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#4 Institutions and Lived Experience in the Study of Interdisciplinarity

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A Forum on Interdisciplinarity

Harvey J. Graff, Ohio State University
Jerry A. Jacobs, University of Pennsylvania
Mary Jo Maynes, University of Minnesota, and
William H. Sewell, Jr., University of Chicago

January 2017

Two author-meets-critics sessions were held at the 2014 and 2015 Social Science History Association meetings on the topic of disciplines and interdisciplinarity with the same set of commentators. Both were organized by Harvey J. Graff. The 2014 session at the Toronto meetings focused on Jerry A. Jacobs' book, *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). The same set of commentators reconvened in Baltimore in 2015 to discuss Harvey Graff's book, *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). The panelists at both of these sessions were John Guillory, New York University; Mary Jo Maynes, University of Minnesota; Janice Reiff, University of California at Los Angeles; and William Sewell, Jr., University of Chicago.

The Forum on Interdisciplinarity presented here includes the edited and revised comments of Mary Jo Mayes and William Sewell, Jr. on both books, and responses and an exchange from Harvey J. Graff and Jerry A. Jacobs. **This paper is one of the 4 papers in this series.**

Keywords: disciplines, interdisciplines, interdisciplinarity, social-science history

Institutions and Lived Experience in the Study of Interdisciplinarity

William H. Sewell, Jr.

Jerry Jacobs is highly skeptical about the supposed benefits of interdisciplinarity, at least as these are trumpeted in current academic circles. Harvey Graff has devoted his life to interdisciplinary scholarship and has been a leading figure in interdisciplinary programs at more than one university. One would therefore expect their books to reach utterly different conclusions. Yet they agree that disciplines are far from the noncommunicating “silos” often invoked by academic champions of interdisciplinarity, that many interdisciplinary programs are less impressive than claimed, and that the disciplines need to be defended against administrators who would use the supposed need for greater interdisciplinarity as a means of centralizing power. Although Graff denies being ambivalent about interdisciplinarity, he is, in practice, nearly as skeptical about most claims to interdisciplinary glory as is Jacobs.

Jacobs’ central claim, one that I entirely accept, is that disciplines in the modern research university are already far more interdisciplinary than is often recognized. All disciplines, he argues, are composed of a wide range of specialties that are highly diverse in their theories and methods. If you stop to think about it, collaborations between political theorists and students of congressional behavior in political science might be — intellectually speaking — no less “interdisciplinary” than, say, collaborations between economists and psychologists about consumer decision-making. Second, scholars in nearly all disciplines constantly adopt methods and theories from other disciplines — economists in fact borrow promiscuously from psychology when they study economic decision-making. Jacobs offers good quantitative evidence against the “silo” model by showing that interdisciplinary journals are currently proliferating and that articles in discipline-based journals typically cite many works by scholars from other fields. Furthermore, he argues that interdisciplinarity does not guard against the supposed risk of over-specialization: interdisciplinary work is just as specialized as single-discipline-based work. Indeed, Jacobs argues, correctly, in my opinion, that specialization is indispensable to the progress of scholarship in general, whether interdisciplinary or disciplinary.

Jacobs is not hostile to interdisciplinarity as such. He notes that contemporary research universities have plenty of effective interdisciplinary research centers. The most successful of such programs, in fact, begin to look much like disciplinary departments, with their own budgets, hiring lines, and sub-specialties. What Jacobs objects to is the inflated claims about disciplines’ narrowness and interdisciplinarity’s unique benefits. He also argues cogently that systematically refashioning universities on a more interdisciplinary model would likely have the effect of decreasing faculty control of teaching, hiring, and research priorities, now mainly in the hands self-governing discipline-based departments, and ceding such control to university administrators. Those of us who clamor for more interdisciplinarity need to be careful about what we ask for.

In short, Jacobs’ defense of the disciplines and warnings about the limitations of interdisciplinarity are smart and effective. Anyone concerned about the state and future of American higher education should read this book.

Harvey Graff, who is certainly a believer in the virtues of interdisciplinarity, tracks its history in the American research university by recounting twelve carefully chosen and extremely diverse historical examples ranging in time from the late nineteenth century to the present: genetic biology, sociology, the humanities, communication, social relations, operations research, cognitive science, the new histories, materials science, cultural studies, bioscience, and literacy studies. His main method is to analyze a wide sampling of statements by leading scholars who argue about, proselytize for, or critique their own purportedly interdisciplinary fields. We should be grateful to Graff for fascinating analyses of so many fields that would otherwise have remained obscure to most of his readers.

Graff, it turns out, has scant patience for claims of interdisciplinarity that he does not regard as well-justified. He is a strict constructionist who refuses the interdisciplinarity moniker to fields or programs that in his opinion are only “multidisciplinary,” “cross-disciplinary,” or “a disciplinary cluster.” Although he actually never hazards a formal definition, it seems clear that he thinks true interdisciplinarity requires (1) a strongly reciprocal relationship between the constituent disciplines, with each discipline actively embracing perspectives and tools of the other and (2) the establishment of some sort of institutional home for the new interdisciplinary field. When Graff applies this criterion to his twelve putatively interdisciplinary fields he finds only three positive cases: genetic biology, operations research, and “the new histories.” On closer inspection, however, the number should be reduced to two. “The new histories” lack the sort of deep programmatic integration between disciplines that characterizes operations research or characterized genetic biology in its heyday. History departments were transformed between the 1960s and the 1990s by absorbing methods and objects of study supplied by sociology, economics, geography, political science, demography, anthropology, and literary criticism. But the borrowing was, with rare exceptions, a one-way affair that failed to give rise to durable interdisciplinary departments or programs — largely because the fields historians were borrowing from showed relatively little interest in adopting genuinely historical perspectives and methods. Indeed, Graff himself writes that this is a case of “interdisciplinarity within disciplines.” “The new histories,” rather than a successful case of interdisciplinarity in Graff’s highly restrictive sense, are actually perfect illustration of Jacob’s highly permeable departmentalized academic disciplines that borrow profusely from other disciplines.

A reader of these two books might well conclude that interdisciplinarity has been massively oversold in recent academic chatter. This is an explicit conclusion of Jacobs’ book but it is also implicit in Graff’s dismissal of nearly all claimants to interdisciplinarity as having attained, at best, something lesser. I fully agree with Jacobs that we must be careful to shield our ears from the administrators’ siren calls and with Graff that most interdisciplinary programs have failed to establish a full intermeshing of their diverse theories and methods and have, over time, either faded away or turned into disciplines like any other. But neither author captures very well the genuine excitement and intellectual creativity that has been generated, over and over again, across all areas of academic research, by interdisciplinary initiatives of all shapes and sizes — initiatives that have repeatedly ignited bursts of inspired new scholarship. I think this is because both authors work for the most part at an institutional level rather than taking an ethnographic plunge into the lived experience of interdisciplinarity.

The one exception is Graff’s brief and uncharacteristically passionate recounting of his own experience in the 1970s as a graduate student working, along with other students and professors, on Michael Katz’s pioneering interdisciplinary project on the social history of Hamilton, Ontario (1975). Graff recalls that “the organization and conduct of social science history,” at least as practiced on this project, “constituted a kind of counterculture or subculture,” one organized “around the principles of sharing and egalitarian exchange; an obsession with method as a membership card; and a sharp focus

on matters of conceptualization and interpretation. Specialized professional language...bound many of us together, while it distinguished and separated us from others... Many of us were seldom seen without an armload of printout or stacks of IBM cards to feed the mainframe." (168) Here Graff recounts a life-transforming interdisciplinary experience, one that set him on his particular and highly fruitful course as an interdisciplinary social science historian.

I think the real importance of interdisciplinarity resides in experiences such as these, which deflect scholars from their previous paths, challenge existing intellectual habits, introduce surprising perspectives, and inspire creative advances in research and teaching. Scholars have such experiences even in interdisciplinary settings that fall far short of Graff's restrictive criteria: individual research projects like Katz's; centers or institutes where chemists and physicists or anthropologists and statisticians continually rub shoulders; interdisciplinary discussion groups or seminars, formal or informal; cross-disciplinary courses, especially when team-taught. Such experiences can occur within the boundaries of a single but complex discipline of the sort invoked by Jacobs, but they are particularly likely when departmental boundaries are breached. This is because disciplines, while by no means noncommunicating silos, do impose real intellectual constraints.

Jacobs agrees in passing with Stephen Turner that disciplines are "hiring cartels" (27), but he fails to spin out the full implications of this fact. As I tell my graduate students: "Disciplines discipline; they're not called disciplines for nothing." They have their own internal lore and hierarchies; their well-patrolled boundary conditions; their key theoretical texts and unavoidable methodological strictures; their initiation rituals (doing bench science in the laboratory; working in archives; doing ethnographic or archaeological field work; transforming IBM cards into printouts, etc.). In order to succeed in graduate school, obtain a job, and eventually get tenure, the initiate must recognize and honor these disciplinary strictures, even when she chooses to argue against them. What interdisciplinary experiences do is to create free spaces where scholars are released, at least provisionally, from these socially binding imperatives, in part by forcing them to confront the equally binding imperatives of scholars from other disciplines. Thus, when sociologists and anthropologists argue about their different conceptions of adequate evidence — sometimes ferociously, as I can testify from some of my own interdisciplinary encounters — both are forced to expand and to relativize their conceptions of how we know what we know. If such encounters are sustained, all parties learn to recognize, and, at best, to actually use one another's languages, epistemic metaphors, thought patterns, research methods, and key conceptual distinctions.

Most of these interdisciplinary spaces fall far short of Graff's strict constructionist standards. Many take place informally, outside the institutional space that Jacobs maps, and even those more formally organized often get by with only the most minimal support from the university administrators he distrusts. Most, even those that are relatively well-funded by central administrations or foundations, have relatively short life-spans, typically not much more than a decade, and they usually fail to develop the department-like coherence that Graff seems implicitly to require. But their intellectual value — which is their *raison d'être* — is not, in my experience, highly correlated with their institutional solidity. This is why new, often fleeting, interdisciplinary spaces are constantly being invented, usually spontaneously generated from below. Interdisciplinarity of this description simultaneously frees and reconstructs the scholarly mind, largely below the radar of Jacobs' and Graff's research on interdisciplinary institutions. In short, while Jacobs and Graff provide useful guides to the history and institutional sociology of interdisciplinarity in the American university, neither delves deeply enough into the lived experience of interdisciplinary encounters to capture the constantly regenerated intellectual excitement and creativity they provide.

References

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William H. Sewell, Jr., is Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Chicago. His work has two distinct foci: (1) the history of early modern and modern Europe and (2) the relationship between history and social theory. His empirical historical research concerns French social, labor, political, and cultural history, particularly in the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848.