Disciplinary Nationalism in an Interdisciplinary World

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When our modern academic disciplines arose in the nineteenth century, they reflected the nationalism that was then prevalent in society at large. In many ways, our disciplines and their attendant departments were conceived on analogy to the European nation-state, each with its own territory, language, national traditions and pride. Increasingly, though, we find ourselves living in an interdisciplinary world in which issues cut across the national boundaries of the established disciplines. A few years ago, the former under secretary-general of the United Nations Brian Urquhart put this problem in vivid terms in his memoir *A Life in Peace* and War, describing his early efforts to foster collaboration among the UN's specialized agencies. Urquhart describes this work during the late 1940s

> as a singularly futile and bleak period in my career .... Our work epitomized, in its futility, the built-in diffuseness of the United Nations system. There was, and is, as little chance of the Secretary-General coordinating the autonomous specialized agencies of the UN system as King John of England had of bringing to heel the feudal barons. Indeed, the situations are in some respects similar. The agencies each have their owns constitutions, budgets, and national constituencies, and have no intention of being coordinated by the UN, although they must pretend to be in favor of it. (119-20)

The comparison to academic departments will be clear to anyone active in administration today: the modern university profoundly shares the structural contradiction of the "United Nations": the dream of a harmonious world amid the reality of a heady mixture of 19th century nationalism and medieval feudalism. Little wonder that decades ago Clark Kerr already renamed the university the " multiversity."

If we no longer wish to embrace Kerr's own program of giving free rein to free trade among our academic entrepreneurs, it remains a major challenge to create vital links among our still often nationalistic disciplines. My own home field of Comparative Literature has long been engaged with this issue, as Comp Lit arose in response to the jingoism commonly expressed in literature departments organized along national lines. As I've wrestled in scholarly and administrative terms with problems of definition and of programmatic direction, I've increasingly found myself questioning three common assumptions about interdisciplinary work: first, that it transcends disciplinary boundaries; second, that it's most characteristically seen in collaborative work; third, that it is logical for students to begin with general interdisciplinary work and then proceed to the specific specialized work represented in majors. All of these assumptions have a certain logic, and many programs give them visible embodiment, in our proliferating crossdepartmental Centers and Institutes, where collaborative teaching and research are often emphasized, as well as in campus-wide General Education programs required of students before they proceed to choose a major for more advanced study.

All of these assumptions, though, should be turned around. Perhaps interdisciplinary work is best thought of as *immanent* to disciplines, not transcendent of them; it is principally practiced within departments, not outside them. Further, interdisciplinary work is often fundamentally *individual* before it becomes collective. Finally, it can best *follow* specialized work rather than preceding it. On this perspective, interdisciplinary work is a kind of multilingualism, not an Esperanto: an engagement of developed specialized discourses rather than a dissolution of difference into a common universal language.

A whole series of institutional changes could follow from these realizations. As regards faculty, collaborative research projects and team-taught courses are often excellent things, but they can be expensive

and cumbersome. Much interdisciplinary work really takes place in the head of an individual scholar, and we can do more to foster faculty development in this direction. Collaborative projects generally proceed on the assumption of existing mastery of the relevant aspects of a project, but what faculty often need, as they begin to explore an interdisciplinary topic, is help in gaining expertise where they don't already have it. We should give faculty more support, for example, in taking courses and attending conferences where they aren't yet expert, rather than always paying for them to give conference papers on what they already know.

For graduate students, language requirements can be opened up (as we've done in Comp Lit at Columbia), allowing them to satisfy a language requirement by taking a series of courses in another discipline. In this way we take interdisciplinary work seriously as the learning of more than one disciplinary language, so that students can use concepts with knowledge of their history and context, and not simply wander off with a few isolated terms or metaphors, often ones that have taken on a new life in new disciplines decades after they've been superseded in their originary discipline.

The greatest change could come with undergraduate education. If we begin to see interdisciplinary work as requiring a real grounding in two or more disciplines, it follows that "general education" should come late in an undergraduate career rather than at its beginning. One way to embody this perspective would be as follows: first-year undergraduates would take a series of discipline-based surveys, ideally some in seminar format where they would develop their writing and their analytical skills; they would then spend their middle two years concentrating on a major or a pair of majors; finally, in their senior year, they would have a set of general interdisciplinary courses, presumably while also completing work on their major(s). We ought to recognize that students are increasingly coming to college armed with multiple AP credits (from courses taken as early as tenth grade!), ready to begin work on a major. Further, they are more and more choosing to do double majors. I often hear people bemoaning this anxious search for extra credentials, but in fact the students may be sensing that the best way to get a grasp on the world is to develop an extended knowledge of more than one discipline. In this way, they are already preparing themselves for true interdisciplinarity later in their academic careers. We would do well to adept our general education requirements to take advantage of this.

The reigning model of general education as preliminary to the real work of specialized disciplines follows Aristotle's dictum that a playwright should proceed from the general to the particular, from great themes to individual cases. Aristotle, though, was describing how to write a tragedy. The inverted model I am proposing more closely resembles Northrop Frye's definition of comedy as an expansive movement outward from individual to society. As he says in his *Anatomy of Criticism*: "At the heart of a liberal education, something should surely be liberated" (93). Building out from individual work grounded in disciplinary perspectives, interdisciplinary work can open up disciplinary nationalism, liberating our disciplines' citizens, faculty and students alike.