

## **Interdisciplinarity and boundary maintenance in a ‘new generation’ undergraduate degree.**

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*‘because it is rarely the case it is important to study those cases where the producers or effectors of the discourse are also its recontextualisers’*  
(Bernstein, 1990, p. 198)

These words from Bernstein set the theoretical context of this paper, concerned with how interdisciplinarity is recontextualized in an undergraduate degree, where knowledge recontextualization is close to, and often operates in parallel with, knowledge production. This research is situated within a university undergoing dramatic curriculum change and its subject is the curriculum, both espoused and enacted. Significantly, in my study those responsible for selecting, delocating and relocating knowledge – the recontextualisers – are also responsible for transforming this pedagogic discourse into evaluative criteria (Maton & Muller, 2007, pp. 18-19).

As part of the implementation of the Melbourne Model, the University of Melbourne introduced six broad undergraduate “New Generation” degrees. The Bachelor of Environments, one of these new degrees, is notable for its emphasis on interdisciplinarity, ‘The foundation of the degree is the inter-disciplinary nature of real-world projects’. (course handbook) The involvement of multiple faculties and the interdisciplinarity emphasis prompted my research questions: What constitutes interdisciplinarity in the new degree? How is interdisciplinarity revealed in the curriculum? Does this reflect disciplinary differences?

This paper will examine the role of the senior tutors as key recontextualising agents (Bernstein, 1996), responsible for both developing and delivering the curriculum to students in the Bachelor of Environments degree. One of the challenges of their role is to address the knowledge requirements of their discipline and the interdisciplinarity mandate. Bernstein’s concepts of collection and integrated codes (1971, 1975) are used to examine the subject curricula as ‘curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge’ (Bernstein, 1971, p. 203; 1975, p. 85). The subject curricula are located along both a classification continuum and an interdisciplinarity continuum to analyse the relations between the curricula type and realization of interdisciplinarity.

This research is based on an examination of the curriculum of six first year subjects in semester 2, 2008, the first year of the new degrees. Two text types are used to analyse the curriculum, subject overviews and assessment tasks. Subject overviews are selected as significant semiotic texts because they represent the recontextualization of the disciplinary knowledge structures into the subject structure. The genre of subject overview is by nature a high-level view, a summary; nonetheless it can contribute to an appreciation of the curriculum type and the realization of interdisciplinarity. The methods used include analysis of the lexis and sequential organization.

In addition, assessment tasks were analysed because what is assessed is what is deemed important by both the senior tutors as recontextualising agents and the students, signalling what counts as legitimate knowledge (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002) and given priority by students. Assessment reveals what knowledge should be acquired and how its acquisition is to be demonstrated. Within the framework of the handbook, the assessment tasks are constructed and evaluated to privilege not only specific knowledge but ways of its expression such as examinations, projects, models. Tasks are analysed according to purpose and form to provide insight into not only the disciplinary knowledge but also how interdisciplinarity is applied. Interviews with the senior tutors provide an additional view of the curriculum through confirming, elaborating or complicating findings from the written documentation.

Findings suggest there are relationships between the type of curriculum code and interdisciplinarity. Generally, those subjects whose curriculum represents a collection code exhibit less interdisciplinarity than those subjects which represent a more integrated code. As the flagship degree in the new undergraduate degree model, the Bachelor of Environments promotes a particular form of interdisciplinarity. Relying on individual recontextualising agents to implement interdisciplinarity seems to ignore disciplinary influences through which the curriculum is mediated. This may result in an interdisciplinary experience different from that intended.

## References

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