

Crossing borders of academia from the perspective of an internationalizing university (editorial)

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Nature's September 2015 special issue on interdisciplinarity is designed to probe how scientists and social scientists tend to work together to solve such grand challenges as those of energy, food, water, climate and health. The collection of features, comments and case studies pulls together some interesting data on interdisciplinary work and its history, meaning and funding. Its editorial entitled "Interdisciplinary science must break down barriers between fields to build common ground"³ makes a strong case for integration of disciplines that have different objects of study, methodologies and procedures, and yet that can converge in research projects that help explain a complex phenomenon more accurately or help design social interventions or public policy more reasonably. The recent visibility of interdisciplinary research has been attributed to a potential to bring significant change to how "normal science" is done.

Sociologists, including those within the area of the sociology of knowledge, are not new to the debate and analysis of this kind of social-structural arrangements. For example, the social capital theories identify different advantages of transgressing the 'borderlands' of social structures. In his influential book, Mark Granovetter (1977: 347-367) identified the "strength of weak ties" or the value of the social connections outside of one's own immediate group. In line with this research, Roland Burt (2004) coined the term "structural holes" to describe the

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3 <http://www.nature.com/news/interdisciplinarity-1.18295#/Editorial>.

property of highly concentrated, clustered, professional groups (exactly like the ones in academia) that "leave" gaps of good ideas to "up for grabs" for those who are closer to them. Academics tend to talk to themselves, artists gather around their creative work, practitioners do business as usual and little interaction is facilitated between diverse fields. Those who engage in interdisciplinary work are likely to develop innovative models or creative ideas that come from being able to think alternatively. Being close to a structural hole creates opportunities for cross-field interaction by observing alternative ways of thinking and diverse behaviors. Although the volume of social network theory research advocates crossing the borders of academia, the rigid structures of the universities, academic publishing and funding severely limit disciplinary migrations.

According to some empirical research in the academia, there are acute and evident challenges to interdisciplinarity. Erin Leahey's research⁴ has recently documented that interdisciplinary research comes at a cost, since it brings down scholarly productivity and is less likely to be funded despite higher impact. Quality peer review of interdisciplinary work is slightly harder to come by, the publication process takes longer, but, above all, it is the learning of new concepts, literatures, and techniques, and communication difficulties within interdisciplinary teams that contribute to "the productivity penalty" paid by researchers who are nevertheless willing to bridge various disciplines. In addition, the drive to facilitate interdisciplinary research has been met with opposition and critique based on a claim that interdisciplinarity is likely to degenerate into adisciplinarity and is devoid of methodological rigor (Graff 2015). The fact that there is a lack of one definition or one institution advocating scientific interdisciplinarity does not help either when aiming to establish interdisciplinarity as a robust alternative to well-defined and self-perpetuating disciplinary divisions.

To contribute to this debate at University of Opole and to localize it in the European academic context, we organized a conference on *Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity – Science for Society and Human Beings* in April 2018 to discuss the state and future of the contemporary university. The conference was held as part of Central European International Staff Week, an annual event that aims not only to put into contact faculty from various departments but also to examine the prospects of international cooperation with foreign partners with whom the university had signed bilateral agreements within the Erasmus+ framework or has accepted other memoranda of academic cooperation.

4 <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/01/19/interdisciplinary-research-may-lead-to-increased-visibility-but-also-depresses-scholarly-productivity/>.

The conference was devoted to multiple aspects of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in various national and global contexts. One panel was devoted to the future of higher education in the interdisciplinary academia and to sharing best practices and results of research projects and cooperative teaching programmes. In contact seminars partners exchanged views on how to implement new methods and technologies in academic teaching and how to measure research excellence along common indicators. There was a chance to introduce to wider audiences a concept behind a new programme of studies being developed at the Faculty of Philology in Opole: Master of Liberal Arts that was to be opened in October 2018 (cf. Case #1)

Case #1: Master of Liberal Arts

Master of Liberal Arts programme of studies is an original and unique (in Poland) education program, offered at University of Opole. Its concept originates from the Anglo-Saxon assumptions of interdisciplinary education in the field of humanities and arts (core curriculum subjects) and has been adapted to the didactic, research and personnel capacities of University of Opole, as well as the graduates' employability strategy in the selected sectors of economy and public services (specialist subjects). The programme combines the content usually offered in separate courses of studies: philology, culture studies, sociology, law and arts. The main learning outcomes are typical for humanities, however, they are supplemented with those of social science studies. Considering that linguistics is the leading discipline of the programme of studies, students are obliged to complete an intensive course of practical English and, additionally, become familiar with sociolinguistic, pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of communication. Students also learn specialist terminology and vocabulary, mainly for the purpose of doing a comprehensive review of subject literature, which is then used as a basis for an interdisciplinary research project in linguistics, media or socio-economic studies (depending on the selected major) within their Master of Liberal Arts thesis. The programme also offers possibilities to improve and integrate knowledge from various disciplines during tutorials and seminars and requires students' participation in scientific conferences.

The advantages of Master of Liberal Arts programme at University of Opole include a well-rounded and transdisciplinary education that facilitates personal development. The graduates will have achieved an in-depth knowledge of communication, language, culture, and society. They will have explored selected dimensions of linguistics, communication studies, arts and social sciences in the context of the history of human ideas and the functioning of contemporary

societies, including their legal and economic perspectives. They will have critically considered the main challenges to global well-being, such as cultural hegemony, gender inequality and media manipulation. They will have pursued an original interdisciplinary curriculum that culminated in a Master's thesis exploring a chosen problem from a variety of perspectives.

Distinguishing features of the MLA programme at University of Opole include: international student teams that facilitate intercultural communication, comparative perspectives and dynamic cooperation; general courses on philosophical, legal, historical, political and economic processes of contemporary public spheres that foster reflectivity and critical stance; tailored courses in public communication, sociolinguistics, media and visual arts, entrepreneurship and organizations that offer elements of practice; access to cultural, literary and artistic projects that enhances aesthetic competences; elective courses and tutorials that enable self-exploration, academic independence, and pursuit of advanced content; Master's research projects that are oriented towards assessing the properties and effectiveness of various forms of socially situated communication practices or addressing social problems through interventions.

During the Central European International Staff Week, special focus was given to how social sciences and the humanities can be used to enhance academic interactions and communication (including academic writing and publishing). The themes for the conference included the (dis)advantages of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity and the merits of doing science for (rather than on) society and human beings. We queried our local identities as researchers in the context of the unprecedented globalization of science (cf. Case #2), especially after English has been established as a lingua franca of the academia and further entrenched the dominance of Anglo-American academic traditions. We networked and empowered ourselves to cross the borders of academia, despite apparent difficulties and cultural distance between for example Europe and Taiwan or Indonesia. As the promise to cooperate across disciplines endows our research with more impact, this spurred interest in establishing interdisciplinary research centers, such as the Communication Research Lab at the Faculty of Philology⁵.

Case #2: An interdisciplinary career

To a considerable extent, interdisciplinarity is the story of my research life. I have a BA degree in applied linguistics (in English), an MA in general linguistics, a

5 <http://wfil.uni.opole.pl/pracownia-badan-nad-komunikacja/>.

PhD in literature, and a habilitation (D.Litt) in linguistics. I work for a Culture Department doing media studies and discourse analysis. I mostly introduce myself as a linguist (unless I say in Poland that I'm an English philologist). Most often I operate off the trodden path of linguistics. I've never been particularly interested in what is referred to as traditional or formal linguistics. Instead, I've been interested in linguistics which draws from social anthropology, sociology, social psychology, cultural studies or critical theory.

For many linguists interdisciplinarity means using the occasional concept, article or book by Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu or Stuart Hall. I quickly realized, however, that communication studies, from which I started drawing more than other disciplines (especially with respect to interaction, persuasion, identity, or ideology) is a vast discipline that I spent several years to inquire into. Yet, when I submitted my first paper to one of the well-known communication journals I found that they were uninterested in language and textual data being the point of entry to understand communication. In addition, if my data happened to be drawn from the Polish context, not British or American, the study had even fewer chances to be published.

Interdisciplinarity was my nemesis when I started to gather my portfolio of work for the so-called habilitation (a degree giving me a status of an independent scholar). Even though some of my discourse analyses were publicized under the heading of cultural studies, communication studies and media studies, I now had to self-designate back as a linguist. My best articles have been about journalistic sensationalism, science popularization, social protest, visual rhetoric and charity communication and much of this is so obviously outside linguistics that I seriously considered taking them out of the portfolio. In the meantime my work was criticized by any social science reviewer who happened to be assigned to assess my work (I put forth two grant proposals that were denied funding, one on the grounds that the way I wrote about my prospective linguistic analyses – frequency, keyness, concordances, N-grams – was not understandable to representatives of social studies). It was the time I seriously started questioning interdisciplinarity and what it meant for my career.

My conclusions were not encouraging. Journals tend to be interested in their own perspective and the purity of the discipline: professed interdisciplinarity seemed not much more than rhetoric. When things were meant to be funded or published, interdisciplinary was more of a drawback than an asset. Not to mention the effort of mastering and keeping up to date with the research emanating from a few disciplines. When I entered communication science, I

was very encouraged to see that the discipline was fairly interested in language. When I made my points about contextualized, strategy-revealing, in-depth interpretation of textual samples in my discourse analyses, editors wanted me to dispose of that and study what texts do to people. My observation is that when mentioning interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity we must acknowledge what divides us, not only what links us.

This special issue offers an insight into the types of research projects developed by our collaborators and other invited authors that exemplify their crossing of various borders in academia: be they institutional, linguistic, national, disciplinary or methodological. In *English as a Lingua Franca in the context of migration: An Italian perspective* Lorena Carbonara and Annarita Taronna (University of Bari, Italy) share some of their ethnographic data from field work with mostly African migrants in Italian refugee centers. The Italian teachers who are to teach basic Italian there happen to use a version of English to communicate basic information and sometimes to alleviate the trauma of the displaced. Their linguistic analysis of the textual data contributes to our understanding of trans-languaging as a discursive strategy resorted to in mixed-language contexts, such as migration. Magdalena Szyszka (University of Opole, Poland) and her two colleagues from Kaye Academic College of Education, Beer Sheva, Israel, Inna Smirnov and Regina Benchetrit report on a pilot study devoted to an international tandem learning project. Their article *Towards crossing the borders in foreign language teacher training: A report on a pilot phase of the Tandem Learning for Teacher Training project* shows the advantages, as well as challenges, of engaging teacher trainees in doing tasks in intercultural educational contexts and shows how the participants develop English skills and other social competences that might become useful in their future careers. Robert Geisler's (University of Opole, Poland) article *Cross-boundary and cross-discipline creation of scientific knowledge: The case of economic anthropology/business ethnography* documents the practical merits of qualitative research methods that originate in anthropology. They are shown to be useful to study and help improve business practices of contemporary enterprises. The article demonstrates how it is possible to cross another boundary, namely the one between being an academic and a practitioner – entrepreneur in order to test the models and recommendations from scholarship. Radosław B. Walczak (University of Opole, Poland) and Jaroslava Kubátová and Klara Seitlová (Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic) describe the benefits of cross-border virtual team work. In their article *Cross-border virtual teams, as seen from applied psychology & applied economy perspective. A case study of a cross-cultural teaching program*, they combine various perspectives to advocate for the

inclusion of international student teams in doing practical projects; yet they are not oblivious to the economic challenges and psychological barriers on the way.

This special issue and the annual Central European International Staff Week that preceded it have been initiated and facilitated by the Office for International Study Programmes at University of Opole. Its mission is to further design, develop and implement the initiatives aimed at making the university a hub for quality teaching and research projects and fostering the innovative, collaborative and interdisciplinary perspectives that are crucial to strategic development of any higher education institution (Case Study 3).

Case # 3: Office for International Study Programmes at University of Opole

The idea behind internationalizing study programmes at University of Opole and attracting international students was based on a few assumptions and observations: A) Being a regional, comprehensive university, UO had to consolidate its potential – especially the human capital – in order to offer full degree study programmes in English; B) Therefore, as it was the case with Sociology, Intercultural Communication specialization, there was a need to invite professors from outside of the Institute of Sociology to teach in the course – philologists, philosophers, education scientists etc.; C) The students coming from different backgrounds, especially to study in the 2nd cycle of studies bring in different perspectives, different disciplines and different national traditions of doing – for instance – sociology; D) This cries for interdisciplinary study programmes that will be able to both attract and realistically accommodate the diverse groups of students.

The above brought us to make decisions about opening programmes like Intercultural Communication, based in sociology, but not shy to combine the humanities too; or Sustainable Development, that is a specialization in Economy (MA) bringing together economy, ecology, spatial management or urban sociology; or Biological Chemistry (BA), obviously combining both disciplines and levels of analysis. The above-mentioned MLA was the ultimate invention based on this approach.

The abundance of international students at the university and in Poland, which not so long ago was almost ethnically and culturally homogeneous, brought certain challenges as well. Crossing the borders of Polish academia turned out to have brought in students who would approach the university rules and regulations in a slightly different way and have sometimes some other experiences and expectations about the university service and in class relations. This comes

at a cost. Namely, misunderstandings, misconceptions, miscommunication. In order to address this, the Office for International Study Programmes applied for a grant to the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education as part of the National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) to train both the staff and faculty of the university as well as the students in intercultural competences to understand each other and the common good better.

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