



EDITORIAL:

Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary?

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Following the publication of the first issue of *INTERFACE* a number of colleagues got in touch with us, some to congratulate us for establishing an interdisciplinary journal, others to inquire whether we are an interdisciplinary or a multidisciplinary journal, or indeed a journal of area studies. Were the inquiries more numerous, there is no doubt that we would have faced more terms to respond to, as the proliferation of terms in this area of scholarship has resulted in “a sometimes confusing array of jargon” (Klein, 2010, p. 15). Graff, nearing a conclusion of his historical survey of interdisciplinarity, is more explicit regarding the cause of both the confusion and the profusion:

The “name game” in which interdisciplinarity is construed by listing or denying disciplines is symptomatic of the severe problems that result from multiple, conflicting, and contradictory discourses in which dichotomies substitute for clarity. Definitions are often absent; transdisciplinarity is an especially egregious example. The endless typologies, classifications, and hierarchies of multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity are not helpful. Most important, we must recognize that interdisciplines could not exist without disciplines; mutually and reciprocally, they shape and reshape each other.

(Graff, 2015, p. 215)

Given this state of affairs, it is imperative that *INTERFACE* is explicit about its editorial stance.

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Superficially speaking, when **INTERFACE** calls for papers that deal with any aspect of any period of any European language/literature one already assumes that it is a resource available to a number of distinct disciplines. However, if the above statement by Graff is correct, then before talking about interdisciplinarity, we should talk about disciplinarity. The problem is what exactly is a “discipline” within our field of studies? If we use as a guide the way academic departments are organized, then the apparent answer would be that the disciplines are organized alongside “national” lines (i.e. French Studies, German Studies, Spanish Studies, etc.). Unfortunately, this organization has a disadvantage: it both hides real and existing divisions and creates artificial ones. So, for example, the researcher of Spanish language faces very different epistemological and conceptual issues from one’s colleague in the same department who researches Spanish literature, and at the same time shares these very issues with the person working on the other side of the wall and who researches French language.

When the resources available and the number of the practitioners are beyond a certain critical mass, then the academic world tries to resolve the problem of the conflict within the same department by creating additional departments, or divisions within existing departments. So, for example, even in the relatively minor (by international standards) field of Modern Greek Studies, Greek universities have the numbers and the resources to split their departments into Modern Greek Literature and Modern Greek Linguistics. However, for the very same field of studies this solution would not be a possibility within, say, British universities, where King’s College – London takes the opposite view: that all Greek Studies (Classical, Byzantine, Modern; both language and literature) should be packed into one unit, or be closed down.

It is beyond the scope of this editorial to trace the history of academic departmentalization.¹ Suffice it here to say that this movement started from medieval times, when law and medicine became distinct from theology and the arts. In response to calls from outside academy for more specialization for the “professional” courses, scholarly institutions

1 However, two very nice accounts of this history are available in Klein (1990) and Swoboda (1979).

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set up a dichotomy of “theoretical” and “practical studies”,² and as a result the professional guilds were able to influence and control the curriculum, as Swoboda (1979, p. 55) makes clear.

What both the example of the Greek departments and the “innovation” of the medieval universities make clear is that the distribution of scholars into academic departments is not being made in order to facilitate the production of knowledge per se, but in order to facilitate the production of knowledge according to the norms imposed by the power relations prevailing in particular temporal and spatial frameworks. In other words, the scholar of French Linguistics, for instance, prefers to be placed within the same department with the scholar of French Literature rather than with the practitioner of German Linguistics –not because the two of them share epistemological and methodological communalities, but because the ideology of Frenchness (or in other cases Germanness, Spanishness, and so on) has inculcated in them shared forms of consciousness, roles and norms which are tightly associated with particular regimes of power (which in this particular case arose into prominence from the late eighteenth century onwards within the context of a power struggle between the aristocrats and the burghers, as well as competing imperialisms and the reactions of the subjugated communities).

Of course, interdisciplinarity is also involved in the struggle between discourses of power. One example of this involvement can be seen in the case of the new universities established in the 1960’s and 1970’s in Canada:

In many cases, the new universities were located in close proximity to long-established ones...Thus, most of them developed programs in areas that we would now consider to be interdisciplinary, either because this was considered to be the intellectually promising course to follow, or because, by being interdisciplinary, the new or refashioned universities

2 As Birnbaum (1969, p. 11) puts it “the medieval universities exhibited a considerable respect for the world of praxis: their faculties of law and medicine were closely tied to the actual exercise of these professions”.

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could claim to be breaking new ground in comparison with the older institutions. All the Canadian universities especially known today for their interdisciplinary studies, with the possible exception of Carleton, were established or restructured in this period.

(Salter and Hearn, 1997, pp. 28-29)

Similarly, the choice made by **INTERFACE** is also a choice motivated by questions of power (or rather, the lack thereof) that we face as scholars of European Languages and Literatures in East Asia. Firstly, as Finch (2012) stated with respect to Korea (but his insights can be generalized all over East Asia) with the exception of English all other European language programs face a situation in which the numbers of both students and researchers are diminishing. As a result, fields that were always less popular (e.g. Italian or Russian Studies) find it already difficult to form communities that will have the critical mass necessary for engaging in important projects; while even the more popular ones (e.g. French, German, Spanish Studies) are seeing their numbers dwindling and seem to be heading towards a similar fate in the near future. The solution that **INTERFACE** proposes is to pool the resources of these different disciplines (which as we have already seen are not as unified and as autonomous as some may claim) and to create unity in diversity. Not simply to tolerate each other, but to actively acknowledge that our diversity enriches all of us.

The first international seminar on interdisciplinarity organized by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation in Nice in 1970 resulted in the publication of Apostel (1972), and offered definitions of the different kinds of interdisciplinarity, (although these changes have been contested from the very beginning, they nevertheless are still the most widely used definitions available). The distinctions made are between multidisciplinary (defined as a juxtaposition of various disciplines, sometimes with no apparent connection between them), interdisciplinarity (defined as the interaction between two or more disciplines) and transdisciplinarity (defined as a process of establishing a common system of axioms for a set of disciplines). These three types

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of scholarship form a continuum: at the one end, different disciplines simply share the same platform, and keep their own distinct agendas and methodologies (multidisciplinarity); in the middle of the continuum, they interact with each other, inform each other, borrow from each other, while they still remain separate (interdisciplinarity); at the other end of the continuum, the distinct disciplines fuse together to create a new discipline (transdisciplinarity).

All these kinds of interdisciplinarity have already been commonplace within the departments belonging to our field. Those teaching and researching language have always been in the same departments with those teaching and researching literature, so our departments have already been multidisciplinary; and of course literary studies would occasionally be informed by linguists to formulate opinions regarding the diction of a piece of literature, so our departments have already been interdisciplinary; while stylistics created a fusion between linguistics and literary studies, so our departments have already been transdisciplinary.

What **INTERFACE** proposes is that we actively go beyond the national boundaries. This is not only an acknowledgement of our relatively small numbers in this part of the world; it is also an attempt to build upon what is probably our greatest strength. As I have argued in my editorial in the first issue of our journal, European cultures have been developing in close proximity with each other; each of them has developed in the context of all the others, and in its turn provides the context within which all the others develop. This contextual influence is being lost by the organization of our field in discrete “national” departments, an organization that encourages reduction and disjunction. It encourages us to reduce any problem into fundamental units of analysis and to consider everything outside this unit as epiphenomenal. However, as we are located far away from Europe, and we can appreciate more easily than those located in Europe what is common among the various European cultures, we can (or, perhaps, we should) take better account of the context. After all, as Bateson (2002, p. 14) stated:

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Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all. This is true not only of human communication in words, but also of all communication whatsoever, of all processes, of all mind.

INTERFACE aspires to be the common platform, the shared space within which all of us will co-operate to provide the context for all of the others.

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