

Interdisciplinary thesis practicalities: How to negotiate the borderlands

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Abstract

This paper applies borderlands theory to the practicalities of interdisciplinary doctoral research. Interdisciplinary work is increasingly common, exciting, and fertile. Yet the boundary-crossing nature of interdisciplinary research is ambivalent, with both potential benefit and danger that inhere in active borderlands. Disciplines have their own tribes (Becher & Trowler, 2001), with cultures and conventions that may be fiercely guarded. Working between more than one tribe requires cross-cultural fluency. Although research students are encouraged to explore the borderlands of interdisciplinarity, in practice they can find this territory to be fraught with additional challenges and the need for careful negotiation. Finding supervisors; negotiating between disciplines with different referencing systems; choosing from different discipline-specific language, terminology and conventions; shaping the research for a wider audience; and satisfying examiners who may be out of their depth for large parts of the thesis are aspects of the interdisciplinary thesis. While the in-between terrain of the borderlands may be fertile and promising, there may also be risks of tribal alienation. How might these be identified and minimized? Where do learning advisors fit into this borderlands space?

Interdisciplinary borderlands

Interdisciplinary research ranges the fertile marginal borderlands between disciplines. Yet the borderland nature of interdisciplinarity makes such research a frontier activity, and “frontiers are dynamic and often unstable zones” (Parker, 2006, p. 77). Parker defines borderlands as “regions around or between political or cultural entities where geographic, political, demographic, cultural, and economic circumstances or processes may interact to create borders or frontiers” (p. 80). Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) blazed the trail into a theory of borderlands as contested spaces where identity is problematically heightened as different cultures meet. Her definition is more poetic than Parker’s and perhaps more apt for this paper: “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (p. 3). Kearney (1998) also shows that “the ‘border area’ is a broad, indistinct and fluctuating zone” (p. 118). Although borderlands are ‘regions’, predicated upon spatial existence, they are also laden with history that is likely to be

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conflictual. Geographic borderland theory notes that such terrain is not empty, nor inert, but alive with a history that often includes suspicion and hostility, and an entrenched tendency to polarize the familiar and the alterior: “The language of space, perhaps because it is so palpably linked to experience, is imbued with the sense of inclusion and exclusion as individuals and groups move through, in, and out of communities” (Gulson & Symes, 2007, p. 2). The benefits of trading are likely to require diplomatic caution.

Similarly, interdisciplinary research students working in the borderlands must negotiate cultural difference. This article emerges from experiential practice as a student learning advisor coordinating a generic doctoral support programme and finding that interdisciplinary students had problems relating to the borderland crossing that they needed to do. Finding supervisors; negotiating between disciplines with different referencing systems; choosing from different discipline-specific language, terminology and conventions; shaping the research for a wider audience; and satisfying examiners who may be out of their depth for large parts of the thesis are challenges of the interdisciplinary thesis. My definition of the term ‘interdisciplinarity’ is academic activity that traverses discipline borders, without distinction between multi-, inter-, or cross-calibrations. In this, I follow Moran (2002), who rejects attempts to use “other terms such as ‘post-disciplinary,’ ‘anti-disciplinary,’ and trans-disciplinary,” instead arguing that “the value of the term ‘interdisciplinary’ lies in its flexibility and indeterminacy” (p. 15). I use ‘interdisciplinary’ as an inclusive term. There is increasing interdisciplinarity in recent years. Balkin (1996) observes that, in the discipline of Law, a promising young doctor would be unlikely to get faculty work in a first class institution if their research did not have something interdisciplinary about it.

Borderlands are constructs intensified by the social imagination. Anzaldúa (1987) takes a feisty identity from her borderlands background, using the term as a metaphor for her own lesbian sexuality for example. In doing so, she locates the tensions of borderlands, observing that “living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element” (n.p. preface). She links the psychological with the geographical: “The struggle has always been inner and is played out in the outer terrains” (p. 87), an observation similar to discipline convention’s inner logic, and its outer manifestation in research and writing practice. That borderlands are social constructs alive with conflict makes them a good metaphor for thinking about interdisciplinarity.

First, using a ‘metaphor’, borderlands, to inform pedagogy around interdisciplinarity seems appropriate, because interdisciplinarity is similar to metaphoric language. Metaphors work by transferring understanding: a metaphorical vehicle conveys target knowledge. (Thinking of a particular method of teaching as a ‘tool’, for example, may enable a teacher to articulate her pedagogical theory: Seeing herself as someone with an extensive tool kit enables her to see her own professionalism.) Metaphor is more than a simple comparison between two terms: It generates new meanings in both.

Ricouer (1994) notes the generative tendency of metaphor: “The ‘metaphoric’ that transgresses the categorical order also begets it” (p. 24). By using language non-literally (and thus transgressing categorical order), metaphor generates new usage of language. This, I am arguing, is similar to interdisciplinary work, which transgresses disciplinary rules to create a new knowledge in the borderlands between disciplines. Linking metaphor to interdisciplinarity, Reynolds (2001) argues that “cognitive metaphors re-organize our conceptual fields—and make interdisciplinary work possible” (p. 7). Reynolds notes that “interdisciplinary work both proceeds by and produces metaphors” (p. 32). Metaphor is a paradigm of interdisciplinarity; both expand our capacity for thought and understanding.

Secondly, the metaphor of ‘borderlands’ for interdisciplinarity is apt because disciplines are cultural entities. They are tribal (Becher & Trowler, 2001), with their own epistemological beliefs. Members of one tribe may be suspicious of others or fail to recognize their differing conventions. There are risks too in appropriating one culture’s tools and using them within another culture’s practice.

The concept of borderlands is inviting. Interdisciplinarity explores margins and borders, territory full of potential, not yet controlled by someone else. Children are often attracted to marginal zones of land out of reach of adult eyes, the scrub along the creek line, or the empty section with its promisingly long grass. Margins prompt the imagination for academic work too, where one undergraduate course’s ideas fuel thought in another, begging for connection to be made. Research can pull forth the possibility of these connections. Interdisciplinarity involves synthesis, one of the higher skills a student can develop (Newell & Green, 1998, p. 32). There are practical reasons for linking sets of ideas: different disciplines offer different ‘cultural software’ or different ‘sets of tools’, as Balkin (1996, n.p.) identifies in a witty interrogation of the word ‘discipline’.

Stepping outside of the disciplinary framework, however, leaves students unsupported by discipline convention while they construct original contribution that will withstand criticism. Correct use of disciplinary cultural conventions establishes the researcher as a bona fide member of the tribe which accepts their work as legitimate; they may lose this credential when disciplines are crossed and they lose the stability of a single cultural practice. Arguments against interdisciplinary studies note the risk of “conceptual confusion” (Benson, 1998, p. 107) which sounds like an outsider’s evaluation of the cultural fusion the student attempts. Benson warns against the danger of “trading intellectual rigor for topical excitement” (p. 107). One team providing student support “came to recognize that interdisciplinary pedagogy is cognitively, emotionally and socially threatening work for teachers and students” (Manathunga, Lant, & Mellick, 2006, p. 321). Students “found it difficult to manage differing expectations of their two advisors” (Manathunga, et al., 2006, p. 370). From an overview, potential difficulties are evident: “Diverse sources, methodologies, goals, and theoretical frameworks are just the beginning of the evils to escape the Pandora's

box of interdisciplinary study once it is opened” (Parker, 2006, p. 78). Stepping outside the disciplinary boundary exposes one to risk.

Problems: the practice

In the interests of finding better ways to sustain interdisciplinary students, we should remain aware of the borderlands risks. Here I reconstruct case studies compiled from experiential examples of students who have consulted me for advice. These vignettes are based on real experiences that highlight a range of difficulties.

Case One: Jane has successfully defended her doctorate which is based in Population Health and spans Geography and Nursing. She herself is a nurse and a mature student. Elated at her success, she is also pleased to have been offered an academic job in Geography: She is aware that it is unusual and fortunate to have an offer of an academic job immediately. However, the work entails coordinating and teaching a large first-year course that she herself has never taken, in a topic which is her weakest area of expertise. She is overwhelmed by the thought of how much work it will be to function professionally in this job if she takes it. On the other hand, she worries that rejection of the job may be held against her.

Case Two: Cristabel’s thesis spans Asian Studies and Business. One department is more affluent than the other. She tutors in the least affluent department which is where her main supervisor is based. She finds this means that the link to the richer department with its deeper pool of funding is tenuous. Departments at this institution offer some funding for research students to get to conferences; in Cristabel’s case, the poorer department advises her to apply to the one with more money, but the richer department directs her back to her supervisor’s department. Twice now her requests for funding have been refused by both departments. She finds it ironic that having access to two pools of funding instead of just one means that neither are available to her.

Case Three: Melody, whose Doctorate of Education has been mainly conducted with the Maori Studies Department, is approaching submission and a conversation with her supervisor has alerted her to the difficulty he is having choosing an examiner. She is concerned that an examiner will perhaps be unsympathetic to her Kaupapa Maori framework (see Smith, 1998) and to her commitment to a Maori epistemology. She is also worried about how much of either discipline she might need to explain if the examiner were to come from the other. The need to hand in the thesis has suddenly brought home to Melody awareness of the risks should the examiners not be flexible about her interdisciplinarity.

Case Four: William is frustrated. He has been looking for a supervisor now for several months. His thesis could be situated in Language and Linguistics, or in Development Studies, or even perhaps in English. However, although he believes that there are several academics on campus who would be good supervisors for his project,

none of them is willing to take him on. All are nervous about being the main supervisor to a thesis that they feel will be largely beyond their area of expertise. He has external funding from his country of origin but is beginning to feel that an exciting prospect secured with a scholarship is drifting away out of reach.

Case Five: Wallace cannot resolve the conflict that he has between his two supervisors who are in different disciplines. His main supervisor is adamant that he must follow her advice. At the same time the more prestigious co-supervisor in the other discipline has told Wallace that she expects him to take her (by implication better) advice. Recently, after being away at a conference and not responding to emails, she overrode the main supervisor's advice on her return. Admittedly, this was concerning a part of the research that was in her area of expertise. Wallace now has to backtrack on several weeks' work and explain to his main supervisor that he is rolling backwards in his progress.

Negotiating the borderlands

The cases above have symmetry with difficulties experienced in exchanges across borderlands. Anzaldúa's (1987) particular borderland history is not unique. One collection of academic articles elucidates social and cultural discomfort at borderlands over a range of geographical situations, including amongst others the Catalan, Pyrenean, European-African, Californian-Mexican, and Palestinian-Israeli borderlands. Collectively the studies show the ambivalent nature of borderlands. Although the interdisciplinary borderlands of academia are not fraught with the same kinds of violence that occur between states, I am suggesting that academics need to be aware that they hold power in an unequal power hierarchy, and need to take additional care.

The unreliability of borderland dwellers is noted in borderlands literature. Douglass (1998) notes the way that people who inhabit borderlands may freely and regularly shift their stance towards the rules of engagement: "The same borderlander is capable of assuming patriotic (defender of the border) and piratical (violation of its rules) stances" (p. 90). When trading across the borders is often both profitable and illegal, attitudes swing between positive and negative according to *pro bono*. It should not be surprising, then, that a supervisor, and perhaps an examiner, may be similarly erratic in their flexibility towards discipline conventions. Kearney (1998) documents the disconnect between state rules and their enactment by enforcers. In the context of the Mexican-Californian border, he observes that in the United States, cheap foreign labour is desired although "the persons in which it is embodied are not desired" (p. 125) and notes that identity as well as space is being contested (p. 124). Students will need to negotiate not only the rules established in guidelines and regulations, but also the sometimes variant practices of power-wielders.

Interdisciplinary supervision

Borderland crossing provides a pressing reason for modelling best practice principles of good communication. Supervisors need to discuss the cultural issues of interdisciplinarity, the protocols for negotiating different cultures, and the strategies for any awkwardness that this entails. Candidates should be clear about their own needs, for example, if they lack experience in some areas of their work. The challenges of working outside of familiar fields should not be underestimated. Supervisors, as the holders of power in the relationship, need to be sensitive to the possibility of student discomfort. Their role of supporting students through an initiation process is even more charged with the need for care.

Students may want to seek advice from other academics besides their supervisors. It can be helpful to list aspects of research that will require support; for example, specific theory or paradigms, an overview of some fields, qualitative research methods and methodology, quantitative methods, laboratory work, fishing for funding in new pools, and writing up in a slightly unfamiliar genre. Students should remind themselves that each time they successfully negotiate a challenge they are developing life skills, useful for the future.

Generic support: Can learning advisors help?

Learning advisors are keenly aware of their own ambivalence as people who may be academics but who are the academic equivalent of borderlands dwellers; for example, designated by discipline-situated colleagues as ‘the writing ladies’ despite publication status (Alexander, 2005). Rowland (2006) notes how frequently we agonise over our academic identity, finding this unsurprising: “The academic development community . . . might be expected to have a particular difficulty when it comes to articulating their own identity” (p. 75). Maybe our marginality gives a vantage point view of interdisciplinary borderlands.

First, just recognizing the difficulty is helpful. We can be institutional nerve ends that receive awareness of a problem. We can also bring interdisciplinary doctoral students together to talk about borderland crossing strategies. What follows are a few suggestions, which I hope may be helpful to students and supervisors. They come with the suggestion to learning advisors that facilitating a session for interdisciplinary students from across campus can be psychologically sustaining for them. This sort of support is practical, but is also pastoral, to use a rather happy geographical metaphor.

The interdisciplinary thesis: Decisions across discipline cultures

First, an overarching truth about the interdisciplinary thesis is that one discipline should be appointed as the home one. Supervisors should be party to agreement on which it is, but the student probably needs to make the decision. For some researchers

this comes easily, since one aspect of their research is clearly central. Others want to resist this privileging process because all their disciplines seem equally important and a hierarchy creates a bias that makes a false prioritisation.

Nonetheless, the decision as to which discipline is designated as the home one resolves a string of decisions. Even the most non-standard researchers must engage with established systems. They will need to publish in journals, which necessitates the choice of which journals they might target. They may want an academic job: which discipline would be the most suitable for future employment? Once the home-base decision is made, the choice of referencing style (and some of the other formal decisions) is made too. Then I would also suggest that at every moment when a decision is made, it is briefly explained so that an examiner cannot miss the cultural purpose behind the choice.

The interdisciplinary thesis: Examiners

Choice of examiners is particularly critical. Part of a candidate's engagement with the literature might be to note experts whose interests, style or paradigm make them suitable examiners. Discussion about possible examiners benefits both student and supervisor as they think about the completion process. This exercise at the very least will remind the supervisor of the thesis specifics that should influence the choice of examiners.

Candidates themselves could list for their supervisor the factors they consider important in the choice of examiners. These could include issues such as

- the paradigm they have used;
- any specific contexts, such as a particular subject group;
- any deep-seated tensions between the covered disciplines;
- which discipline they regard as the 'home' one; and
- any radical departure that the thesis makes from any other.

This list is also likely to be helpful as the interdisciplinarian gets ready to submit the thesis: It may help them to come to grips with the parameters of their work and thus how they might defend it within the context of several disciplinary cultures.

The interdisciplinary thesis: Methodology

Before submission, discipline differences should be identified, and choices fully explained. Style, methods and language could be addressed, since disciplines have their own stylistic conventions regarding the use of active or passive verbs, of author focus in the literature review, of personal anecdote, and of subjective or objective voice. Choices should be explained even more carefully than in most theses.

On a positive side, interdisciplinarity supplies its own methodology. It is likely to involve unusual manoeuvres, and these should be explained. As an example, Balsiger (2004) outlines Henk Zandvoort's principle of 'guide and supply'. According to this,

the relationship between the participating research programmes or disciplines will be characterized by the feature of guide and supply. In guide mode the first discipline formulates the task, which can be dealt with by the second discipline (which may have the most efficient means of solving the problem) in the supply mode. This concept is one explanation of how the disciplines contribute to the methods, but the point is to explain the model entailed in the specific thesis. Newell and Green (1998) point out that “interdisciplinary studies *are* a methodology” (p. 29) [my italics]. Often, though, candidates omit the reasons for their decisions, and need reminding that examiners frequently ask about choices (see Glatthorn, 1998, pp. 186-188 for a list of frequently asked questions). There are no right or wrong answers regarding decisions. What can go wrong is that an examiner fails to see that choices have been made consciously and intelligently, and suspects that the candidate is simply careless. Defence entails spelling out clearly the reasons for the design decisions.

The interdisciplinary thesis: Definitions, terms, explanation, appendices

Interdisciplinarians should be vigilant about the definition of terms, and their sources, since an examiner from one discipline might fail to recognize terms from another, and instead see them as symptomatic of poor language control. Theoretical frameworks should be spelt out more clearly and simply than they would be in a single discipline thesis. Explanatory material could be put in appendices so that if the examiner needs to understand something, it is available as optional reading.

A narrative that addresses some of the decisions prevents misunderstanding, but it also ensures that the work is marked with something unique and personal: the story of an adventure in the borderlands between disciplines. With the narrative of their journey an option to be kept open, candidates could record the issues relating to their progress to produce a richly personal section.

Supporting interdisciplinary students should involve celebrating the borderlands negotiation that they do to bring together something strong because it is multiply cultured. It sounds naïve to make that statement, but it seems important that the additional challenges be rewarded with additional recognition. Anzaldúa (1987) speaks from her own experience to declare that those who inhabit borderlands and build a borderland identity must develop “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (p. 79). The borderland dweller “learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (p. 79). These are skills the world needs. When cultures are successfully negotiated, the ‘something else’ that emerges out of ambivalence is especially precious.

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