

Why do we attempt interdisciplinarity?

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Introduction

We are very aware of the difficulties we face in doing interdisciplinary research. We come across technical problems of linking disciplines and methods, problems involved in publication, effects on career development, logistical problems, difficulties involved in defining problems...each of us involved in the Tyndall Centre and beyond has our own perceptions of the challenges of interdisciplinary research.

The fundamental question in my mind is "so why do we do it?" And I don't mean why an interdisciplinary approach per se is necessarily better (we can have this debate if we want to), I mean "What motivates us personally to work in this way, and not only to identify challenges, but work in an explicitly interdisciplinary research centre and try to surmount them?". Leaving aside for now the distinction between cross, trans and inter-disciplinarity, and simply referring to 'interdisciplinary research activity', I'd like to make two main points. **First, why do we do it, and second, why does 'why we do it' matter?**

I suggest there are five different motivational "urges", if you like, for engaging in interdisciplinary research. I'm sure you will know people who display some of these characteristics and I hope you will recognise elements of these in yourselves. Of course, it would be invidious for me to mention anyone's names as examples, but I will leave that to your judgement....

First, we have the **Egotistical Motivation**. We all know the signs. The desire to see self as the centre of everything, knowledgeable about everything, the 'wise one' who is all seeing...but mainly those motivated by Egotism are interested in themselves. Turn up to give a speech about anything, a colleague's retirement, the opening of a building, their son's wedding, and such a person will inevitably slip in a reference to their latest enterprise, their latest Nature paper, the important people who have consulted them. Egotistical behaviour might come out as "Somebody told me that I was always namedropping. Funny, Gordon Brown told me the same thing last week". Interdisciplinary research gives a pure Egotist a perfect platform for being the centre of attention, the intellectual top dog.

Second, we have the **Visionary Motivation**. Pure Visionaries see the big picture, see common threads in diverse areas, see that everything is linked to everything else, and want to bring it all together. They see problems and want to address them, from a motivation of some greater good. There is always a cause to rally to, always a higher purpose, always what you might call a "holistic wholesomeness". A Visionary approach might be to say "but what does it mean? we have to understand the context". Interdisciplinary research is a park covered in thick new snow for those motivated in a Visionary way to play in. Who knows what new snowmen might be built to-day?

Third, we have the **Techie Motivation**. People inspired in this way love to work out methods for integrating qualitative and quantitative data, programming computers to create ever-bigger integrated assessment models, relish the challenge of reconciling different peoples' impenetrable spaghetti of conflicting computer codes. A Techie approach might be to say "yes, but can we do that in Java?" Less digitally, approaching interdisciplinary research in a techie way could mean focussing on the methods different disciplines use, trying to reconcile economic theory with political science theory, for example. It's not all high-tech in Techie-land, there can be an awful lot of very dry dust there too.

Fourth, there is the **Facilitator Motivation**. Facilitators see the opportunities to integrate as mainly being about people: the enjoyment in

helping people understand each other and work together. An extreme Facilitator approach would be to say "never mind what comes out, it's the process that's important." The myth of interdisciplinarity, for them, is less about understanding the world of things and ideas, and more about unravelling the infinitely complex worlds of human beings.

Finally, we have the **Reluctant Motivation**, which is of course an oxymoron. People who are quite happy with doing things the way they do, but can sense the world around them is moving into a different way of doing things display this Motivation. They may be genuinely sceptical about the value of an interdisciplinary approach – and they can marshal several good arguments why that might be the case. They may be sceptical of new buzzwords and believe that there really is nothing new under the sun. They may feel threatened by the implicit challenge to their own worldview and life's work. But they can't ignore the trend towards interdisciplinarity all around them. Someone with a strong Reluctant streak might say "we need to tick the boxes for the funding application...but how can we do what we were going to do anyway and hit the research councils' buttons?"

So those are my proposed five motivations...which resonates most with you? Personally I believe my inspiration is about 50% Visionary, 30% Facilitator, 20% Reluctant (for purely practical reasons!) and, dare I say it, 10% Egotist. I wonder what my colleagues think....

So far, so mischievous. But why do I think this kind of self-examination is a worthwhile exercise? For too long, there has been a strong focus in interdisciplinary research discussions on the 'other' – the government's funding mechanisms, the publication problems, the challenges of combining different types of data, institutional capacities and constraints to interdisciplinary research. I'm not convinced we need an analytical form of integration. While I can see that many things are linked, I don't have a great desire to try and work them all out and present the world with an answer.

The issue of interdisciplinary integration I see primarily as an issue of motivating and helping researchers understand each other. There is a lot of mutual misunderstanding, some of it wilful. Social science, we hear from some quarters, is

the 'soft stuff, made up as you go along, where anything goes', and social scientists are 'not in the real world, their work has no relevance', and, most hurtful of all, they 'have no fashion sense'. From other quarters we learn that science is 'far too simplistic', and that scientists 'are arrogant and think everything can be modelled with a number'. Most cuttingly, scientists 'don't live in the real world', and yes, they 'have no fashion sense'. Corduroy jackets notwithstanding (and I can say this as a big fan of corduroy), there is much lack of respect, and lack of willingness to listen.

What am I suggesting that we do about it? In the last couple of years I have become very interested in Humanistic Psychology, based on the therapeutic work of Carl Rogers. In Rogers' theory, transformation is possible primarily through the display of good, active listening. I don't just mean hearing the words someone says, but really trying to understand others' perspectives. Rogers outlined three core conditions for this sort of engagement:

- Unconditional positive regard of the other's perspective and actions
- Empathy for the other
- Congruence or realness in our own behaviour.

This so-called 'person-centred' approach is often used by counsellors in personal therapy but its applications are much wider than that – it has been used as a part of conflict resolution, and facilitation of different groups' competing interests. I think it could be a very important part of making progress on interdisciplinary research. Through understanding our own motivations, being honest with ourselves and others about why we do what we do, and being willing to accept another's motivations in a like manner, not judging, and jumping in to show how wrong they are, but really trying to understand, I think that progress can be made. Do you find Egotistical behaviour insufferable? Do you get irritated when someone displays crusading Visionary traits? Do you just want to punch those nice Facilitators? Only when we endeavour to understand each others', and our own, motivations, will we start to overcome some of the barriers we all face in our research lives.