

CREATING AN 'INTERDISCIPLINARY MOMENT' IN GRADUATE EDUCATION: THE THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY SUMMER SCHOOL

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Biographical Note

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KEYWORDS

Graduate education; interdisciplinary; post-disciplinary; theory; philosophy.

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a pilot interdisciplinary graduate Summer School in Theory and Philosophy for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, which aimed to combine research with graduate teaching and learning. The paper will develop reflections on the ways in which interdisciplinary residential learning spaces can promote successful skills development among graduate students. It thus contributes to the ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of this innovative approach to interdisciplinary graduate education in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Through the reflections developed in this paper I hope to offer models and lessons that can contribute to the ongoing development of new ways of delivering research-led interdisciplinary programmes that can enhance the skills and competitiveness of graduate students.

The aims of the Theory and Philosophy Summer School operated at two levels. The first set of aims concerned the enhancement of the interdisciplinary skills and effectiveness of doctoral researchers. The programme was designed to enable students to develop high-level conceptual and communicative tools that would deepen disciplinary knowledge and enhance interdisciplinary cooperation. The second set of aims concerned the development of models for the organisation, curriculum development and delivery of graduate research education programmes in theory and methods of inquiry.

These findings indicate the importance of dialogical processes and interpersonal interaction in developing skills in communicating across disciplinary traditions and boundaries. In this connection the spatial environment proved crucial to supporting disciplinary interaction. Enabling lecturers to integrate research and teaching was also crucial to the achievement of the aims of student development. Finally, reflection on curriculum development has led to a working typology of ways of being not-disciplinary. Together these findings contribute to a developing organisational model for the delivery of interdisciplinary research-led GREP.

GRADUATE EDUCATION IN A POST-DISCIPLINARY WORLD

Graduate education faces a number of challenges, one of which centres on the place of disciplinary structures in contemporary society. The 'post-disciplinary' claim is that the usefulness of disciplinary specialisation is diminishing, and that new ways of organising graduate teaching and research are required in order to overcome excessive narrowness, specialisation and fragmentation. Mark Taylor, chair of Columbia University's Religion Department, argues that the organisation of graduate education has led to separation and over-specialisation where there should be collaboration. It is a system built around narrow scholarship, fragmentation and proliferation of sub-fields – "writing

more and more about less and less" (Taylor, 2009, p. A23). It functions to produce graduates trained for academic jobs that will never be available to them. With the expansion of graduate education, it is increasingly accepted that graduates will develop careers outside of their academic specialism, working in government, business or various non-profit sectors. Some aspect of our training of graduate students must address this concern.

Furthermore, creative and broad-minded approaches are required to address the complex and multi-faceted problems faced by policy makers, businesspeople, governments, and societies: *"There can be no adequate understanding of the most important issues we face when disciplines are cloistered from one another and operate on their own premises."* In response to these problems, Taylor suggests, *"[r]esponsible teaching and scholarship must become cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural"*, there must be more collaboration among institutions, and we need to *"[e]xpand the range of professional options for graduate students"* (2009, p. A23).

Higher Education policy in many countries has recognised this set of challenges.¹ In particular, the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) has sought innovations and improvements in Irish graduate education. Funded in 2009 by the IRCHSS Research Development Initiative, the Theory and Philosophy Summer School for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, organised by the School of Sociology and Philosophy at University College Cork (UCC), represents part of a response to the problem of graduate education in a post-disciplinary world.

THE SUMMER SCHOOL

The goal of the Theory and Philosophy Summer School (TAPSS) was to create a residential setting where graduate students from a range of disciplines could come to engage in a structured teaching programme addressing foundational commitments in methodology through discussions of theory and philosophy. In this way the School aimed to provide a mechanism to support research training, knowledge transfer and networking. The school was a one-week residential programme, structured around a number of distinct student-centred and collaborative learning experiences: **conversations**, in which the whole group discussed a set of key concepts; **readings**, small tutorials discussing a specific text led by a staff member who chose the text; **symposia**, small group sessions to exemplify methods of theorising, how sociologists and philosophers 'do' theory; **discourses**, lectures by established international authorities representing the state of the art; and **blue horizons**, evening lectures open to the public given by a philosophy and a sociology professor from UCC.

The School attracted more than fifty applicants, and was attended by thirty graduate students from UCC, the University of Limerick (UL), National University of Ireland Galway (NUI Galway), University College Dublin (UCD) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD), as well as from universities in Canada, Spain, the UK and Germany. Our participants were PhD students of philosophy, sociology, art theory, anthropology, social psychology, Chinese studies, folklore, modern languages, health sciences and geography. The teaching team included guest professors from UCD, the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), UL, Sligo, Edinburgh and the Canadian universities of York and Waterloo, alongside members of UCC's philosophy and sociology departments.

AN 'INTERDISCIPLINARY MOMENT'

The School was strongly interdisciplinary in that it involved collaboration among people from different disciplines through team teaching and cooperative curriculum development,

¹ National Academy of Sciences (2005) *Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research*. Washington, DC: The National Academic Press.

as well as a degree of interaction and integration at a conceptual level (Klein, 2010). In a broad sense, this approach can be contrasted with **multi-disciplinarity**, the *"juxtaposition of various disciplines, sometimes with no apparent connection between them"*, and **trans-disciplinarity**, which involves *"establishing a common system of axioms for a set of disciplines"* (OECD, 1972, 25-6). While much of the discussion of **interdisciplinarity** over the last twenty years has focused on the institutionalisation of programmes, creating research centres and networks in new interdisciplinary fields like environmental studies, global justice studies and gender studies, our project sought to create a space for a temporary engagement, where all travel to join a common endeavour before returning to their disciplinary work: in short, we sought to create an **interdisciplinary moment**.

The *methodological interdisciplinarity* practised at the school centred on the examination of foundational concepts and methods and reflection on theory in the research process. TAPSS aimed to generate a space in which graduate students from across the humanities and social science could reflect on their conceptual *"instruments of reasoning"* (Geertz, 1980, p. 169), stimulated by a common discussion among people using common concepts in different, yet in some sense related, ways. This sense of methodological interdisciplinarity is well described by Bal's account of *"travelling concepts in the social sciences"* (2002). Generating the kinds of conversations in which conceptual disagreement is productive requires an explicit thematisation of the interdisciplinary ambition of the school, so that the conversations and the misunderstandings become productive and not obstructive; it requires substantive cooperation on the part of the staff and genuine team teaching and collective curriculum building (a core group of six staff from sociology and philosophy jointly developed the curriculum and several sessions at the school were taught by more than one staff member), rather than a simple division of labour; it also requires openness and cooperation among the participants. In light of these challenges, we decided it was essential to hold the school outside of the university buildings, so that all would travel and none of the disciplines would be operating *"on their own premises"*, as Mark Taylor puts it (2009, p. A23) and cooperation and interpersonal engagement among staff and graduate students would be unavoidable.

EVALUATION

The students were required to write learning journals to chart their evolving understandings of a number of key concepts, including epistemology, reflexivity, theory, fact, ideology, interpretation, and value. These concepts were introduced at the beginning of the week. We revisited these terms in the full group sessions in the middle of the week, and found that students were in a position to argue cogently for the inclusion of other key terms, and to contest the meanings of others. Many students reported finding the initial sessions very useful, and the group discussions of these key concepts served well to bring out and sharpen disagreement:

"During the week I found that although everybody tried hard to understand the other some fundamental antagonisms and/or misunderstandings remained, e.g. between critical theory and interpretative/dialectical hermeneutic approaches, but also between philosophy and sociology and between students and 'experts'. In a sense then, our journey, our 'methods as way', was marked by various aporias (from aporos, meaning literally 'no path') which limited the number of directions we could possibly pursue".

One of the goals of methodological interdisciplinarity, as outlined above, is to stimulate reflection on foundational concepts by encountering those concepts as used in different yet cognate disciplines, and this goal was well articulated by one of our students: *"[t]he summer school has certainly increased my awareness of the different methodologies of theory, as the 'latent background' to the theoretical enterprise, and the normative and political implications they carry".*

The importance of the process of interdisciplinary interaction was suggested by one sociology student, who reported initially feeling more comfortable with the talks by sociologists. "As the week progressed, however, many of the [philosophical] concepts and ideas I was exposed to resonated with my research topic". "Through group dialogue", she continued, "I became more aware of the nature of my own assumptions and the traditions of thought to which I belong". In conclusion, she declared that "[m]any of the discussions throughout the week helped me to clarify my methodological position".

The School represented a safe place for discussing ideas and problems outside of the institutional location of the discipline. One of our participants referred in his learning journal to the symbolic safety of the castle as "a space where academics coming from different perspectives could have sharp, tough and direct confrontations in a protected environment". It was also a place away from distractions: media, the internet, and day-to-day professional commitments. This generated a highly collegial atmosphere of informal conversation and collaboration among the core teaching team, most of whom were also residential throughout the week. This was noticed by several of the students, one of whom commented in his journal about the positive impression made on him by the collaborative example set by the teaching team.

Many of our participants said they appreciated the opportunity to work with graduate students from backgrounds they would not ordinarily encounter. They opened student's eyes to other ways of working with similar concepts: "what was most valuable in this aspect were the interactions I had with the fellow students, who recommended literature I was not acquainted with and that I must now consult for my project". Furthermore, this interdisciplinary environment forced them to articulate their ideas in terms that others could understand. This skill speaks to the overall goal of preparing graduate students to operate in professional environments outside of their specialist disciplinary training.

The residential venue enabled students to spend time with senior professors and researchers in a way they would not have had an opportunity to do in an ordinary university setting. One student commented: "I was particularly delighted to have access to speakers after their talks in the bar where they kindly allowed me to bombard them with questions over a glass of wine!" Another student reflected on the events of the fourth day of the School: "that evening, I had a great conversation [with one of the professors] and he encouraged me to develop my theory ... so on a practical level, I had encouragement for my work which I still hang onto for dear life a week after the course ended. That meant a lot to me and I will attend more conferences in future to do more of that type of networking".

CONCLUSION

Our project aimed to create an interdisciplinary moment, and it was successful in generating productive interdisciplinary discussions at the level of theory and methodology among graduate students from across social sciences and humanities. The wider aim was to equip students to communicate outside their discipline, and prepare them for careers beyond their particular specialism. There is evidence from student learning journals that many of the central aims were achieved, yet there is one important group of questions we are not yet in a position to answer: Did their experience at the school carry over into their studies? Were the students able to take this home? Which aspects of the experience worked in a lasting way? We intend to do a follow-up study of the participants in the inaugural summer school in order to monitor and improve the impact of this graduate education programme.

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