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Resisting Disciplinarity: Curriculum Mapping and Transdisciplinarity

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Abstract: American higher education relies on a taxonomy of knowledge stemming from Puritan ways of thinking and knowing—a disciplinary classification system that sorts "questions asked" and "answers possible" into epistemic categories. This paper interrogates the notion of disciplinarity to better understand the arbitrariness of epistemic divisions and the harm that these decisions cause. The author explores transdisciplinarity as an emerging concept in honors education, one which rejects boundaries and explores problems through multiple, competing perspectives. Transdisciplinary pedagogical approaches offer honors educators a mechanism for pivoting teaching and learning away from outdated assumptions of honors as elitist, giving honors students a liberating way to conceptualize and approach inquiry. The result reimagines students and the academy in a way that subverts the boundaries and assumptions posed by modern disciplinary logic and encourages applied and integrative ways of knowing and being.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; curriculum planning; Ramus, Petrus, 1515–1572; Foucault, Michel, 1926–1984; University of Alabama (AL)—Honors College

My daughter is 18 months old, and she is just beginning to count. One, three, seven, eight, nine, ten! Yay! She claps for herself, so proud to have made it to ten (not noticing the extraction and absence of two, four, five, and six). She's a pandemic baby, so she sorts people into family and masked ones. Carers and strangers. She knows no in-between. Just now I watched her pull shoes out one by one and sort them—a favorite activity of matching like to like. She places her shoes first. One is turned backward, but she realizes

her error and swiftly rights it. Mine are next. My tennis shoes this time—perhaps she's ready for a walk. Dada's shoes come last. She grabs a black loafer and matches it with a brown boot. Hooray! She claps, she's pleased with herself. Close enough, I applaud her schematic as well. We will work on colors another day.

But then, as we walk, I begin to wonder about categorization and order. I think about what we have already taught her about scale (small to big). What we have taught her about the family dynamic and gender roles (baby, mama, dada). What counts, what merits praise, and how she fits into the order of things. These categories we are so anxious for her to learn are imbedded with assumptions and histories that prescribe certain ways of being and knowing. What has she learned already about the violence of hierarchy and categorization that she will spend a lifetime unlearning? Will she be able to do it, I wonder, when our academic curricula map out learning, knowledge, and curiosity using those same knives to extract, cut, and sort ways of knowing and being in the world by type and possibility. Will she be able to resist this ordering, I wonder, when I see the limiting effects of such training on my honors students.

To give a sense of where these musings are going, I will begin by tracing the history of curriculum mapping, a Puritan practice of sorting knowledge into fields or disciplines, which was adopted by early American universities and trickled down through the educational system to become the dominant key by which we still map learning. I will then interrogate the idea of disciplinarity, which is used both to distinguish types of expertise as well as to silo and structure ways of knowing and being. From there I will look at a new way of thinking about the relations between knowledges that has been popping up in honors education of late, transdisciplinarity. I suggest that transdisciplinarity is an ethical move to meet and teach students to reckon with complexity. Transdisciplinarity acknowledges that our ways of understanding are limited and contextualized, that disciplinary knowledge contains ideological blind spots, and that our students need and crave more holistic ways of considering and responding to problems.

CURRICULUM MAPPING

The seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century Puritans believed that humanity could best access God's will and intent for their lives by rational means. A secular education was a necessary "labour to methodize your knowledge" (Richard Baxter, 1673, as quoted in McKnight & Triche, 2011, p.

35). Rather than leaving individual believers to develop emotional relationships with the Divine, the Puritans thought that "it was up to man to translate the Word into a map" (McKnight & Triche, 2011, p. 35). Sinful individuals required guidance to develop the tools necessary to access God's intent for their lives. Schooling, which involved progressive learning of the practices of observation and experimentation, ensured individuals acquired these tools. Curriculum historians Doug McKnight and Stephen Triche (2011) noted that these tools

> provided a technique by which to map out and then explicate an individual life moving toward spiritual conversion, which was inextricably linked to external, ethical, and moral action (Bercovitch, 1993; McKnight, 2001). Such technique combined naming, ordering, analyzing, storing for quick reference and explaining experiences, each connected in a linear trajectory toward spiritual and material transcendence as well as a means to control one's surroundings. (p. 36)

Because individuals could not access God's meaning for their lives on their own, a key or map would ensure the logical structure of learning.

For this structure, the Puritans turned to the works of Peter Ramus, a French arts master of the sixteenth century. Ramist maps are spindly family trees linking all the knowledge one might acquire. Akin to a logic tree, the branches break off one by one, narrowing the scope of inquiry with each spoke. These maps offer a unilinear schematic by which viewers move through stages of learning. Michael Mages (1999) notes:

> Employing th[e] Ramean method, one first identified the concept to be investigated then divided it into halves, halved these again in turn, and so on until all the components were established. Once all the reasons or concepts were laid out, then an individual could start combining them to form arguments. (p. 97)

Ramist maps standardized knowledge and the teaching of knowledge. This organizing schematic was taught to Puritan children in grammar school all the way through university. McKnight and Triche (2011) point out that both Harvard and Yale adopted Ramist maps to make sense of the connections and divisions between the forms of knowledge. Thus, Ramist maps were a technology of understanding that aided in standardizing and categorizing the known from the unknown.

William Ames (1629/1997), a Puritan minister and philosopher, formalized Ramist logic with the publication of *Technometry* by categorizing

the knowledge that students acquire before formal schooling, that which is made possible via instruction, and that which is acquired through practice. In his focus on artificial knowledge, which must be acquired via formal instruction, Ames built on Ramist logic: "By defining 'Art' as 'the idea of eupraxia, or good action, methodically delineated by universal rules' (Ames, 1629/1997, Thesis 1), Ames established the trajectory for modern, formal education. (McKnight & Triche, 2011, p. 39). Imposing such order on education aligned with the Calvinist ideology of discipline for believers. Through standardization and replication of knowledge, order could be imposed on a chaotic world and on individuals.

The effect of this structuring of disciplines continues long past the Puritans' heyday. For example, the 1828 Yale Report notes:

> The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge. The former of these is, perhaps, the more important of the two. A commanding object, therefore, in a collegiate course, should be, to call into daily and vigorous exercise the faculties of the student. Those branches of study should be prescribed, and those modes of instruction adopted, which are best calculated to teach the art of fixing the attention, directing the train of thought, analyzing a subject proposed for investigation; following, with accurate discrimination, the course of argument; balancing nicely the evidence presented to the judgment; awakening, elevating, and controlling the imagination; arranging, with skill, the treasures which memory gathers; rousing and guiding the powers of genius. All this is not to be effected by a light and hasty course of study; by reading a few books, hearing a few lectures, and spending some months at a literary institution. The habits of thinking are to be formed, by long continued and close application. The mines of science must be penetrated far below the surface before they will disclose their treasures. If a dexterous performance of the manual operations, in many of the mechanical arts, requires an apprenticeship, with diligent attention for years; much more does the training of the powers of the mind demand vigorous, and steady, and systematic effort. (Committee on the Corporation and the Academical Faculty, 1828, para. 12)

The culture of education here communicated is one of transmission through ritualized practice at understanding a progressive series of ideas. Discipline

functions as a signpost marking categories but also as a foundational structure for conducting intellectual exercise.

This logic remains central to the way that we think about and organize knowledge. Walter Ong (1971) notes, "Ramist methods make it possible to think of knowledge itself in terms of 'intake' and 'output,'" language that sounds familiar within our current technological moment (p. 173). Matthew Guillen (2007) even suggests that our dependence on PowerPoint, outlines, and unit lesson plans can be rooted in this commitment to knowledge mapping (p. 45).

Mapping that which is known and possible to know produces our modern understanding of education as progress through information and categories, which are related to each other in particular ways. Thus, McKnight and Triche (2011) draw on Lee Gibbs (1979) to note that "the organizational framework for all subjects being taught—what we today call the content disciplines found in the school curriculum" stem from this Puritan technology of knowledge mapping (p. 39). The logic map as the central, organizing feature of what is known and can be known remains a powerful force in our modern disciplinary clime.

When considering these documentations of the link between Ramist methods, Puritan assumptions of education, and their effects on our modern codification of knowledge bases, we ought to pause to acknowledge Michel Foucault's concern about the risk of overstating this link. Foucault (1970/1994) argues that a significant epistemological shift took place in the early 1800s that separates Classicism from modernity. He argues:

> The order on the basis of which we think today does not have the same mode of being as that of the Classical thinkers. . . . All this quasi-continuity on the level of ideas and themes is doubtless only a surface appearance. (p. xxii)

With this caveat in mind, we ought to consider whether our disciplinary link to the Puritans is as strong as appearance suggests. Other factors are almost certainly also at play, including the profit-driven climate of modern higher education, the desire on the part of students to earn a marketable degree, and the push for rigor and standardization in measuring and valuing student learning. The pressure on academics to "publish or perish," to engage with the right kind of research and scholarship, and to successfully garner grant funding coupled with the shrinking opportunities for academic careers surely also play a role in the increasingly narrow and limited scope of expertise and

research interest. These forces may be modern, but the way they manifest as disciplinarity cannot easily be untangled from the legacy of Ramist maps and the Puritan vision of knowledge spheres.

THE TROUBLE WITH DISCIPLINARITY

When speaking of disciplines thus far, I have signaled to the categories of knowledge delineated by colleges and universities: anthropology and art history, biology and business, chemistry and child development, for example. Yet we can also think with Foucault (1977/1995) that "discipline is a political anatomy of detail" (p. 139) that "produces subjected and practiced bodies" (p. 138). Ludwig A. Pongrantz (1989) argues:

> Disciplinary power installs particular forms of acting on individuals, by arranging them spatially (through confinement, subdivision, assignment to functions and hierarchical classification), by controlling their activities temporally (by breaking down operations and establishing time units), by harnessing them to ultimate time frames (with a definitive sequence of guidelines concerning means and ends, with exercises and examinations) and by frequently linking these "techniques" to each other. (p. 203, as cited in Pongrantz, 2008, p. 34)

Foucault (1995) notes that higher education has been structured via the "monastic model," where gathering students and faculty in a shared, reserved space—the boarding school, the Ivory Tower—allowed for a space controlling knowledge and its transmission (p. 141). Within the geography of the academy, a further compartmentalizing occurs as "disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed" (Foucault, 1995, p. 143). At the University of Alabama, urban legend during the height of expansion was that a new building went up every 50 or so business days. Currently, housing for freshmen students, a performing arts center, and a new clothing and textiles classroom building are under construction. Meanwhile, a building meant as space for liberal arts inquiry is being converted to house a new institute for policy and leadership (Griesbach, 2023). The division of the campus terrain by domain-specific buildings silos individuals and their curiosities. Thus, as Foucault (1977/1995) notes, "the educational space function[s] like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, and rewarding" (p. 147).

Granted, not all academic spaces are cordoned off in such an explicit way. Multidisciplinary spaces of inquiry do exist in libraries, student centers, and flexible classroom buildings—particularly at smaller colleges and universities. Yet, these spaces often bring together disciplines that are naturally inclined to converse together (e.g., shared classroom space for philosophy and religion or a Living Learning Community for students in sciences and engineering). They often continue to delineate spaces by their value to the university, the majors and graduates they produce, and their ability to bring in funding. Where you are located on campus is based on rank and importance of your knowledge to students, the purchasers of access to your expertise.

The divisions of academic disciplines also reflect taxonomic classifications, a grammar or system of rules that organize our episteme. Disciplinarity that is based on difference is both arbitrary and the foundation of modern thought. Foucault (1970/1994) notes that the existence of disciplines of inquiry is fundamentally tied to a given culture and period's taxonomy of knowledge. As an example, he details the emergence of biology as a discipline in the nineteenth century. Biology could not and did not exist previously because the concepts of life and man are new inventions made possible by a paradigm shift. Foucault classifies previous scholars whom we might casually assume to be biologists as natural historians, for the questions they asked and the answers they found relied on a fundamentally different taxonomy. Whereas anatomy held significance to natural historians in the Classical era and would again emerge as significant in later inquiry, Foucault notes that the rationalist period was the heyday of botany specifically because the taxonomic system offered the discipline an "epistemological precedence" (p. 137). That our classifications and the organization of disciplines affect what is studied and how such study is approached is of no surprise. Consider, for example, how including the arts in STEM (often termed STEAM) impacts funding for the arts and the continued underfunding and suppression of literature, languages, and the social sciences. Foucault (1970/1994) asks, "What is the ground on which we are able to establish the validity of this classification with complete certainty? . . . There is nothing more tentative, nothing more empirical (superficially at least) than the process of establishing an order among things" (p. xix). Categorization and its effects are never neutral.

Turning to current examples that academia wrestles with, where ought computer science lie? Perhaps computer science is a language akin to Greek, Spanish, or Arabic. After all, students must learn an unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary to translate and converse with the machinery they operate in

these classes. Perhaps, though, it is a science (as it is named) or a technology better suited to an operations management curriculum. In another example, both communications studies and history faculty often work on public memory. Which discipline is the gatekeeper for this type of work? The questions that emerge from each discipline may be different because the conversations that scholars have, the ideas they are working with, and the methodologies they rely on will likely be different. We cannot say, though, that public memory is of history or that it is of communication studies. In this way, consider information as a bit like the stars scattered across the night sky. We can map constellations onto curiosities however we wish, but these disciplinary constellations are our own inventions (Flint, 2019). As such, they are products of our time, place, and values. However much disciplines appear to be fixed and mapped, we must remember that these disciplines are produced as much as they are producing certain knowledges. The production of disciplines is always and necessarily caught up in questions of power.

Indigenous education researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) writes:

> Like many other Māori undergraduate students who attended university in the 1970s, I read some texts for my formal course of study and another set of alternative readings to keep sane, to keep connected to the rest of my life and, more importantly to make sense of things that were happening all around me. Much of that alternative reading course is now collected in anthologies labelled as cultural studies. (p. 15)

Here we have an example of forms of knowledge considered outside the academy being consumed by someone within it. These forms of knowledge—areas of inquiry including foundations of education, gender studies, African American and race studies, sexuality studies, and disability studies—are new additions to the academy. What does it mean for the knowledge that keeps you sane to be beyond the boundaries of prescribed disciplines and ways of knowing? Where, I wonder, might Ramus tack these onto his map? Perhaps they are an extension of anthropology—a discipline, as Smith notes, that many of her indigenous peers revile for its history of abuse cloaked as research. Or perhaps these new disciplines might veer off from biology. Scratch eugenics and phrenology off and replace these now pseudo-sciences with a progressive new discipline in area studies. This view is perhaps jaded, but it draws from Smith's damning claim that "in their foundations, Western disciplines are as much implicated in each other as they are in imperialism" (p. 11). Disciplinarity has never been neutral.

In another example that illuminates the danger of disciplinarity, qualitative researcher Maureen A. Flint (2019) talks about a serendipitous moment when a walking interview about feelings of belongingness on campus crossed paths with a campus tour guide introducing prospective students and their families to Gallallee Hall, a physics and astronomy classroom building at the University of Alabama. Flint (2019) writes:

> Through the tour, the place of Gallalee becomes in boundaries and invitations before the prospective students ever enter it, it materializes as "for physics," making lines of possibility for some students, and truncating lines for others. A report from the American Institute of Physics found that socioeconomic status (SES) and race were significant predictors for students' access to physics classes in high school. . . . What happens when we imagine with prospective students the discourse of "for physics," and the surges and sparks, the stutters and stops that follow? In this way, producing Gallalee as "for physics" simultaneously produces it as White. (p. 94)

When curiosity is predicated on prior knowledge acquisition (e.g., Brown, 2018, p. 174), the danger of disciplinarity is that certain ways of knowing and thinking are sealed to students long before they begin post-secondary education. Tracking, or the distribution of students based on performance, begins in grammar school. Indeed, my neighborhood school evaluates kindergarteners each spring, splitting off the top 7% of children for an experiential STEAM curriculum. The history of this practice, how the "top 7%" is measured, and the ethics of this distribution are of significant consequence, but for the purposes of this work, note that the possibilities of pursuing physics close off to many students just as they are learning to count to one hundred.

TRANS/DISCIPLINARITY

Honors education has been critiqued for capitalizing on and reproducing these inequities in colleges and universities (e.g., Flint, 2019; Spurrier, 2009; Weiner, 2009). Such critiques have merit and deserve to be taken seriously by honors educators who are committed to equity and justice, yet I see the refusal of disciplinarity as one advantage of honors education. Rather than maintaining the disciplinary silos of Puritan knowledge and modern schooling, honors educators have begun refusing disciplinarity in favor of an education that is problem-based, bound up with questions of ethics and justice, and characterized by breadth.

Unlike standardized pre-professional curricula, honors education manifests differently between institutions, program types and scales, and classrooms. Thinking in accord with Foucault, Richard Badenhausen (2020) notes that the "grand diversity of honors education" remains one of its "great sources of power" (p. 27). One result of such variation is a multiplicity of terms to describe the refusal to confine knowledge and learning to traditional subject matter categories. Honors educators refer to the notion of pedagogical boundary crossing as interdisciplinarity (Christensen, 2022; Ewing, 2022; Guthrie Stasiewicz, 2022), multidisciplinarity (Bormans, 2015; Wolfensberger, van Eijl, & Pilot, 2004), metadisciplinarity (Werth, 2003), and transdisciplinarity (Stoller, 2021). While inter- and multi-disciplinarity evoke the combination of disciplines to draw connections, Werth's (2003) definition approximates a refusal of disciplinarity. He suggests honors education ought to "transcend or supersede traditional disciplinary boundaries to create a truly holistic, systemic, integrative worldview uncluttered by familiar limits and barriers" (p. 36). Most reflective of the spirit of each of these terms, though, is the notion of transdisciplinarity for its emphasis on the betwixt and between of divisions and its usefulness in undermining categorizations.

Without calling it so, Foucault (1970/1994) adopts transdisciplinarity:

> This comparative method produces results that are often strikingly different from those found in single-discipline studies. . . . There are shifts of emphasis: The calendar of saints and heroes is somewhat altered. . . . Frontiers are redrawn and things usually far apart are brought closer, and vice versa. (p. x)

Similarly, in honors education transdisciplinarity requires breaking apart and seeing anew. It is inquiry as bricolage, drawing from all available means of understanding to engage with and respond to social and cultural problems of significance to the world beyond the academy (Augsburg, 2014). Aaron Stoller (2021) notes that transdisciplinarity in honors education means that knowledge is applied, integrative of multiple ways of knowing and being, broad, connected, just, and accountable to communities. Stoller (2021) argues that transdisciplinary education is

> committed to innovative and exploratory applications of the disciplines that directly bridge and integrate diverse forms of understanding in the service of engaging complex, real-world problems; it fundamentally rejects the 'academic' and 'non-academic' binary and seeks out new, nonbinary, and holistic conceptualizations of

academic practice. [Transdisciplinary] knowledge is the only form of expertise capable of disrupting, reimagining, and transforming the university, and only here will honors find its occupation. (p. 49)

I find myself nodding wholeheartedly alongside Stoller. Transdisciplinary education recognizes that shifting the question and changing the scale matters because it offers new ways of considering problems previously stuck in disciplinary ways of knowing and brings new possibilities for answers.

In my own teaching, I notice that a commitment to transdisciplinarity is alchemical. Students grow and learn in ways that are not easy to predict at the outset of their education. Take Janie (pseudonym) as an example. Janie is a Black, first-generation college student who enrolled in my freshman honors seminar during her first semester of college even though she was not sure she belonged in honors. While she excelled in classroom spaces, she believed herself to be an imposter. Rather than love of a particular subject or discipline, Janie's passion is K-pop. Her experience in honors is maze-like. It started with a discussion about citizenship, globalization, and cosmopolitanism, which led Janie to enroll in an honors seminar on Afro-Asian relations. From there, Janie dove into media studies and the Korean language. As she grew in confidence, she began mentoring freshman students, and I once heard her coach another student about imposter syndrome and ways to tackle it. As she concludes her time in honors, Janie plans a career in international relations. Hers has never been a clear or obvious path; it was forged one class and one problem at a time as Janie developed confidence in herself and began to see connections between old and emerging areas of interest. Her path is the result of immersion in many, competing ways of considering problems and a careful, reflexive gluing together of encounters and interests. Her curriculum vitae represents the possibility of transdisciplinarity for helping students reimagine and claim ownership of their education.

As another example, in classes that are explicitly transdisciplinary, students engage problems in more substantive ways when they must collaborate on how they should explore problems. For example, I once taught an honors seminar discussing the ethics of algorithms and the Internet of Things. Students in the class each approached the problem in ways that reflected their disciplinary backgrounds. Yet the process of having to reckon with people who thought differently and approached the problem from disparate lenses and methodological commitments forced students to sit in an unfamiliar space of possibility. When one student insisted there was no privacy concern with data collected from algorithms, other students in the class built an algorithm

to predict their peers' sexuality. Their algorithm proved disturbingly accurate. Reckoning with such a dystopian reality forced a rupture, requiring us as a class to think differently, to be more curious, and to pay more attention to justice.

CONCLUSION

American colleges and universities have always relied, and continue to rely, on the academic discipline to categorize, rank, order, evaluate, and classify the taxonomy of knowledge. Teasing out the history of disciplinarity from its Puritan origins helps us understand the dangers of an epistemic classification system. I believe that honors education, which has begun to reject disciplinarity in favor of transdisciplinarity, offers an alternative model that helps us think about knowledge and inquiry differently.

The move toward transdisciplinary, while valuable, is not an easy one for students or honors colleges and programs. Honors students are often good at being students, meaning they are good at learning within the disciplinary status quo. This status quo often manifests as the "'banking' concept of education" wherein education "becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 1970/2002, p. 72). I began this paper with an anecdote about my toddler who is learning categories that prescribe particular ways of being and knowing in the world. When those toddlers just learning to count enter our honors courses almost two decades later, they are fluent in the assumptions and logic of the disciplinary model, the way that questions are asked and answers are found in this model, and the possibilities available for inquiry. Annmarie Guzy (2005) observes, "much of the sense of self-worth for honors students comes from successfully navigating through and being rewarded by the educational apparatus" (p. 29). Honors students take comfort in the disciplinary model, where they know how they will be assessed and understand the rules and strategies necessary to excel. After all, disciplinarity—with its standardized tests, lab reports, and five paragraph essays—has served them well.

Transdisciplinary education subverts this model by valuing risk taking and pushing students to think differently. Thinking differently, though, is dangerous. For students, it risks GPAs and a sense of identity that comes from knowing the right answer. For honors colleges and programs, transdisciplinarity might mean stepping on departmental toes, skepticism from colleagues, and questions about depth and rigor. Yet, transdisciplinarity offers a way of returning to the roots of honors education as a means of "break[ing]

the academic lockstep" (Winship, 1924, p. 91). By subverting disciplinary limitations, honors education helps manifest a different kind of student, one who is not subject to the dictates of the right answer and does not choose a course of study for its projected career path. In short, transdisciplinarity helps students imagine and manifest the liberatory power of education.

The refusal of disciplinarity shifts honors education away from the largely imagined utopic space of the Ivory Tower into a heterotopic space where questions cannot be easily answered. Because transdisciplinarity subverts the structure and norms of modernity, it offers an opportunity to resist the violence of White supremacy, heteronormativity, classism, ageism, and ableism that pervade the disciplinary structure. Transdisciplinarity helps us reimagine knowledge and inquiry beyond these boundaries, making possible a means of questioning and exploring differently. Moving toward transdisciplinarity is, I believe, a necessary and authentic move toward a messier and more just way of teaching and learning.

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