

THE CASE FOR/AGAINST INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES:  
A COMMENT ON THE DEBATE

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*"... I came to see that that there are no economic, sociological, or psychological problems but just problems, and they are all mixed and composite. In research the only permissible demarcation is between relevant and irrelevant conditions. The problems are regularly also political and, moreover, must be seen in historical perspective." Gunnar Myrdal<sup>1</sup>*

*"... For interdisciplinary educators, ... two observable trends in American higher education are depressing. We are laboring in institutions which appear increasingly to value vocationalism, specialization, and compartmentalization with many faculty members identifying more readily with national professional groups than with local academic communities. And, correspondingly, the number of islands of innovative interdisciplinary educational experimentation and development is diminishing. Financial constraints, political conservatism, and student vocational orientation all are instrumental in this retreat from integrative education." Jerry Petr<sup>2</sup>*

The rather different perspectives on interdisciplinarity presented above open this comment because they capture nicely a significant part of my response to the provocative essays of professors Benson and Newell. My intention is to develop briefly the ideas implicit in those two statements, and then provide some elaborative support to two other important lines of argument which emerge from the Benson and Newell papers.

I like the first of the two comments quoted above because I think it is correct and insightful. And, in the context of the Benson-Newell dialogue, it asserts that, on the theoretical, conceptual, and philosophical level the integrationists win. At least in the social sciences, where I labor, there is no contest. Problems must be addressed and policies must be developed from an interdisciplinary perspective. For example, the assessment of the impact of unemployment on the United States is not solely an economic problem; nor is the evaluation of the consequences of multinational corporations; nor is the explana-

tion of the flourishing "underground" economy in this country and elsewhere. And, of course, decisions about the use of an artificial heart are not simply medical questions; nuclear weaponry is not only a military issue; and school busing is not primarily a transportation problem. Life is interdisciplinary; students of life must be interdisciplinarians. The sorry state of our ability to understand and respond to problems such as those listed above reflects the failure of the traditional disciplinary approach.

I like the second quotation which introduces this comment because I think it too is correct and insightful. And, in the context of the Benson-Newell dialogue, it asserts that, on the existential, operational level Tom Benson's arguments against interdisciplinary studies seem to prevail. In practice, the criticism may well overwhelm the affirmations.

Consider that the school of interdisciplinary studies<sup>3</sup> which hosted our 1981 national meeting no longer exists. The interdisciplinary program<sup>4</sup> from which I was invited to the 1978 inauguration of the Association for Integrative Studies is gone. Nationwide, interdisciplinary programs appear to many as expendable frills in higher education, in part at least, due to the predominance of the Benson arguments in the court of (academic) public opinion.

Consequently, representing conceptual victory and practical defeat, many of us feel hollow and frustrated. And, as a response to those feelings, Bill Newell's agenda for action is appropriate. Unless we expand our efforts to generate, construct, clarify, and demonstrate the potential of interdisciplinary studies, the success and approbation which seem implicit in the philosophical validity of our position will not overcome the practical difficulties in their implementation.

To carry this comment a bit further, I would like to dwell briefly on an idea from each essay which, to me, merits amplification and development.

First, I want to emphasize, underline, and reinforce the occasional pedagogical themes in Newell's essay. Too often neglected as we discuss the content of interdisciplinary education, the pedagogical opportunities presented by high quality integrative studies need to be amplified.

Fundamentally, interdisciplinarity is mostly about questions, about problems and topics of "real world" concern. Disciplinarity, on the contrary, is mostly about answers, answers which are at least implicit in the methodology or paradigms which are at the heart of disciplinary education. And because interdisciplinary studies address questions of real societal concern, opportunities abound for active involvement of students with subject matter, rather than passive absorption of others' "truths."

This same question/problem orientation fosters confrontation of the interdisciplinary (both student and faculty member) with the world as it is, stimulates the growth of tolerance for ambiguity and multiple perspectives, and elevates the art of questioning to the highest place in the educational process. Undergirding the pedagogical thrust of interdisciplinary education is the possibility of student development of cognitive, ethical, intellectual and moral dimensions as fundamentally discussed and described in the work of Piaget, Perry, Kohlberg, and other developmentalists.

The other side of the developmentalist coin is the possibility that Newell may give too little attention to the problems associated with sophisticated intellectual demands on students not yet prepared to deal with them. Asking the "concrete operational," "dualistic" student to address the complexities of genetic engineering, or human rights as a foreign policy plank presents pedagogical difficulties which should not be ignored. Interdisciplinary problems and curricula are exciting for academic professionals and stimulating for maturing students, but they may present baffling perplexities for the less advanced novice.

The caveats expressed in the preceding paragraph lead to the aspect of Benson's essay which I want to highlight. As interdisciplinary educators we must think well beyond the elegance and importance of our subject matter and maintain high levels of concern for what is happening to our students. We should remind ourselves that, for the most part, we, the exploratory faculty, are credentialed professionals with corresponding professional security. We have, again for the most part, a dissenting view of how the academy should function and how curriculum ought to be structured. But, on the other hand, our students are amateurs, apprentices in our care who ultimately must operate successfully within an academy which is, basically, disciplinary.

Students often must adhere to a disciplinary major. They must face the reality of a Graduate Record Exam or a Law School Aptitude Test or a Graduate Management Aptitude Test, or assorted other hurdles or obstacles rooted in a disciplinary view of the academic process. In my own discipline, economics, they must know all the arcane abstractions which have little relevance to understanding the role of the multinational corporation in the world economy, but which are most directly relevant to admission to a high quality graduate economics department.

The academic world as interdisciplinarians would like it, and the academic world our students must live in are different. We need some thoughtful restraint to our inclination to make students the vulnerable foot soldiers in our war against the academic establishment. I think Tom Benson's essay makes that point.

All in all, then, I conclude that Bill Newell has given interdisciplinary educators their marching orders; Tom Benson has shown them the walls they must scale. Newell is correct about the demands placed upon interdisciplinarians--demands of excellence, high standards and exemplary work. And Benson is correct about the consequences of failures to meet those standards. Given the correctness of the objective, and the significance of the task, who can avoid the challenge of making the effort?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gunnar Myrdal , "Institutional Economics," *The Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 12, No. 4, (Dec. 1978), p. 772.

<sup>2</sup>Jerry L. Petr, "Can Progress Toward Interdisciplinary Education Be Built on a Disciplinary Base?" *Issues in Integrative Studies* No. 1(1982), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>William James College, Grand Valley State Colleges, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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