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**Beyond Disciplined Questions:
Interdisciplinarity and the Promise
of Educational Histories**

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Either subtly, or with the force of a figurative hammer, scholars get the message that interdisciplinarity, as a mindset and an approach to knowledge production, is good for them. What began in the academic ether some decades ago is now institutionalized at many universities – and has been for some time. Academic departments, degree programs, and institutes bear its name. Learned journals dedicate volumes to its pursuit, monographs utilize it as a methodology, and university job advertisements frequently demand interdisciplinarity of successful candidates – "only boundary crossers need apply." Indeed, if there is any doubt about the rising social capital of interdisciplinarity at the present time, one need only look at the recent restructuring of one of our major granting agencies (or should I say "knowledge" agencies as they would now like to be known) – the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, better known as SSHRCC. Utilizing the catchphrase, "we build knowledge," SSHRCC has undertaken to reward research that is collaborative, interdisciplinary, and, according to its website, "fuels innovative thinking about real life issues."[1] Securing SSHRCC funding is an important measuring stick for the worth of a particular research project – in some circles anyway and no matter how much we deny it – and so the motivation to develop work based on an interdisciplinary perspective is an increasingly high stakes proposition.

As my presentation unfolds, you will discover that I am very much of two minds when it comes to the place of interdisciplinarity in the work of historians of education. You will sense a bit of tension or at least some conflicting attitudes in what I have to say. On the one hand, I am mindful

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1   *http://www.sshrc.ca/web/about/about_e.asp*

of the potential of interdisciplinarity to invigorate the field of the history of education, to encourage innovative partnerships across knowledge traditions, to strengthen our ability to capture the complexities and conflicting motivations that spur along change. On the other hand, I am also mindful of the material conditions within which historians work and I wonder about the quality and character of institutional support for interdisciplinary initiatives. My comments will also make clear that I am wary – as I think we all should be – of furthering techno-rational agendas that link the pursuit of interdisciplinary co-operation with "profitable" (or perhaps I should say "relevant") research.

It is particularly timely, and like second nature for historians, to ask why this drive to interdisciplinarity confronts us at this point in our social and cultural history, and what this might mean for the varying kinds of research that we do. Is this in any way new, and what promise does it hold for those of us who study the history of education in a variety of contexts? My goal in this paper is to contribute some thoughts to an important conversation that scholars in varying locations are being asked – some might say being told – to have. Why all the fuss about interdisciplinarity? What is it said to deliver? Should we be more actively fostering it in our work and if so, why and how?

Since interdisciplinarity is often presented as a reaction against disciplinarity – a problematic state of affairs I return to a bit later – let me start the conversation by focusing first (and perhaps ironically) on the latter. I think it is worth reminding ourselves what is claimed in the name of a "discipline." In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn proposed that disciplinary scholars share a set of underlying theories or generalizations, models, or exemplars that guide their work. He maintained that those trained in a discipline learn to "see the same things when confronted with the same stimuli."[2] In *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Inquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines*, Tony Becher used different language to describe this shared experience. He conceived of the disciplines, and of disciplinary scholars, in anthropological terms – disciplines as self-regulating and self-sustaining communities – and disciplinarians as defining their own identities, practices, and rules of conduct. In short, Becher dubbed the disciplines the "tribes of academe."[3] Paul Dressel and Dora Marcus, in *On Teaching and Learning in College:Reemphasizing the Role of Learners and the Disciplines*, defined academic disciplines as "systematic ways of organizing and studying phenomena."[4] These so-called "systematic ways"

2   T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).
3   T. Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Inquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines* (1989; Bristol: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 2001).
4   P. Dressel and D. Marcus, *On Teaching and Learning in College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982).

include shared understandings of particular language, processes of gathering data, ways of organizing material, and interpretative protocols. To be an "insider" in a particular discipline is to understand what others in the same discipline are talking about and writing about. To, in other words, "get it." Michel Foucault reminded us that the development of norms that bind and regulate the disciplines – and indeed the so-called academic tribes themselves – continue to be tightly woven to systems of power that regulate and discipline human conduct and social relations.[5]

The concept of interdisciplinarity is, of course, nothing new, nor is it, in my estimation, always clearly understood. In North America, it has been around since at least the First World War. In her very engaging history of interdisciplinarity, Julie Thompson Klein argues that as liberal arts colleges became dominated by disciplinary structure in the nineteenth century and the proliferation of specialties continued, it became increasingly more difficult (and less desirable) to educate "the whole person." Industry demanded specialists and the disciplines were happy to recruit students and shape them thus. The well-rounded baccalaureate degree was a nice idea, but it held decreasing caché in modernizing, industrial economies. Nevertheless, there were always those who clung to the notion of a "liberal" or general education and they established programs that challenged the so-called insularity of the disciplines. Particularly in the twenties and thirties, the establishment of new research initiatives in the American context, and the borrowing of quantitative techniques of measurement and evaluation from psychology and sociology, brought the crossing, combining, and melding of disciplinary knowledge further into relief. [6]

It seems, however, that no one has yet agreed on the precise definition of this crossing, combining, and melding. Proponents have characterized interdisciplinarity as new and innovative, and as ancient, harkening back to Plato and Aristotle. Thompson Klein defines the "interdisciplinarian" as a master borrower: "A scholar in a given field appropriates the cultural tools of another discipline in order to study a phenomenon that could not be studied as well using the tools of her home discipline."[7]

There is also more than one way to "do" or to conceive of interdisciplinary work. Some forms combine the conceptual and methodological tools of several disciplines to varying degrees. On one end of the spectrum is interdisciplinary labour that divides itself somewhat equally among two, three, or more knowledge traditions. This approach tends to fall into the "interdisciplinarian as bridge-builder

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5   Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon, trans. by L. Marshall and K. Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
6   Julie Thompson Klein, *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1990), 19-39.
7   Ibid.

between disciplines" camp. Herbert Simon argued in his book *Reason in Human Affairs* that in order to truly do this interdisciplinary work well, "you have to immerse yourself in another field for a minimum of a year in order to learn it sufficiently well to do work in it."[8] Others remain more firmly grounded in their home discipline, using only snippets of other disciplinary tools when it suits. Beyond the notion of building bridges among disciplines is another goal sometimes taken on in interdisciplinary approaches – that of "restructuring." Restructuring is more radical and often embodies a criticism not only of the disciplines being restructured through interdisciplinary engagement but, either implicitly or explicitly, the prevailing structure of knowledge that undergirds them.[9]

Regardless of its various and varying manifestations, interdisciplinarity is often undertaken for practical reasons. An important motivator for some interdisciplinary collaboration over the past sixty years has been what Thompson Klein and others call the "mission-oriented project" or "problem-focused research." Financial incentive, from government and industry, to solve or at least tackle particular kinds of problems in particular ways has had a profound influence on the desirability of interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly in the sciences and medicine.

Not everyone, however, sees the current incitement to interdisciplinarity as unquestionably positive for the humanities and social sciences. The Canadian Association of University Teachers has recently lamented that SSHRCC's proposed changes that push for "interactive engagement across disciplinary boundaries" ignore the values of basic research and undermine academic integrity. A major SSHRCC program called "Initiatives in the New Economy," for example, requires applications to pass a "relevancy" test administered by a panel, including government and industry representatives, that decides if they can advance to peer review. [10]

At the risk of promoting a new conspiracy theory, I have noticed that when the traditional academic disciplines are discussed in conjunction with interdisciplinarity, some rather troubling metaphorical machinations tend to go on. Once described in language that personified them as noble and even regal, the so-called "traditional disciplines" are in some quarters suffering a rather bad rap these days. When compared with an approach that is interdisciplinary, the disciplines are increasingly portrayed as perhaps a little parochial, a touch myopic, rather out of date. In her article "Learning Interdisciplinarity – Sociocultural Perspectives on Academic

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8   Herbert Simon, *Reason in Human Affairs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 23.
9   Thompson Klein, *Interdisciplinarity,* 29.
10   "CAUT Critical of Proposed SSHRC Transformation," *CAUT /ACPPU Bulletin* 51, 7 (Sept. 2004): A1, A6.

Work," Lisa Lattuca uses this very language when she maintains that "interdisciplinarity can act as an antidote to disciplinary myopia" and, following on the title of this presentation, allow us to "escape restrictions of 'disciplined questions'."[11] "The disciplines" are increasingly associated with the metaphor of "the barrier," of boundaries, of fences or walls to be razed, dismantled, challenged. Consider Richard Quantz and Kathleen Knight Abowitz's contention that an interdisciplinary approach allows scholars to "forge new spaces beyond the boundaries of any one discipline."[12] Disciplines, it would seem, stand in the way. Interdisciplinarity, by contrast, is said to offer a better way to the future. It invites us to leave home and stretch our wings, to become world (and worldly) travellers, to put ourselves into the shoes of others and to see ourselves and our surroundings through new eyes, new lenses, new perspectives. And, ultimately, discover new, more satisfactory answers. Given the increasing rhetorical orientation of Canadian universities towards the so-called "global village," this link between interdisciplinarity and multicultural border crossing is particularly powerful.

I have, of course, taken this over the top. The disciplines continue to matter in all sorts of ways on university campuses. Nevertheless, I think it would be hard to deny that their collective crowns have slipped a bit in the increasingly high-stakes game of securing research funding at so-called Research Intensive Universities. Questions posed in historical work that are most usefully answered using the conceptual tools of a single discipline are one thing, so it seems. Questions posed in historical work that are most usefully answered using the conceptual tools of two, three, or four disciplinary traditions seem to be quite another. Of course, all this depends on the questions we ask – a point we will need to consider very carefully. The methodology has to serve the question, not the other way around.

All this talk of the relevancy of research, of its usefulness, tends to make historians nervous. And this is, of course, for good reason and brings me back to the questions I asked at the outset. Who decides what is "relevant" research for historians of education, and does an interdisciplinary approach usefully foster this relevant research? Does industrial and/or governmental support for interdisciplinary research that is "relevant" necessarily undermine a commitment to considering a range of important questions?

I want to offer some balance to my comments thus far for fear of being accused of "interdisciplinary bashing." This is far from my intent. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that interdisciplinarity in the practice and theory of educational histories has the potential to further our

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11   Lisa R. Lattuca, "Learning Interdisciplinarity – Sociocultural Perspectives on Academic Work," *The Journal of Higher Education* 73, 6 (Nov.–Dec. 2002): 711-39.
12   Richard A. Quantz and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "Social   Foundations, 'Disciplinarity,' and Democracy," *Educational Studies* 33, 1 (Spring 2002): 24-34.

understanding of the connections between past and present.[13]   When interdisciplinarity enables such transcendence, it is a very useful approach for investigating the myriad of complex and convoluted forces that have always shaped education. Interdisciplinarity encourages historians to consider interpretive problems from various and competing angles and perspectives – it promises us a very dynamic picture of the past.

But if we take, as an important quality of interdisciplinary research, serious attention to multiple perspectives on questions and to engagement with critical social theory, many historians of education are "always already" engaging in interdisciplinary work. This is undoubtedly due to the very nature of the beast – to focus on "education" in the past is to come upon a cacophony of voices, interests, priorities, and definitions. If we think interdisciplinarity is difficult to define to the satisfaction of all, try doing the same for "education." We know, for example, that educational priorities – whatever they may be at any given time in any given context – were and are subject to, and often co-opted by, the priorities of other social forces and systems of thought. Psychology, medicine, capitalism, colonialism, democracy – all of these social systems and many others have dovetailed with education, in both comfortable and unsettling ways, at different moments and for different reasons in the past. Historians of education have paid serious attention to these dynamics and their work has prepared us for the messiness and liquidity that has always characterized educative goals over time.

Ultimately, then, we must come back to the point that our methodology must serve the questions we ask. So what are the questions that historians of education need to be asking, and would an interdisciplinary approach get us closer to useful answers to these questions? Our engagement with this, it seems to me, is critically important if we are to highlight the relevancy of our labour without implying it hasn't been there all along.

My understanding of the questions historians of education might ask is shaped by my own position within a particular university in a particular province at this time. Your answers to this question might differ from mine, depending on your particular social location. I teach and research not in a department of history, but rather in an interdisciplinary department within the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. I am surrounded by colleagues trained in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and history, whose interests range from adult education to early childhood education in both formal and informal settings. In my teaching life, my time is divided equally between the instruction of pre-service teachers and the instruction and supervision of

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13   Mona Gleason, "The History of Psychology and the History of Education: What Can Interdisciplinary Research Offer?" *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 9, 1 (Spring 1997): 98-106.

graduate students, all of whom have their own interdisciplinary interests and backgrounds.

The questions that I formulate about the educational past, as you can imagine, are deeply affected by my interdisciplinary home *and* by the interests and questions forged with students. Each time I finish a particular teacher education course centred on current social issues in education, I find myself with a list of questions that require engagement with the past. Bullying, for example, is an issue of grave concern for beginning teachers, as it is for a variety of people involved in schools. Where did this issue come from? Have teachers, parents, administrators, and children always been concerned about bullying or it is truly a contemporary issue? How is current attention to it connected to changing attitudes towards children, child studies, and, as Neil Sutherland has intimated, the culture of childhood? Has the history of formal schooling – its structures, curriculum, architecture, and administration – contributed to the rise of bullying? What about the role of teachers themselves? How did teachers deal with violence in their midst in the past? Were they trained to deal with it? Was the entire issue swept under the rug?

Contemporary concerns with schools and poverty also prompt us, I would argue, to ask particular questions about the past. Ben Levin has argued that, while contemporary schools can play a role in mitigating poverty, they should not be blamed for causing it. We may accept Levin's contention about schools and poverty in the present, but was this always true? How has poverty been confronted in the official and unofficial curricula and structures of schools? How "public" were schools in the past? Whom did "public" include? Whom did the concept leave out and why? Has the increasing attention to the notion of "difference" in some areas of concern to schooling made these spaces more public or less public? How is history implicated in this?

The quality and nature of "school and home relationships" is of perennial concern to pre-service teachers. In some ways, this seems to be a contemporary preoccupation, but if we push a bit deeper, the past is centrally implicated here as well. How have families in the past integrated school knowledge and school culture into their everyday practices? What demands do families make of schools today that were unheard of in the past? Why has this change occurred? What have been the nature and bases of families' responses to schools? Did some families integrate school knowledge and their own values with ease? With difficulty? How might a thorough understanding of the complexities of the home and school relationship change how we understand the place and importance of formal schooling in the past? By focusing on the critical question of race, historians such as Jean Barman and Tim Stanley have provided some critical answers to how and why particular families resisted and responded to school practices and priorities. What happens when we include the critical question of sexuality and family resistance, or disability and family resistance, or poverty and family resistance?

Disability and special education are complex areas that concern and

trouble many contemporary pre-service teachers in my classes. What has been the role of the school in shaping both the treatment of physically and mentally disabled students and the very meaning of the label "disabled"? How have schools and schooling themselves been disabling forces for these particular students? How have the architecture, curriculum, and structure of schools played a role in this? How has this changed over time and why? I have argued elsewhere that schooling is and was a very embodied process – how were bodies dealt with in schools? How were they conceptualized? How were they denied?[14]

The graduate students with whom I work share many of these historically forged questions and concerns, and contribute some unique ones of their own. In the Department of Educational Studies, graduate students have consistently challenged me to conceive of the history of education as not simply the history of schooling. Why and where has learning taken place in the past? How were the different venues of learning differentiated – at home, at work, at school, at rest, at play – and why? Very different social value has been placed on different kinds of learning – how have these variations been justified and how have race, class, sexuality, and able-bodiedness, to mention only a few variables, been implicated in ranking "education"?

The place of "voice," of narrative and story, both conceptually and methodologically, concerns many graduate students. Has "voice" been an issue in histories of education? Have oral stories of schooling been positioned as interpretive and methodological problems or opportunities? Whose voice is listened to and represented? How is this justified? What happens to what we think we know when silenced voices are uncovered and amplified? Do we know more about the production of education or the consumption of education? As Wendy Robinson has argued in a collection entitled *History of Education for the Twenty-First Century*, historians need to focus more attention on the "everyday problems of educational practice...how has educational practice had an impact on behaviour?"[15]

I would argue that contemplating possible answers to all of these questions presupposes some engagement with interdisciplinarity. Historians, perhaps best of all, have demonstrated that education is not a "thing" separate from other social processes, it is in fact inseparable from them. It was Jacques Derrida's contention that the multiplicity of "truth"

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14   See for example Mona Gleason, "Embodied Negotiations: Children's Bodies and Historical Change in Canada, 1930-1960," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 34, 1 (1999): 112-38; and "Disciplining the Student Body: Schooling and the Construction of Canadian Children's Bodies, 1930-1960," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, 2 (Summer 2001): 189-215.
15   Wendy Robinson, "Finding our professional niche: reinventing ourselves as twenty-first century historians of education," in *History of Education for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. D. Crook and R. Aldrich (London: Institute of Education, University of London, 2000), 60.

is the problem with which we struggle. How does the academy, or society more generally, make space for the notion that the "truth" is multivocal?

The whole question of the place of interdisciplinarity in the work of historians of education is tightly connected to the political economy of knowledge production in this country and indeed around the world. Not all scholars are rewarded equally or equitably for pursing research that claims an interdisciplinary methodology or orientation. The material conditions within which we conduct our work – as importantly as questions regarding our epistemological directions – mitigate powerfully for and against interdisciplinary collaboration.

In my experience the call for interdisciplinarity is not often matched by a structural commitment. How well, for example, do academic institutions provide space and time for learning opportunities amongst scholars from various locations that might produce interdisciplinarity? For those historians of education who work in universities, how does collaborative and interdisciplinary research fare in considerations of tenure and promotion? Questions about what counts as legitimate knowledge – and their connection to constraints based upon race, class, and gender – ought not to be ignored in this regard. In my mind, it is still not clear whether the promotion of interdisciplinary co-operation is intended to make room for more versions of the "truth" or to pursue a single, sanctioned "truth" more economically.

Then too, many critics have advised that we avoid the functionalist demand to make history of education apply to the here and now, lest we position ourselves and our work as slaves to contemporary policy. Certainly, the rhetoric around interdisciplinarity that would have us pass a "relevancy test" is rather nightmarish in its techno-rational implications. *But* the issue is rarely ever this cut-and-dried. For example, First Nations students in the province of British Columbia continue to be positioned in hegemonic discourse in terms of problems – problems surrounding under-performance, problems of lack of support, and problems of lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of school officials with whom they interact. In this instance, historians, I would argue, have a tremendous part to play in encouraging – even agitating – for positive policy reform in the case of Aboriginal education. We can forge innovative links with community representatives and researchers in other disciplines and fields to encourage a reconceptualization of Aboriginal education based upon the needs of Aboriginal people, not based upon tinkering with the existing system, which has largely failed them in the past and continues to do so.

I have asked a great many questions this evening, and have offered few answers. Whether interdisciplinarity is "good" for the history of education depends upon the questions we feel we need to ask. And, without surrendering to a naive embracing of "relevant research," these questions do depend on what we think the history of education is "for." Do we produce knowledge to be sold, to settle old scores, for pleasure, to improve the quality of life in the here and now? David McCallum argued that "History is not about the past. History is about the present in the

past, which is a different present than ours."[16] If interdisciplinarity fosters a better way to understand and convey that present in the past and how that present continues to shape our own, only then does it offer a promising path forward.

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16   David McCallum, appearance on C-SPAN, 4 Jan. 1998.