

At the Interface of Disciplines

Interdisciplinarity as a Driver of Curriculum Innovation

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Document Version
Submitted manuscript

Published in:
Curriculum at the Interface

DOI:
[10.5465/AMBPP.2017.13651symposium](https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2017.13651symposium)

Publication date:
2017

License
Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):
Madsen, D. (2017). At the Interface of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity as a Driver of Curriculum Innovation. In C. T. Tackney, & M. Zølner (Eds.), *Curriculum at the Interface: The European Higher Education Area and Copenhagen Business School Academy of Management*.
<https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2017.13651symposium>

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Download date: 14. Oct. 2024



Presenter Symposium

CURRICULUM AT THE INTERFACE: THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

AREA AND COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Potential Sponsor Divisions: Management Education and Development, International Management, and the Social Issues in Management Divisions.

The Symposium organizers, Mette Zølner and Charles T. Tackney, have received the statements from all intended participants agreeing to participate in the entire Symposium and stating that they are not in violation of the Rule of Three + Three.

(We request consideration for MED Best Symposium in Management Education and Development Award.)

Presentation Titles and Presenters:

1. Teaching the EU using plurilingual content based teaching and cooperative learning

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2. At the interface of disciplines: Interdisciplinarity as a driver of curriculum innovation

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3. Rigor AND relevance: Challenges of Master thesis writing at the Copenhagen Business School

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4. Institutional Entrepreneurs and Curriculum Innovation

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5. Insight-based critical realism: a Trans-cultural Epistemology for a European Higher Education Area

Charles T. Tackney, Ph.D.

6. Teaching in foreign languages at the interface of business disciplines

Mette Zølner, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This Symposium presents curriculum design and content issues in a Scandinavian business school at its Centenary. The aim is an exploration of an educational institution at the interface of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) within the historical trends of the European Union. We hope this step will empirically document how the goals of the European Higher Education Area are functionally linked with the entrepreneurial sensibilities of administration, faculty, and administrative staff during the concrete operations of work. The series of presentations are framed between trans-cultural epistemological foundations in insight-based critical realism and inquiry into how the institutional entrepreneurs – the program directors – negotiate opportunities, risks, and tensions in curriculum and program implementation. Detailed case presentations take up curriculum effort to successfully engage issues of interdisciplinarity, use of text production as a tool in support of project and thesis writing, and the use of plurilingual content based teaching in a cooperative learning model for European studies. The history of one curriculum model initiated to educate better citizens, combining interdisciplinary methods with language instruction, whose features have endured and diffused throughout the business school, ends the presentation set. Symposium discussion will be designed to invite participants, from within the EU and beyond, to join in collaborative practitioner research for the EHEA future.

Keywords: European Higher Education Area, Curriculum innovation, Scandinavian higher education.

At the interface of disciplines: Interdisciplinarity as a driver in curriculum innovation

Dorte Madsen

This paper addresses the practice of interdisciplinarity in the curriculum of an interdisciplinary Business Administration and Organisational Communication degree at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), and points to the need for further theorizing on relations between disciplines in general, and for more research into the practice of interdisciplinarity in problem-based learning, in particular.

In their chapter: "Business Schools in Society: The Distinctiveness of Diversity", Irwin, Salskov-Iversen and Morsing (2011) outline how CBS engages in the Business in Society challenges of contemporary society, operating with the broad organizing principle of academic diversity and the presence of a diversity of disciplines. This has also resulted in the creation of a number of interdisciplinary degree programs (BSc and MSc) such as business economics combined with philosophy, mathematics, law, psychology, politics, sociology and, language, business and culture. As a scholar of interdisciplinarity in its different organizational, strategic and epistemological disguises, the presence of this diversity of disciplines comes across as the ideal playground for the practice of interdisciplinarity in research and in teaching. However, thus far, this diversity of disciplines, in terms of relations between them and interdisciplinary knowledge creation, has not been translated into research projects constructing interdisciplinarity as an object of research in its own right, and therefore, we do not know much about the cognitive advantages enabled by interdisciplinary practices, nor how they were gained.

Considering CBS's general commitment to cross-disciplinary research and practice of designing interdisciplinary degree programs, it seems fair to assume that interdisciplinarity may have a taken-for-granted quality that makes discussions of practices involving more than one discipline, as well as the myriad of meanings ascribed to interdisciplinarity, seem unproblematic.

However, to undergraduate students in an interdisciplinary degree program, there is quite a potential for confusion when, in their mandatory Philosophy of Science course, they have to learn how to juggle the many paradigms and disciplines at play in their program, to actually benefit from this course in their methodological considerations, all with a view to better formulating research questions and designing their project-work.

The program and the Philosophy of Science course:

The program is an undergraduate program in Business Administration and Organisational Communication and is briefly described in this extract from their qualifications profile:

The bachelor program in business administration and organizational communication is research-based and interdisciplinary. The program brings together insights from business administration, sociology and communication theory and provides students with an in-depth understanding of strategic communication in organizational settings and social and economic contexts.

The Philosophy of Science course is a mandatory, 3rd semester course with eleven weeks of lectures, and, additionally, four weeks of workshop classes: two weeks focusing on a business administration case (microeconomics / realist paradigms), and two weeks focusing more broadly on communication theoretical issues (social constructionism / idealist paradigms). The examination consists of a synopsis (5 pages) written in groups followed by an individual, oral examination. Besides having an exam of its own, this course prepares students for problem-based project work, such as their “Interdisciplinary 2nd Year Project: Strategic Communication Challenges in a business administration context” as well as their Bachelor’s Project. The learning objectives of the Philosophy of Science course are:

Students should:

- 1) demonstrate overview of basic positions in the philosophy of science and explain analytical and methodological consequences of their choice of position(s).
- 2) apply different philosophical approaches to a specific problem within business administration and communication.
- 3) explain the interplay of disciplinary perspectives and paradigms and critically assess how the chosen perspectives inform their methodological choices.

One of the central questions of the course concerns how thinking about methodology helps to enhance the quality of the students' work. This reflection point is evident both in the specific course as well as in their project-work more generally. Among the general quality criteria in qualitative work, the transparency criterion (Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2012) stands out as particularly relevant to the role of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives as it encourages students to articulate their considerations on the choice of paradigms for their inquiry as well as possible relations between the disciplines they draw on in their work.

The transparency criterion further highlights how "the final text should state clearly those choices that were made during the project and, in particular, *why* they were made." (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2012:37). This has tangible methodological and practical consequences for the students' development of their projects, including the research question, research design, choice of methods, as well as their reflections on possible relations between disciplines.

For the students of this course, their future projects as well as for their project supervisors, the underlying basis of this course in an interdisciplinary practice approach offers a vantage point from which to explicitly include their considerations on the choice of paradigms and interrelationships among disciplines in their work, and they are encouraged to make their choices transparent to the readers of their projects (examiners) as well as to themselves. As far as can be

determined, we have not yet taken advantage, in our classrooms, of the vast body of scholarly writing that covers interdisciplinary research and teaching (but are planning to do so, for the time being in the form of a new elective course). I briefly summarize below two aspects of interdisciplinarity studies that might benefit the practice of interdisciplinarity.

Problem-based learning informed by categories of research questions and different modes of interdisciplinarity

Lattuca (2001, 2003) has developed the following categories of research questions that may help students 1) develop more sophisticated research questions in general and 2) help them account for and make transparent the possible role of disciplines and relations between them more specifically. Lattuca (2001) does not premise her concept of interdisciplinarity on integration as a goal but advocates a more open approach where the question of (inter)disciplinarity is premised on the type of research question:

- 1) Questions that are identified with a single discipline (questions have a compelling disciplinary basis).
- 2) Questions that are found in the intersections of disciplines; the question belongs to both disciplines.
- 3) Questions that are found in the gaps between disciplines; the question belongs to neither.
- 4) Questions that cross disciplines.
- 5) Issues and questions without a compelling disciplinary basis.

Lattuca's approach lends itself to exploring any relations between disciplines combined with e.g. Barry et al.'s (2008) different *modes* of interdisciplinarity: 1) the *integrative-synthesis* mode that understands interdisciplinarity additively as the sum of two or more disciplinary components or as achieved through a synthesis of different approaches, 2) the *subordination-*

service mode in which “the service discipline(s) is commonly understood to be making up for or filling in for an absence or lack in the other, (master) discipline(s), and 3) the *agonistic-antagonistic* mode, according to which “interdisciplinary research is conceived neither as a synthesis nor in terms of a disciplinary division of labour, but as driven by an agonistic or antagonistic relation to existing forms of disciplinary knowledge and practice.” (Barry et al. 2008:29). These insights also invite discussions of the relative strength of disciplines and power more generally.

Interdisciplinarity implies new epistemic standards - not necessarily integration

Whether integration is the ‘litmus test’ (Klein, 2010) for interdisciplinarity is a highly-contested issue in the literature (Madsen, 2016, 2017). By way of provisional conclusion, I will briefly summarize the two opposing views at this stage of Symposium presentation development. According to Mansilla and Gardner, in the integrative approach “it is proposed that interdisciplinary work should be judged according to the criteria of the ‘antecedent disciplines’ and the value will be assessed in terms of these additive criteria” (cited in Barry, et al., p. 28). Fuller (2003, 2004) on the other hand (following Kuhn and his incommensurability thesis and the absence of an absolute norm across paradigms) argues that the point of interdisciplinarity is not to build on methods and insights from existing disciplines — a common, but misguided approach that mistakenly assumes combining methods makes for better knowledge. Instead, the transformative promise of interdisciplinarity lies in its capacity to interpenetrate disciplines, changing what they do and generating new epistemic standards.

These positions indicate that there is a vast untapped potential for curriculum innovation and for enhancing our understanding of the practice of interdisciplinarity, adding more nuances to our grasp of different modes of integration and different modes of interdisciplinarity. These

insights are important for theorizing relations between disciplines in the practice of interdisciplinarity, a matter that the presentation and paper associated with this Symposium contribution will undertake.

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