

## WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A DEVIL'S ADVOCATE?

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What do you say to a devil's advocate, especially one who speaks with derision about those "interdisciplinary studies faculty driving curricular ice cream trucks down the academic alleys?" Do you thank him, admonish him, argue with him, ignore him, or "good humor" him? Or maybe--better yet--seek his salvation! Maybe, if we cleaned up our act, we might save his soul and ours. Certainly, some of our act does need cleaning up. Yet we must not deceive ourselves into believing that a cleaner act will convert large numbers of our foes into friends. The hard line protectors of the conventional, the established academic turfs, are not really open to persuasion, either by intellect or sterling performance. They have already made up their minds and employ whatever arguments they can fashion to rationalize their positions. I am reminded of the fate of the late Ernie Becker at the Berkeley campus of the University of California. Despite his considerable scholarly productiveness and a student body so impressed with his wide-ranging, interdisciplinary knowledge that they were willing to pay his salary, the "old men" of the departments declared him "persona non-grata" and forced him to leave the campus. Also, I am reminded of recent struggles on our campus over the control of enrollment in the general education program in which departments masked their actual vested interest objectives behind self-righteous declarations on the superiority of disciplinary education.

Benson, bless his soul, not only accepts these devilish declarations of disciplinary superiority, he puts them in an argument form that makes Satan look even better than he himself could ever imagine. Benson sets up a simplistic dichotomy in which disciplinary and "good" education are on one side, and interdisciplinary and "bad" education are on the other. Note the Bensonian juxtapositions:

<u>Discipline</u> (good education)	<u>Interdiscipline</u> (bad education)
coherent	confused
rigorous	romantic

(Continued)

fundamentals	diluted diversion
competence, critically based	shallow, popularly relevant topical studies
well-designed, sequential	disorganized variety show
cost-effective	expensive, gimmickry
high standards	dubious quality
leads somewhere, career, post-grad study	leads nowhere

It's downright insidious! Save us, oh Lord, from this image-trap presented so effectively by our putative friend. Naturally, we understand that the devil made him do it.

Of course, we all know colleagues who share some of these perceptions. And on many campuses there have been questionable educational efforts carried out under the banner of interdisciplinary studies which deserve criticism. On the other hand, conventional disciplinarians are responsible for quite a bit of lousy teaching and research. Obviously, those who allow this polar conceptualization to structure their perceptions will not "see" good work done by interdisciplinarians nor bad work done by disciplinarians. They are stereotypes in the most basic sense.

Stereotypes are highly resistant to change, despite loads of cognitive dissonance. Nevertheless, they are not invincible. If we want to increase our acceptance beyond the already committed interdisciplinarians and reduce our personal and program vulnerability, we must attack the perceptual barricades with both words and deeds. As Benson himself suggests we must seek both political and intellectual solutions to the real and image argument against interdisciplinary studies that he poses: conceptual confusion, pedagogical and curricular laxity, inferior preparation for students, and higher costs of offering. I propose three solutions—one political, one intellectual, and one administrative and curricular.

My political solution involves co-option: define interdisciplinary very broadly as all activity which juxtaposes, applies, combines, synthesizes, integrates or transcends parts of two or more disciplines. While being respectable and defensible this definition enables us to encompass a substantial proportion, if not the majority of faculty at most multi-purpose institutions of higher education. The biggest programs which this umbrella covers are the applied professional ones--an area which Benson implicitly and inexplicably excludes. All areas of administra-

tion, for instance, are necessarily interdisciplinary—business, education, health, public, etc. Once, in a public meeting, I called our School of Business the largest school of interdisciplinary studies on campus. The Dean gasped but didn't openly reject the attribution. Other comparable professional areas include: nursing, social work, special education, home economics, engineering, journalism, broadcast and communication arts, design and industry, clinical science, recreation, criminal justice, etc. Of course, all of the topical studies to which Benson alludes are in the interdisciplinary archipelago, ranging from "old timers" like area studies through religious studies, gerontology, environmental studies, etc., to future studies. Even the so-called basic disciplinary departments have members with research and/or curricular interests that are cross-disciplinary in nature. They could have topical interests like those just mentioned or two discipline "hybrid" orientations like social psychology, bio-chemistry, musical ethnography, etc., or a shared interest in a method of data manipulation, e.g., statistics, computers.<sup>1</sup>

The basic political strategy is to define the generic term of interdisciplinary as appropriately inclusive as possible. The ultimate objective is to integrate interdisciplinary programs and faculty into the overall University structure. I am not suggesting full miscegenation, though that could happen in a few cases over time. Rather, I am arguing against the impermeable, little box approach to running organizations. A structural intertwining of identities and organizational networks reduces the opportunity for invidious characterizations, political isolation, paranoid scapegoatisms and the budgetary axe. During a period of austerity and educational retrogression a segregated ghetto of interdisciplinarity is especially vulnerable as the many cases of program dissolution over the last fifteen years have painfully demonstrated.

By incorporating a broad spectrum of venerable faculty and programs under the interdisciplinary mantle, we may give newer interdisciplinary programs a better chance of gestation and survival. Those who would plaster all new interdisciplinary efforts as faddish and inferior must use some care in their broadsides, as they may end up antagonizing a substantial segment of the faculty and administration. On our campus, for instance, though it wasn't easy, Women Studies was eventually successful with this strategy.

My second solution is the intellectual one. We must develop and disseminate, as Benson urges, interdisciplinary methodologies. We must struggle for a place in the academic sun for our "discipline of disciplines." Becoming an interdisciplinarian involves acquiring the same kind of disciplinary competence of which Benson speaks. In my view the minimal requirements include:

1. Identifying a feasible, limited area of disciplinary combination in which to ply one's epistemological trade. The

cognate areas of knowledge into which most of our colleges are organized provide one set of possibilities, that is, natural science, social science, creative arts or humanities. In my opinion there is no specialization in interdisciplinary studies, *per se*, but in interdisciplinary studies in something, namely, some sensible combination of disciplines. I consider myself, for instance, an interdisciplinary social scientist. That involves working with seven different disciplinary perspectives with some shared epistemological premises on a common subject matter, human behavior.

2. Becoming familiar with the basic disciplinary and sub-disciplinary perspectives, that is, the dominating explanatory and interpretive strategies in one's area. Some disciplines have more explicit orienting thought models than others, economics, for example, as contrasted with political science; but all disciplines have an organized mode of investigating, evaluating and interpreting statements about their subject matters or they would not have any claim to disciplinary existence. Knowing these disciplinary, epistemological bases enables one to understand the meaning of a statement within its context and why it differs from a statement, possibly on the same subject, from another context.

3. Acquiring familiarity with the methods of determining "truth" and "beauty" within the disciplines' purviews. One does not need extensive training in statistics, for example, to appreciate the knowledge-gaining strategies with which it is compatible, its uses and limitations.

4. Learning several strategies of transdisciplinary integration with their advantages and disadvantages. Some transdisciplinary approaches with overarching thought models which propose to replace prevailing disciplinary world views not only exist but are being widely utilized, for example, in the social sciences and beyond--general systems, Marxism, phenomenology, etc.

On the one hand, this four part approach to the profession of interdisciplinarity does not seek nor even desire a single, unified holism. On the other hand, it is much more sophisticated and enduring than putting a few disciplinary fragments to work on solving a social problem. Thus my approach escapes from another one of Benson's insidious dichotomies. And it can be taught at different levels of depth and sophistication.

Regardless of how well-defined our discipline becomes, interdisciplinarians should always cultivate and retain one of our more endearing traits, namely, flexibility, openness to new ways of doing things, a reasonable tolerance for challenges to the conventional--if you will--a little romanticism in our intellectual rigor. We also need to retain our sense of humor. Keep making up bumper slogans like Lu Mattson of Cal State-Sonoma--"Interdisciplinarians do it in any field."

The curricular and administrative solution is my third and last. Students must be given the opportunity to take interdisciplinary majors at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The basis for a core curriculum are the interdisciplinary skills outlined above while other courses chosen around coherent organizing principles complete the program. Undergraduate preparation of this kind in the social sciences is preferred by many graduate schools in areas such as business management, law, social work, public administration, etc. Graduate programs enable students to pursue in an organized and supported fashion those studies which are best comprehended with an interdisciplinary approach. Not incidentally, graduate programs also provide a place to socialize future generations of interdisciplinarians in the same way that other disciplines perpetuate their own.

Initiating and maintaining generic interdisciplinary studies majors is not easy. They are squeezed from both sides. Conventional-minded faculty and administrators can not see any intellectual or resource rationalization for separately established interdisciplinary programs with permanent faculty and majoring students. At the same time all those faculty who are committed to particular cross-disciplinary topics want their own majors with their own courses. For instance, my own interdisciplinary social science program at San Francisco State has provided the early support for many interdisciplinary areas which went on to create their own degree programs, in particular, urban studies, ethnic studies, women studies, labor studies, etc.

One partial solution to this squeeze game that we have tried at San Francisco State is cross-disciplinary minors. Minor curricula in cross-disciplinary areas such as criminal justice, gerontology, religious studies, human sexuality studies, holistic health, etc. are proposed and offered by faculty from various disciplines and interdisciplines. No additional permanent faculty are required. Most of the courses already exist, and consequently, the steady-state virtues are obvious--to some anyway. Students can take the minors in conjunction with a disciplinary or interdisciplinary major, overlapping courses in both cases, and actually using the minor as the cohering theme in the interdisciplinary major. Our administration and faculty senate have supported this cross-disciplinary minor approach in the past, although a recent critical accreditation report and a change in administration in my own school has dampened enthusiasm somewhat.

Consequently, I return to my earlier theme. No matter how successful we are in making "objective" progress in mitigating some of the real deficiencies pointed out so diabolically by Tom Benson--and we must do exactly that--we shouldn't expect a conversion of the conventional yahoos; after all, they've already made up their minds. And besides they only do it in their own fields.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a complete typology of cross-disciplinary activities in the social sciences see my article, "Varieties of Interdisciplinary Approaches in the Social Sciences," *Issues in Integrative Studies*, No. 1 (1982), pp. 12-20.