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Interdisciplinarity / Extradisciplinarity: On the University and the Active Pursuit of Community

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Abstract

This paper explores a defining contradiction at the heart of the university as a social and cultural institution: society requires the university to serve it, but this service requires the university's detachment and freedom from external social determinations. I argue that we can see this paradox embedded at the very heart of the university expressed in a myriad of ways throughout the institution's long history, including the relatively recent debates about interdisciplinarity. I review some instances in the history of the university where this contradiction has expressed itself most clearly and then examine some of the ways in which the rubric "interdisciplinarity" has been deployed in the contemporary corporate university. How is the term used? Who uses it and for what reasons? How might we come to understand "interdisciplinarity" as a performative term re-presenting or promising one set of meanings, but instantiating a very different set of actions? What are the political dimensions of its use? I highlight and problematize the distinction between the emergence of "interdisciplinarity" as an intellectual phenomenon and "interdisciplinarity" as it is currently defined and administered within academic institutions. Finally, I explore an alternative way to think about what we do at the university in the name of interdisciplinarity.

Introduction

During more than eight centuries, 'university' has been the name given by a society to a sort of supplementary body that at one and the same time it wanted to project outside itself and to keep jealously to itself, to emancipate and to control . . . with the relative autonomy of a technical apparatus, indeed that of a machine and a prosthetic body, this artifact that is the university has reflected society only in giving it the chance for reflection, that is dissociation. (Derrida, 1983, p. 19)

This quotation, taken from an essay by Jacques Derrida entitled "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," signals a paradox at the heart of the university. Society demands the university to serve it, but this service requires the university's detachment and freedom from external social determinations. The university enacts this paradox: requiring authorization from outside social agents (government, industry) in order to be free of them, and in order to reflect upon, criticize, or challenge them. This paradox, or conflict, embedded in the very idea of the university has been expressed and performed in a myriad of ways throughout the institution's long history, and it can be found, once again, in the relatively recent debates about interdisciplinarity.

In *Outside the Lines: Issues in Interdisciplinary Research*, Liora Salter and I identify a division in the literature about interdisciplinarity. One body of writing tends to define interdisciplinarity as any

scholarly activity that works between disciplines to solve specifically defined social and technical problems. This brand of interdisciplinarity takes its impetus and instructions from beyond the walls of the academy, from the “real” world of industry and government. As such, we name it “instrumental” interdisciplinarity. The other broad area of writing on interdisciplinarity is primarily conceptual and focuses on the practice of interdisciplinarity as scholarly activity in and of itself.

Under this rubric of “conceptual” interdisciplinarity, we make a further distinction. Some conceive interdisciplinary research as fundamentally dependent upon disciplinary: “this perspective works to highlight the strengths of a disciplinary organization of knowledge and to suggest that those strengths may be extended into the development of new non- or interdisciplinary modes of knowledge seeking” (Salter & Hearn, 1996, p. 31). Another branch of conceptual interdisciplinarity sees it as a direct challenge to disciplinary and to the established administration of knowledge. These challenges either search for a unified theory of knowledge or, more often, position interdisciplinarity as a *process* that renounces the reification of knowledge and education and stresses the integrative process of “becoming” individuals and communities. Embedded in these challenges is a critique of the dominant forms of institutionalized and administered knowledge.¹

Not surprisingly, the divisions Salter and I highlight between modes of interdisciplinarity re-iterate and re-inscribe the paradox at the heart of the university. In what follows, I further explore these divisions — between instrumental interdisciplinarity as a problem-based practice governed by determinants outside the walls of the university, and conceptual interdisciplinarity as embodying a challenge to the dominant disciplinary knowledge formations — in light of the university’s determining contradiction. I review some instances in the history of the university where this contradiction has expressed itself most clearly in order to set a context for the current debates about interdisciplinarity. In light of this history, I then examine some of the ways the rubric “interdisciplinarity” has been deployed in the contemporary corporate university, and I argue that “interdisciplinarity” has become a signal for the foreclosure of the university’s orienting paradox. How might we come to understand “interdisciplinarity” as a performative term, re-presenting or promising one set of meanings, but instantiating a very different set of actions? How is the term used? Who uses it and for what reasons? What are the political dimensions of its use? To answer these questions, I examine and problematize the distinction between the emergence of “interdisciplinarity” as an intellectual phenomenon and “interdisciplinarity” as it is currently defined and administered within academic institutions, and highlight the displacement of the first logic by the second. Finally, I gesture in the direction of an alternative way to think about what we do at the university in the name of interdisciplinarity.

The Early Universities: Contested Terrain

Since its earliest incarnations in the Middle Ages in Paris and Bologna, the meanings and functions of the university have been contested. In its very origins, the university embodied conflict between external interests — church, state, commerce — and internal radical opposition to these interests. This tension existed between the *studia generalia* — the free association of students and teachers that made up the earliest universities — and both the sites and contexts of their associations (towns and businesses) and the content of their study (vocational orientations such as law, medicine, and theology, which required external authorization).

As Charles Homer Haskins pointed out, it is important to remember that, contrary to popular belief, the term “university” does not refer to a universality of knowledge, as some would expect, but, rather, to “the totality of a group, whether of barbers, carpenters, or students” (1957, p. 9). The first *universitas* of

¹ For a full discussion of these distinctions, see especially “Interdisciplinarity” in Salter and Hearn (1996).

students organized as a group in order to protect themselves from the price-gouging activities of the townspeople. These unions of students, once incorporated, found themselves able to make other kinds of demands, most notably of their teachers. In the southern universities of Italy, teachers were beholden to the fees students would pay per lecture and, as such, became subject to the *universitas* of students. Teachers then founded their own guilds, or colleges, “requiring for admission thereto certain qualifications, which were ascertained by examination” (Haskins, 1957, p. 11). The term “university,” then, refers to “nothing more than an entity that manages its own affairs and conducts business for itself” (Kane, 1999, p. 3). Initially, the term “university” was employed to describe various trade unions, but this usage was gradually discontinued.

The first universities in Italy were student driven and vocationally oriented, defined by specific types of knowledge being taught in different regions: law in Bologna, medicine in Salerno. The model of the southern university emerged as the result of struggles between students, teachers, merchants, and city officials. But, notably, “the student guild immediately got the upper hand, and for several centuries effectively controlled the university. The students not the professors . . . elected from among their number the rectors or chief administrators, and students held the other administrative posts” (Cowley & Williams, 1991, pp. 44-45).²

In Northern Europe, however, the universities emerged out of struggles between teaching masters and the Church. Northern universities, such as the University of Paris, had their start as cathedral schools. The Bishop’s secretary, the Chancellor, hired Masters to teach and so initially controlled who and what was taught. All the Masters were clerics of the Church and could not deviate from teaching Church doctrine. They could, however, approve or disapprove students. In these first universities, the teachers had the upper hand over student guilds. The Chancellor also ran the lives of his students through the administration of Canon Law.

The newly formed College of the Masters of Paris eventually contested the power of the Chancellor after a period of student riots and unrest. Some of these riots were precipitated by the radical teachings of scholars such as Peter Abelard, who dared to subject Church dogma to the formal structures of Greek reasoning. Teachers took to the streets, teaching in “ramshackle houses on the Petit-Pont that linked the island with the Left Bank of the Seine” (Kane, 1999, p. 8). Students turned away from the Chancellor’s university and “made up a student city in the middle of the city” (Kane, 1999, p. 9). The contestation of the power of the Church by the Masters of Paris ended in a royal charter and Papal Bull allowing the Masters to incorporate the university as an independent body with the power to elect its own Proctor to represent them to the King and the Church. In 1219, a Papal Bull was ordered dissolving the power of the Chancellor altogether (see Haskins, 1957; Kane, 1999).

In its earliest incarnations, then, the university was a site of conflict and expressed its conflicted origins plainly. It was subject to external determining agents for its curriculum and its context (after all, these universities had no buildings but were dependent on private halls, churches, and the street) at the same time as it insisted on its independence in terms of internal institutional arrangements. Since this time, the university has remained both a site for radical social critique and a training ground for established professions, serving external dominant interests and, at the same time, staging opposition to those interests.

We might reasonably argue that the university has never really seen harmony between its professed “ideals” and its practice — its orienting concepts of self-governance and selfdetermination and the administration or implementation of those concepts. The university, as a formal, administrated social institution, has always served the interests of those in power. The university, as an idea, process, or

² For a detailed discussion of the history of student movements and student resistance, see Mark Edelman Boren (2001).

experience, has tended to fight against those interests, insisting on its freedom. Debate, argumentation, and criticism remain enshrined as core values of university learning.

Immanuel Kant and The Conflict of the Faculties

This paradox of the university, expressed as a tension between academic freedom and instrumental or administered knowledge, appears again, famously, in Immanuel Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Written in 1798, *The Conflict of the Faculties* was the last book Kant published; its three parts were not collected until after his death.³ He wrote the piece in response to the censorious measures against academic writing taken by the King of Prussia. In the essays, Kant performs a high-wire act for the King. He dutifully and repeatedly recognizes the university's indebtedness to its political context and makes a case for the university as a site for social and government training and public service. At the same time, he argues for the university as a site for freedom of thought and inquiry. Kant attempts to defend both the academic freedom embodied by the lower faculty of philosophy and the "usefulness" of knowledge imparted by the higher faculties — law, medicine, and theology.

The higher faculties of law, medicine, and theology have the job of caring for men's civil, physical, and spiritual well-being and are under the necessary eye and sway of the government. The lower faculty of philosophy has the job of policing truth and illuminating reason. Kant sounds most conciliatory when he writes, "a faculty is considered higher only if its teachings . . . interest the government itself, while the faculty whose function is only to look after the interests of science is called lower because it may use its own judgment about what it teaches" (1972, pp. 25-27). With this model, Kant entrenches a view of the academy as simultaneously inside and outside the direct influence of external political or economic forces. But, perhaps more importantly, he re-states the paradox of the university through a discussion of the organization of the disciplines. His model admits to a necessary element of usefulness and instrumentality, at the same time as it advocates that thought and research be free from social and political pressures:

It is absolutely essential that the learned community at the university also contain a faculty that is independent of the government's command with regard to its teachings, one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything and concerns itself with the interests of . . . truth; one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly. For without a faculty of this kind the truth would not come to light (and this would be to the government's own detriment). (Kant, 1972, pp. 27-29)

In the conflict that he names "an inevitable recurrence," Kant sees "a necessity somehow transcendental and constitutive" (Derrida, 1992, p. 13), and so attempts to create a concrete strategy for its management and regulation. This is Kant's "system of justification" (Derrida, 1992, p. 6) for the university, one that might successfully navigate its internally generated mission of reason and its externally authorized mission of usefulness. This system is based on the regulatory ideal of reason as final arbiter of action and thought. As Derrida has written, "Kantian thought tries to attain to pure legitimation, to purity of law, to reason as the court of last resort" (1992, p. 10). With Kant, reason is instituted as the "reason for" the university's necessary autonomy and its exemplary role, and is structured in opposition to, or set apart from, the instrumental or technical ends of knowledge.

³ For a full discussion of the conflict surrounding *The Conflict of the Faculties*, see Mary Gregor's "Translator's Introduction" in Kant (1979).

The “Useful” University and the Rise of Disciplinarity

The central tension between the usefulness of the university for its society on the one hand and freedom of inquiry from external interests and the pursuit of reason on the other is in evidence again in the university reform movements of the nineteenth century. It is best exemplified in the establishment of the University of London in 1825 and in the reforms foisted upon Oxford and Cambridge a decade earlier.

At this time, Oxford and Cambridge were taken to task, most notably by Adam Smith and Sydney Smith, for their exclusion of non-Church of England men, their apparently non-existent teaching practices, and their curriculum, which came under attack for its dreamy pursuit of “truth” and useless study of the classics. Adam Smith wrote, “in the university of Oxford, the greater part of the public professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching” (cited in Young, 1992, p. 101). The Reverend Sydney Smith argued for the necessary usefulness of knowledge as against the uselessness of the kind of knowledge and learning offered at Oxford and Cambridge. In so doing, Smith instantiated a covert class politic into debates about higher education that continues to this day:

what other measure is there of dignity in intellectual Labour, but usefulness? And what ought the term University to mean, but a place where every science is taught which is liberal, and at the same time useful to mankind. Nothing would so much tend to bring classical literature within proper bounds, as a steady and invariable appeal to utility in our appreciation of all human knowledge. (Smith, extracted in Sanderson, 1975, pp. 35-36)

The Dons at Oxford and Cambridge responded to these criticisms, arguing for the pursuit of useless knowledge. They linked the pursuit of high truth with spiritual practice and with the Church, and pitted the standard of “quality of mind” against a debased and vulgar notion of direct utility. Edward Copleston, provost of Oriel College, responded to Smith:

to make necessity the standard of what is praiseworthy or honourable is against the uniform judgment of mankind. There must be surely a cultivation of mind, which is itself, a good: a good of the highest order; without any immediate reference to bodily appetites, or wants of any kind. . . . The habit of discrimination, the power of stating a question distinctly and of arguing with perspicuity are of much greater importance than the hasty acquisition of miscellaneous knowledge. (extracted in Sanderson, 1975, pp. 37-38)

The founding of the University of London in 1826 broke the Church’s monopoly of higher education and entrenched the arguments for socially useful education articulated by Sydney Smith and Adam Smith, among others. The informing spirit of the University of London was the work of Jeremy Bentham, especially his notion of “chrestomathia,” meaning “conducive to useful learning” (Young, 1992, p. 105). This was a theory of pedagogy based on the qualities of efficiency and discipline. Bentham proposed

a new system of instruction . . . based on the latest theories of associationist psychology, together with the abolition of flogging, [and] the admission of girls on an equal basis with boys (a principle that the University of London itself did not endorse until 1878). . . . The school

itself was built as a panopticon, so as to allow the most efficient use of the teacher's capacities. (Young, 1992, pp. 104-105)

The University of London, along with the reformed German and American universities, offered a comprehensive range of useful subjects — medicine, engineering, mathematics, political economy, law — and focused, purposefully, on the utility of research and knowledge for outside interest.⁴ These universities embodied in concrete form a politicized alternative to the class-based practices of open inquiry and “useless” literary education offered at Oxford and Cambridge.

During this time of university reform in the mid-nineteenth century, the disciplinary structure with which we are now so familiar became entrenched. These disciplinary structures of knowledge and teaching were clearly conditioned by outside interests: economic, cultural, and political. The rise of industrialization and technology, the growth of the natural and social sciences, and the rise of a professional bourgeois class, for example, not only helped to determine the structure and delineation of the disciplines, but also permeated the administrative structures and ideologies of the university itself. New modes of inquiry, psychiatry, evolutionary biology, and sociology articulated what Foucault (1982) termed the “dividing practices” demanded by the “useful” university. Faculties competed against each other for internal and external funding and recognition. Thus, they came to function in relative isolation from each other. Bentham's model of education as panopticon set into motion a practice of disciplinarity as a “distinct form of power which trains the body and soul, by systematically observing and distinguishing its subjects” (Messer-Davidow & Shumway, 1991, p. 212).

We can see in the emergence of the useful disciplinary university a concomitant movement toward social conformity and political docility. Although in its earliest expression the useful university was intended to democratize education, the structural formulas for disciplinary efficiency worked instead to generate useful and productive social subjects. As Michel Foucault argues, disciplinary power

refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of the rule to be followed. It differentiates individuals from one another. . . . It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, and the nature of individuals. It introduces through this value giving measure, the constraint of conformity to be achieved. . . . [I]t traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal. (1977, pp. 182-183)

The discourses of university disciplinarity as we understand them today emerged at the same time as industrialization and the entrenchment of market logic:

The combination of social and institutional bureaucratization, demands for efficient professionals, and the idealization of professorial virtuosi led to the further entrenchment of disciplinary specialization. These institutional and social dynamics have continued to this day, ensuring the maintenance and hegemony of disciplinary research and education. (Salter & Hearn, 1996, p. 20)

⁴ For a full account of the funding of the University of London, see Sanderson (1975).

The Rise of Interdisciplinarity

We might see the rise of interdisciplinarity in the early part of the twentieth century in the tradition of the students of Bologna, the Masters of the University of Paris, and the Dons of Oxford and Cambridge. We might see it as yet another attempt to assert the necessary freedom of knowledge and inquiry against the exigencies and external pressures of society and entrenched modes of administered knowledge. But we might also see it as yet another expression of the contradiction and conflict embedded in the idea of the university. Interdisciplinarity in its first historical expression after World War I was explicitly counterdisciplinary and was interested in university reform. The focus at this time was on integrative knowledge, as evidenced in the unity of science movement. These challenges — what we have called “critical interdisciplinarity” — continue today in the form of area studies, women’s studies, queer studies, post-colonial studies, race studies, and cultural studies, to name a few. These modes of knowledge cut across traditional institutional and administrative boundaries at the same time as they question traditional ways of knowing and learning.⁵

Predictably, just as discourses about critical interdisciplinarity developed within the academy, external social and political demands (most notably the Second World War) called for the development of problem-focused, instrumental interdisciplinary research. As the humanities and social sciences continued their critique and challenge to established forms of knowledge and modes of knowing, keeping alive some notion of a “lower faculty” within the university, problem-focused interdisciplinarity was deployed to address political and social issues defined and delineated by external agents. And so, we return to the distinction between problem-focused interdisciplinarity and conceptually based interdisciplinarity.

This brief review of some defining moments in the history of the university illustrates some of the ways in which the university’s paradox has been articulated and played out. We might argue that the difficulties we currently face in the modern university are shaped and conditioned by this same paradox or contradiction. Clearly, our understanding of current debates and issues inside the university may be enriched by an appreciation of the paradoxical nature of the university and of the ways in which this paradox has been negotiated throughout the university’s history.

The numerous crises facing the university today — debates around the impact of external corporate interests and funding on academic freedom; debates about the role of “new learning” technologies; debates about the impoverishment of public education; debates concerning the disciplinary “rigour” of the humanities in the face of the “cultural turn” of the 1990s, better known as the “culture wars”; and, of course, debates about the legitimacy and content of interdisciplinary research — all betray a determination to define, once and for all, the university’s nature and mission. These debates drive to resolution and usually articulate, in some form or other, one side or another of the paradox outlined above: utility vs. uselessness; pragmatic, skill-based education vs. the pursuit of learning for learning’s sake. But where does interdisciplinarity sit inside the conflicted site of the university? Is “interdisciplinarity” exemplary of the university’s animating paradox? Or, is it, in effect, working to nullify or cripple it? What can current incarnations of interdisciplinarity tell us about the relative health of the university’s tradition of contestation and conflict?

⁵ For a complete accounting of the history of modern interdisciplinary institutional formations, see Julie Thompson Klein (1990).

Interdisciplinarity Today: Success or Failure?

Almost ten years after the publication of *Outside the Lines*, it might reasonably be argued that the movement for critical interdisciplinary work has been successful. It appears as though traditional structures of disciplines and faculties are dissolving. We have seen the unprecedented growth of area studies and the growing dominance of cultural studies as an orientation for politicized learning across the social sciences and humanities. Modes of knowledge formation and the hierarchy of the disciplines, as they have been understood for well over one hundred years, are breaking apart (Klein, 1990, 1993; Readings, 1996). Traditional forms of knowledge are being rationalized out of existence in the name of what once were powerfully anti-institutional forces, such as cultural studies.⁶

But, as Bill Readings has famously written, the move to institutionalize cultural studies and other types of “area studies” (along lines of gender, race, and sexuality, for example) must be understood in broader social and political context:

the idea of cultural studies arises at the point when the notion of culture ceases to mean anything vital for the university as a whole. The human sciences can do what they like with culture, can do cultural studies, because culture no longer matters as an idea for the institution. (1996, p. 91)

In other words, the “engaged politics” articulated inside cultural studies, gender studies, or race studies can be reasonably indulged by the modern corporate university. Cultural studies or gender studies can serve as the ultimate interdisciplinary models in the corporate university; critics can continue to lace together theories of representation, identity, and ideology, and can expect to be institutionally indulged because, simply, “the high stakes game has moved to another table” (Readings, 1996, p. 104). In this age of the transnational corporate university, the real action, internally, is in the areas of science and technology and is driven, externally, by the rhetoric and “best-practices” of for-profit corporatism. Given these claims, one might reasonably ask: have critical interdisciplinarians simply been flattered into a sense of “success” due to their growing institutional recognition? Can critical sensibilities be so easily bought off?

Critical interdisciplinarians may have argued for the dissolution of traditional administrative structures, but this deconstruction failed to provide a sufficient understanding of the recuperative power of administered market logic. This bureaucratic logic rushed in to fill the void left by traditional incarnations of the university. Today’s useful university is the bureaucratic university, “an autonomous bureaucratic corporation whose internal regulation is entirely self-interested without regard to wider ideological imperatives” (Readings, 1996, p. 40). The modern corporate university is a social site that reproduces without question the values and tenets of capitalism. It not only mimics the structures, behaviours, and values of private industry, but also has, in fact, become such an entity itself (Press & Washburn, 2000). “The university is bowing more and more to corporate values . . . [and] accountability has indeed been co-opted into accounting — empty chatter about excellence evades fundamental questions of value while disguising narrow and brutal conceptions of cost and benefit” (Harvey, 1998, pp. 115 - 116).

The corporatization of the university is evidenced in Canada and around the world in any number of ways: private funding of research (over 4.25 billion corporate dollars were donated to universities in the

⁶ For examples of the growing hegemony of cultural studies, see Cary Nelson (1994) and Anthony Easthope (1991). For a discussion of the impact of trends in cultural theory and the rise of cultural studies on traditional humanist disciplines, see Good (2001).

U.S. in 1995); “strategic partnerships” with industries; corporate sponsorship on campus through scholarships, on-campus advertising, and sports team endorsements; endowed chairs; the implementation of key performance indicators by governments based solely on (any) job acquisition after graduation; the growth of professor-entrepreneurs; the development of new media technology and learning programs in partnership with private technology interests; and the proliferation of “technology transfer” and “patent development” offices in university administrations.⁷ In Canada, increasingly, topdown corporate models of governance are replacing bicameral university governance structures, and faculty and students are increasingly marginalized in decision-making processes.⁸ Perhaps the most telling evidence of the hegemony of the corporate university is the fact that administration was

the leading growth sector of higher education . . . in more than 3,000 U.S. colleges and universities from 1985 to 1990. While the number of full-time faculty grew by only 8.6 percent, administrative personnel rose by 14.1 percent, and their subordinates, “other professionals,” increased by double that, or 28.1 percent. (Engell & Dangerfield, 1998, p. 5)

In light of the growth of external corporate interests on campus, one might reasonably ask what role has instrumental interdisciplinarity played in this development? Has instrumental interdisciplinarity served to legitimate and indeed bolster the interests of private corporate interests on campus? Problem-focused, or instrumental, interdisciplinary research is particularly vulnerable to the external logic of corporate interests as it can leave unexamined the assumptions behind the delineation of “problems” to be studied, the sources of its funding, and the social, political, and economic implications of the “solutions” it offers. Here, we can see how the rubric of “interdisciplinarity” functions as a kind of Trojan horse, smuggling external political and economic interests inside the walls of the academy. And so, “interdisciplinarity” becomes a sign or a code word. Cloaked in the rhetoric of academic freedom and innovation, “interdisciplinarity” can serve as a rationale and as a source of legitimation for private interests and corporate-style institutional arrangements inside the academy.⁹ Academic administrators love to feel as though they are on the cutting edge. The use of the term “interdisciplinarity” in grant applications and funding proposals works to assure them they are. With this term, they are able to signal one meaning — free academic innovation in knowledge formation — and execute another — an uncritical capitulation to agendas and problems determined by government and corporate interests.

Countering the Corporate University?

I see our current circumstances, in the throes of the transnational corporate university, as dire. The paradox of the university — its tradition of conflict and debate — is being foreclosed. I would like to heighten the sense of urgency some of us may feel about the current state of the university, about the paradigms we are losing and the ones we are purportedly “gaining” — those foisted upon us by external corporate logic. Most significantly, I would like to ask how have both critical and instrumental interdisciplinarity worked, perhaps unknowingly, to produce or allow for the current state of the corporate university? In the wake of the “postmodern turn” in the humanities and the social sciences, do

⁷ See Press and Washburn (2000); Engell and Dangerfield (1998); Harvey (1998); Readings (1996); Poovey (2001); and Theall (2000) on the corporate university.

⁸ See especially Booth (2001), Quigley (2003), and Hearn (2002b).

⁹ Press and Washburn (2000) outline specific examples of the ways in which private interests control and direct research agendas. They highlight how researchers are “gently persuaded” to abandon claims to academic freedom in the name of “useful” research.

we need to re-instantiate a “subject” behind the object of a university education? Are the rhetoric and rationale of corporate interests expressed as “practice-oriented education” now all there is to see in university administration and curriculum? Has the university lost its “lower faculty”? Gregg Lambert argues that there is a

fundamental problem in the architecture of the contemporary university, a failure in the discourse of sufficient grounds or principles, perhaps a foundational weakness caused by the absence of a faculty whose juridical task was to protect the ends of the university from being reduced to purely finite, economic, politico-ideological, and culturally determined forms of interests. (1997, n. p.)

How can we prevent the university from being reduced to its pure utility for capital, from becoming a purely functional apparatus? How can we prevent the foreclosure of debate and conflict about and around the site of university? Can the humanities and their current interdisciplinary inflections re-incarnate Kant’s ideal of the “lower faculty”? Can they actively work to re-assess their responsibility to think through the idea of the university and its structures?

Mary Poovey, from within the post-modern cultural turn, argues for the strategic essentializing of the idea of the “human” in order to counteract the thorough penetration of market logic into the university. She writes, “The only way we can evaluate the effects of market penetration into the university in terms other than the market’s own is to assert some basis for evaluation that repudiates market logic and refuses market language” (2000, p. 9). Tellingly, Poovey argues that the basis for this alternative rhetoric must be the “goods of living culture, which embody and preserve human creativity” (2000, p. 9).

This argument resonates with older university debates, as the humanities are called upon to fulfill the role of Kant’s lower faculty. The humanities must “preserve, nurture, analyze, interrogate, and interpret this living body of cultural materials” (Poovey, 2000, p. 10) as a defense against the assimilating forces of external social pressures. This sentiment is echoed in much current work by humanists who assert the usefulness of useless knowledge (Engell & Dangerfield, 1998; Good, 2001; Kermode, 1997). Engell and Dangerfield bring the words of Edward Copleston, Provost of Oriel College, to mind when they write in *Harvard Magazine*:

Do we care anymore whether colleges and universities are custodians of collective, diverse cultures — whether they record, teach, transmit traditions and give us the linguistic and symbolic tools to express our veneration, criticism and contribution to our culture, to make connections within its variety, to examine its checkered past and to imagine its possible future? (1998, p. 8)

But, can a facile redeployment of these older justifications for the university as bearer of culture effectively work against the logic of the corporate university? To what degree do these justifications simply replay turf wars between the disciplines, leaving the larger question of the nature of the place, its regulatory ideal of reason, its moral imperative, and our responsibility to it untouched? What role can “interdisciplinarity” play in the fight to resist the paradigms of instrumental knowledge production and administration we have “gained” in the last decades and reinvigorate debate about the nature of the university itself?

Revisiting Interdisciplinarity

An institution — this is not merely a few walls or some outer structures surrounding, protecting, guaranteeing, or restricting the freedom of our work; it is also and already the structure of our interpretation. (Derrida, 1992, p. 22)

Is interdisciplinarity working to shore up the interests of university administrators and their private partners? Is it working to placate the interests of those “radical” thinkers who wish to carve out academic ground and legitimacy for themselves and their interests? Is what happens under the name of “interdisciplinarity” actually working to open up spaces for challenge and dissent — holding open a space for new thought?

In *Outside the Lines*, we describe interdisciplinarity as “any challenge to the limitations or premises of the prevailing organization of knowledge or its representation in an institutionally recognized form” (Salter & Hearn, 1996, p. 43). But we must remember that this description itself is as much a political position, and a structure of interpretation, as it is any objective measure of the academic landscape out there. I argue that we must work to inflect the term in such a way that it can be made to keep alive the traditions of debate and contestation at the heart of the university.

“Interdisciplinarity” must be both an intellectual and an overtly political endeavour, involving a rigorous process of self-reflexive analysis beyond issues of representation and into the terrain of the political economy of knowledge production. As Derrida writes in his essay “Mochlos,”

I do not know if there exists today a pure concept of a university responsibility. . . . But today the minimal and in any case the most interesting, most novel and strongest responsibility, for someone attached to a research or teaching institution, is perhaps to make this political implication, its system and its aporias as clear and thematic as possible. (Derrida, 1992, p. 22)

In light of this, we must ask how might we best deploy and enact interdisciplinarity now?

Clearly, the challenge is to fight the foreclosure of the university’s meaning by market logic and to hold open spaces for thinking, developing, and teaching alternative values, as a way of at least maintaining the paradox of the place. I propose that one of the ways in which this might be done is to link the intellectual work of interdisciplinarity with the generation of new forms of community inside and outside the walls of universities. In other words, we need to consciously link together intellectual interdisciplinarity and the act of imagining new forms of university administration and institutionalization, imagining new communities to be formed and new ways of forming them within and against the “ruins” of the university. These new communities would necessarily be involved in ongoing efforts to describe and re-describe the university as a social, cultural, and political site, at the same time as they pursue other knowledge ends. As Bill Readings writes, “dwelling in the ruins of the University thus means giving a serious attention to the present complexity of its space, undertaking an endless détournement of the spaces willed to us by a history whose temporality we no longer inhabit” (1996, p. 129).

We have seen how “interdisciplinarity” bears the marks of the university’s central and defining tensions. Just as interdisciplinary work can challenge and break apart entrenched knowledge formations, it can also provide the ground for new knowledge communities. These communities might be

provisional. They will inevitably shift and change. They might be defined by the pursuit of specific kinds of knowledge, but they might also be defined by concrete attempts to challenge the current institutional incorporation of the university itself via new modes of governance, methods of consultation, and funding practices. Indeed, they might work beyond disciplinary structures altogether.

Towards Extra-disciplinarity: An Example of a New Learning Community

Such a community would interrogate the essence of reason and of the principle of reason, the values of the basic, of the principal, of radicality . . . and it would attempt to draw out all the possible consequences of this questioning. . . .What is meant by community and institution must be rethought. (Derrida, 1983, p. 16)

Recently, at Trent University, in the face of administrative adversity, a solid student-led subculture emerged which combined direct political action with theoretical analysis and the development of new cross-disciplinary interests. Students, along with faculty from across disciplines, formed a distinct learning community, derived not from the classroom, but from the political fight for the soul of Trent and the idea of the university itself. This struggle against privatization and corporate modes of university governance resulted in the formation of several reading groups and courses, teach-ins, conferences, an art show, films, newspaper and journal articles, and the integration of several sympathetic community groups (townies) in Peterborough with the student groups. One might call such a phenomenon “extra-disciplinary” in the sense that most of the learning and research occurred outside of the classroom and across disciplinary structures of the university. As Derrida has written, given the paradox of the place, the responsibilities of and to the university can never be purely academic: “The decision of thought cannot be an intra-institutional event, an academic moment” (Derrida, 1983, p. 19).

The events at Trent recall the first moments of the university in Italy — for the most part, student-led and student-defined. At Trent and indeed at many other universities across the globe (most notably in the 300-day-long student strike at UNAM in Mexico City and, surprisingly, at Harvard in Boston), students formed their own “university,” within and against the demands of external political and administrative agents. In these moments, the university finds itself re-imagined, simultaneously speaking to itself and beyond itself: postadministration, post-classroom, and post-theory. The university becomes a staging ground for meaningful social participation and political change.

Bill Readings argues that the university community is necessarily a dissensual one. As we have seen, dialogue, dissent, and debate are part of its very lifeblood: “The university is a place where thought takes place beside thought, where thinking is a shared process without identity or unity. Thought beside itself perhaps” (1996, p. 192). From its earliest incarnations, the unique social space of the university has always attempted to enact a very simple idea: we should learn and think together. At its core is a notion of community and of communication that is generated both inside and, necessarily, beyond the walls of the place. Real learning built out of dialogue is necessarily open-ended, exploratory, and self-referential. The university community is, as a result, always in the process of “becoming,” constituting itself every time it tries to define itself, again within and against its social context. Every time we ask what a university is, “we are making a claim about its future, namely, that it is not complete” (Bobette, 2001, p. 3).

The role of interdisciplinarity, as I see it, is to work towards substantiating this claim. Interdisciplinarity as a practice and a concept needs to remember and preserve the idea of conflict and debate embedded as a core value of the university. This understanding must become part of the structure of our interpretation of the place and the process. Under the rubric of interdisciplinarity, and against the foreclosure of corporate logic around the meanings of the university today, we must commit ourselves to

new formations of knowledge and inquiry and, simultaneously, to the constitution of new learning communities, however provisional and tentative. Interdisciplinarity should give expression to a modality of scholarly activity that works self-consciously and responsibly to hold open both an intellectual and an administrative space where one remains free to ask and fruitfully pursue the question “what is a university?”

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