciplinary, but some is not," masks findings which may ruffle a few feathers. She discovers, for example, that only one of the thirty-eight courses in the NWSA Report falls into her Type 3 category of Interdisciplinary. Essentially, the *field* of women's studies is interdisciplinary but women's studies *courses* rarely achieve full interdisciplinarity.

Like Beckwith, Grace's application of interdisciplinary theory to women's studies ends up complicating our understanding of interdisciplinarity. Where does critiquing disciplines instead of applying their insights fit into interdisciplinary study? How does an interdisciplinary approach get transformed into a transdisciplinary one, and what difference does it make? Does interdisciplinary study itself change when it draws on a discipline so transformed by interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary critique that it begins to look like a new discipline (e.g., feminist history) to some of its adherents?

Grace concludes with a plea to women's studies faculties to look more closely at the balance of disciplinary and interdisciplinary elements in their curriculum. She cautions against abandoning disciplines at the same time that she advocates their critique and transformation. Her search is for "a modicum of common ground, a curriculum which features more distinctly interdisciplinary courses which simultaneously critique and validate disciplines."

If Nancy Grace asks the unaskable, then Stanley Bailis mentions the unmentionable in "The Culture of Babel: Interdisciplinarity as Adaptation in Multicultureland" when he raises uncomfortable questions about multiculturalism and even interdisciplinarity itself. Bailis points out (after Elizabeth Minnich) that multiculturalism is predicated on a denial of (cultural) unity, even of the appropriateness of seeking it. Interdisciplinary study, on the other hand, sees difference (i.e., disciplinary specialization) as a problem and inquires into those differences precisely to develop unity. He observes that "integration might help to keep in place the quite different set of problems [Minnich] identifies"—a misleadingly singular, falsely universalized and decontextualized sense of who 'we' are. This contrast between interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism becomes especially worrisome if we think of interdisciplinary study as one of our culture's mechanisms for adaptation to difference. Moreover, there may be a fundamental clash of values: interdisciplinarity believes "syntheses have a kind of corrective priority over what is being synthesized," while multiculturalism actually intensifies difference by creating academic departments and specialties.

Multiculturalism and interdisciplinary study have their points of agreement, however, in Bailis' eyes. Both see our differences as necessary (though the former view treats them in a more positive light). Both struggle with the problem of accessing differences and making "coherent use of the instruction thus received." Both disciplinary specialization and false cultural unity lead to a view of the whole which is "partial and synecdochic."

Through this comparison, we learn that interdisciplinarity suffers from some of the same short-comings as the disciplinary specializations it critiques and seeks to counteract. Since any unity it creates is necessarily partial and incomplete—unlike the comprehensive unity promised by transdisciplinarity—interdisciplinary study necessarily contributes to and thus perpetuates fragmentation and exclusion. Bailis observes that "by stressing restoration of unity, this image calls attention away from the fact that activities justified by our own critique of specialization have a way of generating more specialties."

Thus, while interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism appear on the surface to have much in common, their goals and, to some extent, even their values may fundamentally clash. In any event, the comparison brings to light some difficulties with the rhetoric used to justify interdisciplinarity.

Biographical Note: William H. Newell is a professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Studies and Director of the Institute in Integrative Studies, both at Miami University. He has written extensively on interdisciplinary higher education and frequently serves as a consultant or external evaluator for interdisciplinary programs. He is Executive Director of the Association for Integrative Studies.