



Walls Tumbling Down: Our Opportunity

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**Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or
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When early humans used their intelligence to survive or advance their civilizations, it is very likely that they had no knowledge of disciplines, as we know them today. That is, hunting was not a study of economics, anthropology, or physics—it was a way to solve the problem of hunger. Of course, we understand today how each of these scholarly disciplines can play a part in understanding these early hunters, but it is unlikely that they were on their minds at the time. They were using their knowledge as a means of solving a problem before them. As time passed, and humankind's knowledge grew and developed, its complexity required classification, which ultimately resulted in the disciplines we know today.

As our knowledge has grown—and certainly it has—we can liken it to the growth of a tree. Beginning with a single trunk, it eventually grows branches. These branches in turn split into more branches, until not only are there many branches, but they begin to touch and even cross over one another. The same can be said for our knowledge. However it has grown or developed, there is no question that overlap exists, and in some cases even difficulty in defining exactly where one discipline begins and another ends. This must not be viewed as a problem, however. While some might view this analogy as meaning that our ever-thickening tree is resulting in confusion and impenetrability, we can also view the crisscrossing branches in our example as increasing the number of paths of inquiry we can take to find the answers to our questions.

Disciplines therefore are not a bad thing, but they must be viewed for what they are: a *descriptive* means of categorizing our knowledge and paths of inquiry. Disciplines are derived by humans and not handed down to us from the heavens.

The birth of the Social Sciences themselves practically created the idea of interdisciplinary studies in the early 20th century (Klein, 1996, p. 8). Librarianship itself is one of the most interdisciplinary studies of all. In the process of studying the arrangement of knowledge and information, it stands to reason that librarianship inevitably borrows aspects from all of the disciplines.

If interdisciplinary studies are not a new concept, why does it seem so pressing now? One reason could be the speed that the internet has brought us. For scholars wishing to do research in a discipline outside of their own, they no longer have to, say, travel to a different subject library located elsewhere on campus. Nor do they need to learn new research methods or use unfamiliar print indexes to locate scholarly literature. They do not even need to know the titles of any of a discipline's scholarly literature in order to get started in it. They can simply log into a computer, select a database, and with little advanced training, retrieve a competent set of scholarly articles in this new discipline. This is by no means a replacement for working with an expert in a certain new discipline, but nonetheless, even doing a simple search in Google can help a scholar identify an expert in a new discipline whom they can contact, and bypass a great deal of time and drudgery in the process.

Anecdotally speaking, scholars seem to be increasingly customizing their areas of study, often by studying in multiple subject areas, or melding aspects of two of them together to create a unique area of study. It is not uncommon nowadays to see titles such as "Professor of English and Women's Studies," or "Professor of Media Studies and History." This blurring of the boundaries between disciplines will likely increase as

newer scholars, whose studies occurred entirely within the internet age become more of a presence in academia.

Interdisciplinarity in Academia

In order to gain an understanding of interdisciplinarity as it is viewed outside of library science literature, books were searched that included the term “interdisciplinary” in the Library of Congress Subject Heading. From these results, it is clear that there is no shortage of discourse about social sciences and interdisciplinarity. What may be surprising to some is how long it has been discussed. While the literature focused on for this paper is primarily scholarly articles and books from the past 15 years, one of the most relevant works dates back to 1969 (Sherif, 1969). In his introduction to *Interdisciplinary Relationships in the Social Sciences*, a collection of lectures delivered at a 1967 Symposium on the topic, Sherif argues that interdisciplinary borrowing is not new, and that even then, the natural and physical sciences were borrowing from each other. He further states that, “It is when borrowing involves the social sciences that interdisciplinary effort becomes a matter of controversy, beneath the dignity of a natural science,” expressing the feelings of frustration social scientists likely felt (and perhaps still feel) in an age of natural and physical sciences “chauvinism,” so to speak.

In this same volume, Milgram (p.103) weighs in on the benefits of interdisciplinary research. He states “When a social scientist frees himself from the narrow grooves of his academic discipline, a new range of intellectual problems is made accessible to him, and new paths of inquiry open.”

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Even in terms of our current disciplinary structure, Klein (1996, p. 55) tells us that it is only a recent development, a little more than a century old. Despite this newness, however, she correctly states that it is nonetheless responsible for the current administrative and academic structure of most colleges and universities today—which can cause difficulties for the interdisciplinary scholar in search of financial or organizational support.

There are many examples of success resulting from interdisciplinary methods in research both within the social sciences and without. Calhoun and Marrett (2003, p. vii) note a few of these, including the use of immunology and anthropology in HIV/AIDS research, population studies of the health of aging populations, and the studies of the relationship between heart disease and social factors. Overall, however, Salter and Hearn (1997, p. 3) sum it up best by saying that interdisciplinary research is important from the practical perspective: “research is interdisciplinary because many research problems cannot easily be addressed from within the confines of particular disciplines. They require the concerted efforts of many people, each reflecting a different perspective.”

Interdisciplinary studies have a high potential for new discoveries and the advancement of knowledge. New perspectives from scholars of different academic backgrounds usually provides at least a spark in igniting new advancements. An excellent example of an important new realm of interdisciplinary studies is Quaternary Studies, the study of the last few million years of the earth’s history. Quaternary Studies incorporates, by some estimates, 35 different academic disciplines, including anthropology, geology, geography, biology, climatology, history, and oceanology. Using

knowledge from all of these varying disciplines, and threading them together in new ways, scholars in this area are uncovering amazing new observations about, among other things, humanity's affect on the environment, changes to the earth climate, and how life on earth has responded historically to such changes.

Despite the demonstrated successes of interdisciplinary research, challenges and obstacles remain. Salter and Hearn offer this description of the status quo: Support from the universities, criteria of the granting councils' adjudication committees, support for learned journals, the organization of universities into departments, and the association of graduate degrees with specific disciplines all lend credence to the idea that disciplines are an inevitable and necessary component of intellectual work. (1997, pp. 20-21)

Salter and Hearn go on to discuss some other less-concrete obstacles, such as the association of interdisciplinarity with "intellectual fads and fashions," relegating it to the status "luxury that universities can ill afford" (1997, p. 3) They convincingly dismantle the foundations of these obstacles their aforementioned argument, but it seems clear that to those not involved in it, interdisciplinarity still has an air of illegitimacy that might be difficult to shake.

How is interdisciplinarity being discussed in library and information science literature? Since the topic of this paper deals with the role a librarian can play in facilitating interdisciplinary research, articles dealing with librarian roles were researched using Library Literature and Information Science via EBSCO. There were

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three main themes that were discussed in this area: “subject librarianship,” i.e., the specialization of librarians along subject lines; “holistic librarianship,” which refers to librarians as generalists by library function, e.g., librarians who act as bibliographers, catalogers, and reference librarians; and finally the challenges of cataloging interdisciplinary materials.

What kind of problems does interdisciplinarity pose for libraries? The two most obvious areas are the arrangement and acquisition of knowledge (collections and collection development) and identifying the knowledge (cataloging).

Interdisciplinarity and Collections

As the aforementioned Salter and Hearn quote states, we must acknowledge reality in terms of the administrative organization of most universities along disciplinary lines. And while the intention of this paper is not to undermine or “overthrow” this regime, there is no question that academic libraries, which often mirror this regime by organizing along subject lines can pose some obstacles to the scholar pursuing interdisciplinary research, and to the librarian trying to acquire interdisciplinary resources.

An interdisciplinary scholar might wonder, in a subject-based library, which library they need to use for their studies. Take for example, a scholar studying the history of the American civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s as portrayed in the media. A history librarian might tend to focus on the historical aspects of the topic. But according to Hickey and Arlen, more than half of the sources historians consult fall outside of the

traditional Library of Congress Call Numbers for history. Social sciences sources in the realm of civil rights, communications, and perhaps political science and law could offer important insight and background to this topic and a social sciences librarian could provide them.¹ In this case, if the social sciences librarian does not refer the scholar to the history librarian, the scholar is likely to assume that all the materials available would be found in the history library and not inquire further. The point is that librarians must be able to “surround” the scholar’s area of research to at least be able to suggest other areas of inquiry or refer them to another specialist. This will be covered in more detail in the next section.

Developing collections is the other major issue with interdisciplinarity. Since most academic libraries tend to be organized along subject lines, collection responsibilities (and their attendant budgets) tend to be similarly organized (Hickey & Arlen, 2002, p. 97). How do you split up the responsibilities? And, perhaps most importantly, which budget should pay for newer materials in this field? Short of designating a librarian the “interdisciplinary selector” and giving her/him a dedicated collections budget, the best course is to make sure that communication mechanisms (e.g., meetings, discussion boards) are in place for selectors to be sure that certain areas are being covered. Interdisciplinary areas are often in danger of “falling through the cracks” during the selection process, due to selectors assuming that “the other person” will be buying it. The selection process should have a very social component to it, to encourage selectors in fields that often cross over each other to work together for greater good of the collection (Hickey & Arlen, 2002, p. 97).

¹ This example assumes, of course, that history would not be part of a social sciences library, but part of a humanities library, which is not always the case. International Federation of Library Associations, Social Science Libraries Section, Satellite Conference, *Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or sea change?* University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, 6-7, August 2008

Interdisciplinarity and Cataloging

No cataloging system is perfect. Cataloging is a descriptive framework for the items in a collection, and no matter how good it may be, it can never completely replace the experience of having the item in front of you. Subject headings and call numbers have evolved along with the disciplinary structure of academia and therefore are of help only to the interdisciplinary scholar who understands the disciplines she/he is crossing.

Librarians, this author included, in the past have often looked down on full-text searching as somehow beneath their professional status and a somewhat blunt method of conducting searches. The subject heading searches that librarians did before the widespread availability of full-text online databases just seem to have more dignity to them, in a professional sense. When one considers search precision, searching by subject headings invariably produces better results. However, search precision does not carry the same level of importance it once did, (few care if Google pulls up a million hits, they just want to look at the first ten) and such precision is not as important for interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary research is more about defining the disciplinary “ingredients” of the research (e.g., the identification of media studies, history and civil rights in the earlier example) and becoming aware of resource types (newspaper articles, television broadcasts, government documents) than identifying specific books or articles. In a practical sense, full-text searching is appears to have a lot of momentum.

But how can full-text searching be utilized if no electronic full-text copy exists for an item? Outside of Google's book scanning project, which aims to create full-text records of books from the collections of many of the largest academic libraries in the United States, there are two options. Annotations and/or Table of Contents are available for inclusion in MARC records from a number of library vendors, including the Library of Congress itself. Including either of these two items in catalog records can increase the "findability" of interdisciplinary items by describing them in more accessible, universal language, than rigid, controlled subject headings can.

"Web 2.0" functions such as tagging, can create an entirely new lexicon for subject headings that flow "from the bottom up," i.e., from the users into the catalog, rather than "from the top down," i.e., from the professional catalogers down to the users. Allowing users to "tag" items by adding their own descriptive terms to their records will also provide better findability to interdisciplinary materials by more immediately incorporating new terminology into catalog records. Such user-generated tags would not *replace* controlled subject headings, but rather complement them.

Interdisciplinarity and the Role of Librarians

Interdisciplinary studies should not be feared or avoided. This is a development that librarians must embrace enthusiastically. While it is important to maintain librarians with subject specialties who are experts at the specific sources and research strategies necessary for the traditional disciplines, all librarians should also have the ability to direct a scholar to other relevant disciplines and help them navigate the overall Body of

Knowledge. Boissonnas (2001, pp. 40-41) has written about the trends and problems of overspecialization in libraries, and states very eloquently:

Library work is not about dealing with knowledge as units of information; rather it concerns handling knowledge within the context of human experience.

Overspecialization carries the risk of shutting out some of that human experience. Like the lousy doctors who are wonderful medical technicians, we run the risk of becoming great information specialists and lousy librarians.

Boissonnas is actually referring to becoming too specialized by function, e.g., technical services vs. public services, but it is equally applicable to interdisciplinarity. "Human experience" does not exist in neatly divided disciplines. It is impossible to discuss the major questions facing the world, such as poverty, the environment, or peace, without being interdisciplinary (McNicol, 2003, p. 23). Boissonnas also discusses the concept of "systems thinking," where the focus is not on individual components, but all of the components comprising a system and their interrelationships. This is equally applicable to the role of a librarian in interdisciplinarity.

Librarians are no longer the "gatekeepers" of knowledge (Fletcher, 2001, p. 6). The Internet revolution in knowledge accessibility has been an amazing transition for society, but librarians know that their profession is still necessary for the future of scholarship. This might not be as clear to the rest of academia, however. It behooves librarians to be as flexible as possible to ensure that their universities can see the benefits of working with librarians. Assisting scholars navigate and understand the literature of their disciplines—and the literature of other, related disciplines—is a niche in academia that librarians are uniquely qualified to fill.

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Take HIV/AIDS as an example: a medical researcher working only in a medical library might be familiar with all of the Medical Subject Headings pertaining to HIV and AIDS and with the associated medical Library of Congress Call Numbers associated with them in the Q's and the R's. Without a librarian who understands at least the existence of HIV/AIDS as a social issue, the medical researcher may be deprived of important relevant information in the H's or what important legal issues are involved (in the K's). This is a clumsy example, to be sure, since few researchers today depend only on call numbers or browsing library stacks to become aware of information—but overall, it is important to consider a new role for librarians as being people who can break out the components of a field of study and suggest paths of research.

Meeting the Challenges

How can librarians meet the challenges of interdisciplinary studies? Although it may sound almost comically simple, the rigorous and regular reading of general interest periodicals is one way. The key here is that the periodicals *not* be scholarly journals, but should be written for an educated audience. Why not scholarly? Because interdisciplinary research implies some level of research in a discipline in which one is not an expert. Few, if any librarians can have subject specialist experience (or advanced degrees) in all the disciplines that frequently come in contact with others. Trying to regularly read the scholarly literature of disciplines outside of one's main area of expertise can be mentally exhausting—which will reduce the possibility of keeping up with it. Favorites of the author are magazines like *The New Yorker* (a weekly), and

Wired (a monthly) but any magazines that provide coverage of a broad spectrum of subjects, including politics, social issues, finance, the arts, science, technology, literature, and history will work. The goal is to keep attuned to developments in these fields, so that appropriate disciplinary connections can be made. By remaining conscious of interdisciplinary connections while reading, a librarian can strengthen his/her own research and reference services skills.

Regular reading of select RSS feeds is another worthy strategy.

In promoting a role as an interdisciplinary librarian, one must leave the library and get out into the scholar's world, and network with faculty in different areas of expertise. One of the most valuable services a librarian can provide to the faculty they serve is to help them to understand when they should go outside their discipline for information.

Ultimately, just embracing the challenge of interdisciplinary studies, and accepting the reality that this is a solid direction of a growing body of research will keep a librarian in tune with a living, breathing, and growing landscape of knowledge.