

Is interdisciplinarity old news? A disciplined consideration of interdisciplinarity

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In April 2009, Mark C. Taylor, chair of the religion department at Columbia University, contributed a piece to the *New York Times* provocatively titled “End the university as we know it.” The article had attracted 473 comments on the paper’s website before the thread was closed just over 12 hours following its release and a quick online search reveals the article to have become a veritable internet sensation.

Taylor’s main criticism in the article is that a “mass production university model has led to separation where there ought to be collaboration and to ever increasing specialization” as, he posits in reference Kant (1798), academics become trustees “not of a branch of the sciences, but of limited knowledge that all too often is irrelevant for genuinely important problems” and as “research and publication become more and more about less and less” within fragmenting academic departments.

Taylor suggests that, in response, American universities must be “vigorously regulated and completely restructured.” He offers six prospective steps towards such restructuring, including the production of doctoral theses as “analytic treatments in formats from hypertext and websites to films and videogames,” the abolition of tenure, and the imposition of mandatory retirement. My paper, however, focuses on his two suggestions dealing most directly with the theme of interdisciplinarity.

In addressing interdisciplinarity, Taylor deems the “division-of-labor model” of separate academic departments “obsolete” and suggests that they be abolished and replaced by a curriculum focused on “common problems” such as “water” (and its quantity, quality, and distribution). He argues that such a problem-focused curriculum, which could be restructured periodically to address new issues, would “bring together people in the humanities, arts, social and natural sciences with representatives from professional schools like medicine, law, business, engineering, social work, theology and architecture. Through the intersection of multiple perspectives and approaches, new theoretical insights will develop and unexpected practical solutions will emerge.”

This is certainly not the first time the disciplines (and those who teach and research within them) have faced such critiques, which explicitly and implicitly call into question their autonomy, their status, and the legitimacy of their claims to expertise based on their production and possession of specialized knowledge (Beck and Young, 2005). My paper draws first on the Bernsteinian work of Rob Moore to explore one particularly influential way - which he terms “hyper-

interdisciplinarity” - that the disciplines are put on the defensive, as they are in Taylor’s *New York Times* piece. Moore (forthcoming) stresses that the sociological focus of this exploration is “not upon the *principle* of interdisciplinarity *per se*, but upon a type of [approach] in debates about knowledge and education in which it is presented as a *radical* alternative to disciplinary knowledge”. Such a presentation necessitates the rhetorical construction of a “radical break” between disciplinary knowledge, often held to be “a stultifying force that imposes arbitrary divisions and restrictions upon the educational field that stifle originality and innovation and preserve the educational advantages of dominant social groups” (ibid.), and a new order of interdisciplinary knowledge (which is, it should be added, more economically productive in the global “free market” according to neoliberal; conceptualizations). Andrew Abbott, in work referenced by Moore, argues, rather, that interdisciplinarity relates (and, generally, *always has* related) stably and complementarily with disciplinarity. Based on a historical consideration of the departmental structure as it emerged within the American university and of interdisciplinary research within the social sciences from the mid-1920s (including an analysis of article titles suggestive of “interdisciplinarity” within the *Social Sciences Citation Index*), Abbott suggests that “like most good ideas in social science, interdisciplinarity is old news” (2001, p. 131).

Additionally, what Taylor most crucially seems to overlook in promoting the abolition of permanent academic departments and the shift to an entirely problem-focused curriculum is that the intersection of multiple perspectives that he foresees as resulting from such a shift requires the *existence* of various perspectives, and some training within these various perspectives, in the first place; “interdisciplinarity presupposes disciplines” (Abbott, 2001, p. 135). Ultimately, the disciplinary stability that Taylor terms “obsolete” is rather “the condition for successful *innovation* within and between disciplinary networks rather than for ossification and sclerosis and for radical, progressive advancement in knowledge and understanding” (Moore, forthcoming).

Building on this framework, my paper next suggests that the “hyper-interdisciplinarity” promoted by Taylor is symptomatic of what Basil Bernstein (2000, p. 52) describes as “regionalization,” the recontextualization of “singular” knowledge structures (disciplines) into “larger units” increasingly responsive to and dependent upon the “market their output is serving” and subject to external control, within university settings. According to Bernstein (2000), for whom the notion of boundaries was a focal point, the boundary between the Trivium and Quadrivium established in the curriculum of the medieval University of Paris can be seen to represent a boundary between, in a Durkheimian sense, the “sacred” pursuit of transcendental and esoteric knowledge for intrinsic purposes and the “profane” pursuit of knowledge tied to much more instrumental and mundane practices such as economic production (Beck, 1999). Importantly, in light of the discussion that follows in my paper, for Bernstein “a sense of the sacred ... of educational knowledge ... is ... a function of socialization into subject loyalty: for it is the subject which becomes the linch-pin of identity” (1977, p. 96).

Recognizing, then, Bernstein’s longstanding concern with understanding how school curricula and pedagogy serve to structure identity and consciousness and his related attempts to link the mode of production and division of labor in different eras with the dominant pedagogical models of the time (Bonal and Rambla, 2003), my paper seeks to identify effects on the relationship between, as Bernstein (2000) puts it, knowledge and knowers (here, particularly, university

teachers, researchers and students) resulting from the shift from “singular” knowledge structures to “regions”. These might be expected to include the replacement of “inner commitments and dedications by short-term instrumentalities” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 62), serving to construct an “outwardly responsive identity rather than one driven by inner dedication” (ibid., p. 69).

In the global shift towards neo-liberal capitalism, Bernstein (2000) conceptualized a related shift from “competence” to more instrumental “performance” models of pedagogy. As opposed to the focus of competence models on the production of what Bernstein termed *introjected* identities, performance models focus more instrumentally on external objectives such as economic concerns (and the production of *projected* identities), leading ultimately to what he conceptualized as “short-termism” (ibid., p. 59). Such external and “short term” concerns are evidenced throughout Taylor’s *New York Times* piece - by the analogy he draws between American higher education and the automotive industry in Detroit (the recent government “bailout” of car manufacturers there - the “necessity” of which has been blamed by conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation largely on high labor costs, “expensive pension and health care packages negotiated through collective bargaining” and other “poor decisions” (Gattuso and Loris, 2008) often involving management’s historical concessions to labor - is of course heavily implied by Taylor here), by his invocation of terms and ideas such as “cost,” “contracting,” “problems” and the need for “practical solutions” to them, by multiple references to the “market” and, perhaps most particularly, by his deeming of a student’s dissertation on how the medieval theologian Duns Scotus used citations as “irrelevant” – and constitute an entirely *instrumental*, and largely market-oriented, conceptualization of knowledge and of the role of the university in producing it.

My paper concludes by considering whether Taylor’s proposed regionalization of the university curriculum is likely to develop into what Bernstein identified as a “generic” performance model focused on producing among learners (often through “lifelong learning”) a “set of general skills [necessary for] a range of specific performances” (2000, p. 55) or, rather, whether it is more likely to result what might be termed a “hyper-specialization” even more intense than the sort identified by Taylor as the reason behind his proposal to restructure the American university in the first place!

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