

Interdisciplinary Practice as Reflexivity

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This article considers ways in which interdisciplinarity may be practiced. The suggestion is that interdisciplinarity as a practice can be understood as embracing a reflexive orientation on the part of inquirers. It is this orientation which enables them to entertain possibilities for taking on board ideas/interpretations exceeding the boundary of some "source discipline." It is part of the responsibility of inquirers to consider whether single discipline-based research might be unduly restrictive in its way of seeing issues of concern and hence of constructing options for action. Interdisciplinary processes imply that effort is expended to create fresh opportunities for understanding-and-action through working with the juxtaposition and interplay of different vantage points on inquiry. Possibilities for discursive accountability on the part of all concerned are hereby extended. It is also suggested that calls for more interdisciplinary inquiries are part of a larger project toward the increased democratization of discussion about research practices in society. Discussions about the value and validity of interdisciplinary inquiries may be seen as linked up with the pursuance of such democratisation.

KEY WORDS: interdisciplinary; reflexivity; responsibility; discursive accountability; validity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The call toward increased interdisciplinarity goes hand in hand with an appreciation that the boundaries of disciplinary inquiry might unduly restrict our possibilities for understanding and, at the same time, constrict possibilities for action.² Interdisciplinary endeavors are aimed at opening up more variegated inquiry routes as a way of approaching issues of concern. The pull toward getting

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²The qualms raised within so-called critical modernist (for example, Habermasian) and postmodernist (for example, Foucauldian) argumentation about the character of disciplined scientific inquiry may be seen as pointing to similar concerns (despite the differing views on rationality implied in the arguments). See, for instance, Flood (1990, pp. 48–50) for an account of how these qualms can be harnessed to provide opportunities for "liberating systems thinking." See also Romm (1994, 1995, 1996a,b) for accounts of the way in which knowledge production processes may both create and stifle options for action in society.

interdisciplinary needs to be grounded in a recognition that certain “problems” cannot be solved within the remit of disciplinary (Lunca, 1996a). The disciplinary focusing of the direction of study—and attendant implications for action—may be regarded as reductive when one takes into account the “nontriviality” of the problems faced, whose nontriviality represents a challenge to disciplinary inquiry (Lunca, 1996b).

Interdisciplinarity may be regarded as a practice oriented to opening up more variegated opportunities for thinking and acting in “the world.” This practice may be relevant to a variety of (social) contexts. At least, its possible relevance in such contexts needs to be seriously entertained. Failure to do so, as Spaul (1997, p. 80) notes, is not neutral in its consequences.

If we feel responsible for the impact of our ways of “knowing” in the world, we have a duty to consider at least whether, in the social arenas in which we find ourselves, our styles of knowing are becoming unnecessarily restrictive (Romm, 1995). The plea to engender increased interdisciplinarity in our approach to social issues is based on the suggestion that it is worthwhile (at least) to consider, in arenas deemed appropriate, the possibility of working with the disjunctions and inconsistencies highlighted as different domains of inquiry are juxtaposed.³ Such understanding, as Weil (1997a, p. 376) points out, is not aimed at ironing out but, rather, at working with ambiguity and paradox.⁴

“Interdisciplinarity” can be distinguished from “multidisciplinarity.”⁵ Multidisciplinarity implies a study which involves many disciplines in coming to terms with some issue (Jones, 1997, p. 107). However, ways in which those involved may be sensitized to confronting alternative points of view are not pinpointed when the term “multidisciplinarity” is employed. As Jones (1997, p. 107) indicates, “Multi-disciplinarity often amounts to a dialogue of the deaf

³This is not to say that within disciplinary domains disjunctions and anomalies cannot be located. Probert (1997, p. 24) refers to the “essentialist fallacy,” which presumes that disciplines are characterized by one core theory or one set of core methods and procedures. Recognizing this fallacy, though, does not preclude a commitment to try also to explore fresh possibilities generated through working between disciplines (in interdisciplinary endeavors).

⁴Weil (1996, 1997a,b) proposes that her vision of learning and unlearning is positioned at and across boundaries of disciplines, professional groups, organizations, and communities. See also Flood and Romm (1996) for discussions on widely informed (responsible) choice making as a way of addressing dilemmas within what they call triple-loop learning.

⁵Interdisciplinarity can also be distinguished from transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity normally carries the connotation that certain modes of inquiry or themes can be located as recurring across the various disciplines. For example, Winston and Blais (1996) point to experimentation as a mode of inquiry which might be employed across a range of disciplines, while Fisher (1996, pp. 161–162) suggests that social constructivist thinking (as a way of orienting to the world) is transdisciplinary in that “the problematic nature of our [traditional] epistemologies” is becoming raised in many fields of inquiry. This article is not aimed at exploring recurrent methods or themes, but this exploration could of course also be undertaken while examining the practices involved in practicing “interdisciplinarity.”

in which incompatible research approaches are pursued in parallel with little or no communication between them.”

Although the concept of interdisciplinarity is often associated with that of multidisciplinary, it is suggested here (in keeping with Jones) that interdisciplinarity can be seen to incorporate an additional component to multidisciplinary. It pinpoints the requirement that inquirers are sensitive ongoingly to inputs provided from other perspectives (that is, other than some initial starting point or “source discipline”) and that they use this to develop their own multilayered appreciation (see also Weil, 1997a). Put differently, it draws attention to the (ongoing) interplay in consciousness between alternative ways of seeing issues of concern. It draws attention to the quality of (reflexive) consciousness underpinning the practice of interdisciplinarity (McKay and Romm, 1992, p. 143).

Interdisciplinarity can also be considered in terms of its opening of potentials to enhance democratization of knowledge construction processes in society. It creates a(nother) site in society where it is possible to revisit in practice “expert-led” research endeavors. Interdisciplinary inquiry (as reflexivity) highlights as being part of the inquiry process the way in which “professional researchers” [or what Deshler and Ewert (1996, p. 7) call “trained researchers”] might relate to the concerns of others in defining ways forward in the research process. The role and status of initiating researchers and of others concerned in any project are seen as something that has to be negotiated in specific inquiry contexts, as people define and redefine the skills and resources that might be brought to bear in the inquiry.

The consideration of some of the implications of tying interdisciplinarity to reflexivity is aided in this article by offering a post facto account of a particular research project (which was defined as an action research project). The research was set in Swaziland. The issues that were explored revolved around inheritance practices, especially insofar as these affected women. The proffered post facto deliberations are aimed at drawing out the kinds of reflexive orientations which enabled the boundaries between various domains of inquiry to become, in the words of Tait *et al.* (1997, p. 307), “shifting and flexible.”

2. SOME ARGUMENTS FOR REFLEXIVITY

Gouldner’s call (1970, 1975a,b, 1980) for a reflexive orientation as a way of “knowing” in society was linked to his suggestion that human inquiry ideally is a process whereby people learn to transform themselves—so that they can become aware of the dodges that they may be using to avoid having to listen to what he called “hostile information” for their position (cf. 1970, p. 495). Gouldner contends that any attempt on our part to understand “the world” involves a process of recognizing the need to *(re)confront ourselves* as we

engage with issues of concern. We need to be aware that our experience of reality cannot be divorced from our way of orienting to this reality. Gouldner thus highlights the importance of “knowing” as embracing an ongoing reflexive process of enhancing our self-awareness.

Taking up and extending Gouldner’s plea for a reflexive approach to inquiry, Brown (1977, p. 74) argues that part of what responsibility and accountability implies is making explicit our analytic frames and “re-incorporating them into the analysis.” In reply to critiques leveled against Gouldner’s “introspective” approach, Brown emphasizes that the plea for reflexivity does not amount to navel-gazing. Rather, it encourages those involved in social inquiry (whether so-called professional or lay theorists/researchers⁶) to reflect back on the way in which their constructions might impact on others, so that they can consider new ways of accounting for their involvement in society (see also Brown, 1989, 1994).

Looking back and reflecting upon the ways in which we engage in processes of knowledge-construction is the key to operating a reflexive orientation to/in “the world.” But the idea of reflexivity itself is not clear-cut. It has come to evoke many possible meanings as researchers in various ways have tried to explore its challenge. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 481) and Weil (1996, p. 226) propose that one way of conducting reflexive inquiry is to suggest that, in such inquiry, researchers offer an account of the way in which their own personhood may be impacting on the way that they conduct the research process. The requirement is therefore to keep some kind of journal which allows aspects of our ways of seeing and dealing with situations to become reported on as being an important part of the inquiry process. Golding (1996), in a similar vein, suggests that reflexivity allows both the specific “researchers” and the “audiences” of the research to recognize the way in which proposed constructs have influenced the coding of “realities.”

Pleasants (1997, p. 400) points out that the insistence with which researchers look back at themselves (and their reality codes) as they undertake, and report on, their inquiries, is bound up with the requirement to problematize representational speech (1997, p. 400). Once this is problematized, we may consider it as part of our responsibility as inquirers to be aware of the way in which our “representations” already might affect the way we and others envisage options for action in “the world.” (See also Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Romm, 1995; Lunca, 1996a; Spaul, 1997.)⁷

⁶The term professional researcher itself takes on new meaning once it becomes recognized that research training can be spread as a competency as people negotiate ways forward for conducting inquiries. However, as Bawden (1991) and Deshler and Ewert (1996) note—speaking in the context of action research—it still might be useful to speak of professional/trained researchers in the sense of those helping to coordinate inquiry processes (in Bawden’s terms, helping to set up researching systems in society).

⁷It is in these epistemological terms that calls for reflexivity can be accepted also within so-called postmodernist discourse (cf. Gergen, 1992; Hassard, 1993; Taket, 1994; Brauer, 1996).

The challenge is to try to nurture forms of inquiry that are not likely to be unduly impositional in their social effects. Interdisciplinary endeavors can be seen as one way of responding to this challenge. It allows those involved in inquiries to reconsider, with others, the ways in which they are building up their understandings/constructions and it creates fresh opportunities for the building up of what Weil (1997a, p. 374) calls multileveled learning.

3. AN EXAMPLE: INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE AS REFLEXIVITY

As an example of how research may be used to operate interdisciplinary practice as a process of reflexive consciousness, I now refer to an action research project which was concerned with exploring aspects of Women and the Law in Southern Africa (WLSA). My particular engagement, with Nina Romm, was in a (so-named) consultancy role to a team of researchers in Swaziland during a specific phase of the project (the phase dealing with inheritance issues). The consultancy consisted largely of a workshop organized over a few days (a few months into the start of this phase of the project) and, also, of informal liaison with some of the researchers. By using the word “researchers” I refer to those on the project who saw themselves as playing some kind of coordinating role (the so-called team) in helping to develop their own and others’ inquiry skills in the research project.

The project was concentrated around the issue of inheritance patterns in Swaziland. [Armstrong (1992) reports on an earlier phase of the project concerned with maintenance law.] It was defined as an action research project conceived with the conscious intention of leading to (social) improvements as part of the process of developing the inquiry (Aphane *et al.*, 1994, p. ii).⁸ It was conceived as providing an opportunity to examine the way in which the law could be utilized by people (especially widows) to contest what could be regarded as constrictive inheritance practices—insofar as people’s choices of action were seen as unfairly limited by these practices. It was also defined as an opportunity to engage in a nonimpositional manner with the women and men who participated in the study.

⁸Bawden (1991, p. 24) offers a succinct definition of action research as follows:

It is the activities of the participant-observer joining with other participant-observers, that enables the system to become a researching system in the first place! Thus we have the case of the professional researcher learning about the world in order to be more informed in his or her own actions, and the researcher helping others to enquire into their own worlds as a basis for better informed actions all round.

Bawden here indicates that the requirement for action researchers is that they contribute to developing a system in which processes of knowledge-construction are enhanced, so that all involved persons may develop their inquiries about “their worlds.”

The researchers on the team entered into open discussions at many points with participants and at certain points helped to provide practical advice.⁹ However, it is argued in this article that the interdisciplinarity of the research endeavor served as a way of *preventing unidirectional focusing of the discussion or of suggested options for action*. Notably, comprising the team of researchers were, for example, those (more) trained in legal studies, those (more) versed in sociological discourse, and also some nonprofessional persons.

What emerged in the course of the project is that the team of researchers as well as other participants came to temper their initial points of focus in the light of alternative views. An example will serve to illustrate this point. The project—as an inquiry into inheritance practices—required some theoretical resources from legal studies as one source discipline. But this point of focus, as became clearer in the course of the study, could not account for the pressures leveled upon women (in terms of felt moral obligations and practical dependencies) by the force of cultural tradition. Sociological discourse was geared to appreciate the way in which people might experience these particular pressures.

From a legal point of view it might seem (to those more versed in this area) that the general law could be harnessed to provide “better chances” for widows. At the same time, though, it was important to bear in mind that socio-cultural perspectives had to be juxtaposed against this conception. In terms of this juxtaposition it could be appreciated that while some widows accepted that they might be able (with a court case) to attain an inheritance by legal entitlement, they felt that they were still too dependent and/or obligated to their in-laws to threaten them via a court case (Aphane *et al.*, 1994, p. 112). *The interdisciplinary character of the research endeavor allowed the researchers not to become too complacent with regard to any point of view adopted*. Their language for conceptualizing “the situation” had to shift between, for instance, focusing on the potential opportunities provided by the *law* and tempering this focus with sensitivity to, say, the way in which *tradition and obligation* added layers of complexity to the women’s (and others’) conception of options for seeing their situation (and possibilities for action).

It is this cultivation of sensitivities that defines an interdisciplinary approach, as conceptualized in this article. Different researchers in the example come into the project with different disciplinary/professional/experiential backgrounds. The point, though, was not to insist that each had to gain sufficient knowledge of

⁹Methods that were used to aid the overall investigation included court records (of high court proceedings), masters records (of administrative procedures relating to dissolution of estates under general law), observations (of next-of-kin meetings where executors are chosen under general law), focus group discussions (where groups of people focus on specific areas for discussion), in-depth interviewing (of widows and widowers), case studies (of widows and widowers and family members), and key informants (any person regarded as specifically “knowledgeable” in the field). Methods were used as discourse enablers, opening up opportunities for researchers and research participants to encounter input that had not been previously entertained.

these different backgrounds from the start but, rather, to allow the process of unfolding in the research project to qualify them more fully (in other ways of seeing) at points at which sensitive issues arose—that is, at points where juxtapositions *in situ* would help to create multivalent appreciations of the complexities involved in seeing and addressing the issues. [The multivalent appreciation implies an extension of some initial source point of inquiry to the point of admitting its disjunctions when juxtaposed against alternative possibilities (see, e.g., Romm and Romm, 1987).]

More detail on how interdisciplinarity featured (at points) in the WLSA project and how this created fresh opportunities for (re)-encountering dilemmas is provided below.

3.1. Opportunities for Addressing Dilemmas

It is important (for the purposes of enriching insight) that research studies do not stop with merely *recounting* the flavor of dilemmas experienced in everyday life. Weil (1996, 1997a) points out that dilemmas incorporate the notion of persistent uncertainty. These uncertainties, while not controllable, are nonetheless open to wider visioning, which offers “opportunities for transformative learning” (Weil, 1997a, p. 375).

Dilemmas can be identified as more than merely personal, by showing (from different angles) how they relate to larger patterns. For example, in the WLSA project, dilemmas felt by widows could be seen as attributable partly to the uncertainty of not knowing whether recourse to the court system might cause them to lose control over the process of managing their affairs in the community. The dilemmas can be appreciated as springing partly from the way in which *court cases create ambiguities* because one is never sure how precedents will be interpreted (in courts operating in terms of the general law, which makes use of precedents). Alternatively, the dilemmas can be looked at by highlighting *ambiguities relating to the widow's continued interactions with in-laws* during the time at which she is involved in utilizing the general law. The way in which she is made to feel guilty can be noted from a sociocultural perspective. Or again, looked at historically, the changes created by, say, *the money economy and its ambiguous impact on relations in the community* can be probed. The way in which the money economy has come to offer opportunities (for example, for creating more independence), while also closing down opportunities in certain instances (because tradition still requires that women do not own “too much” property), can be highlighted. In this way processes of exploring these multileveled concerns can be created as part of the process of doing research (Weil, 1997a, p. 374).

It may be suggested that one way in which multileveled learning can be encouraged is through the setting-up of focus group discussions where people

might raise issues of concern to them. In the WLSA project, focus group discussions became an important arena for raising queries (around inheritance practices), so that issues could be discussed in the community (Aphane *et al.*, 1994, p. 41). In the discussion groups, it is not only women who recognized problems associated with the retention of the custom of keeping the family property. Concerns in this regard became revealed as requiring readdressal within the community, insofar as customary “keepers” of the family property were seen as sometimes unable/unwilling to operate their responsibilities. This could become a basis for revisiting the custom by considering its suitability in the light of various participants’ experience of it. It was hoped that the discussions in these groups would have wider reverberations in the community, as, for instance, issues become raised as problematic. As a starting point, space was created where people could reconsider customs in the light of a prior morality which is meant to offer protection to women and children. The issue was discussed as to whether the needs of widows and their children “today” can be met within the traditional interpretation of the customs—and whether alternatives in the light of the commitment to protect women and children needed to be given attention.

The issue was also raised concerning the role and status (and ambiguity) of the general law in aiding such protection. The focus groups served as a site to help build up a multilayered appreciation of dilemmas felt—in this way allowing those involved to enrich their understanding of issues faced.

3.2. Post Facto Account of Interdisciplinary Practice as Reflexivity

The above post facto account has commented on some aspects of the WLSA project. Or rather, it has drawn out and idealized certain aspects of the WLSA project in order to support a proposal for seeing interdisciplinary practice as tied to a reflexive orientation on the part of those involved. What has been pinpointed is the way in which the capacity (of which instances were outlined above) to increase sensitivity to “information” springing from different disciplinary points of departure created opportunities for the development of new relationships among the (initiating) team of researchers and between them and (other) research participants. These relationships developed through processes of building up multilayered appreciation of dilemmas involved in conceptualizing and addressing situations. The process of building up multilayered appreciation can also be considered as a process of developing discursive accountability. This means that people can *account for their way of seeing/experiencing the complexities and for the way they decide to act in the face of this complexity, by showing that their understanding-and-action bears the mark of their encounter with others’ arguments and perceptions* (Romm, 1996c,d).

While some of the those involved (whether those on “the team” or others in the community) might at first have been inclined to emphasize the value of utilizing the general law (as opposed to customary law/tradition) as a way of redressing what they took to be unfair inheritance practices, they tempered their understanding of this in the course of the project. This did not mean that they relinquished altogether this idea as a possible way of tackling inheritance issues. It does mean, though, that they came to respect that the value of this (on either a moral or a practical level) could be contested in the light of other experiences. Hence, their own “recommendations” for action had to take account of this (for further elaboration see Romm, 1996c). This, of course, did not preclude them from deciding to lobby on certain issues that they felt were still pressing (such as, say, lobbying against an administration system which often failed to notify widows when meetings that concerned them were due to take place). But their lobbying practices might now also involve a process of building up more group discussion in the community, recognized as a site which could not be ignored or discounted (given the way in which widows and indeed widowers and others had expressed their sense of sociocultural pressures).

Likewise, some community members, while still often wary of seeing “the law” as some kind of panacea for addressing inheritance issues, were able to appreciate that there were sites—outside of “normal” tradition—that could be used to engender a consciousness in the community about new ways of handling the issues. For instance, some participants (in conjunction with some of those on the initiating “team”) were able to set up forums in the church, where discussions could take place and from where leaflets (about, say, new ways of handling the writing of wills) could be distributed.

In this way shifts in consciousness about what is (could be seen as) at issue and how the issues could be addressed were created through the engagements of “the team” with one another and with (other) participants. Instead of consciousness being unduly bounded by predefined areas of focus, thereby stifling opportunities for engaging in fresh ways with “the issues,” shifts were created in the process of the inquiry. Or rather, this post facto account has attempted to draw out this quality of reflexive consciousness in order to indicate what might be involved in its operation in interdisciplinary inquiry.

The operation of interdisciplinarity as a research program, as with other research programs, throws up questions concerning how such endeavors are to be judged in terms of their quality. How might we address such questions?

4. CONSIDERATIONS OF VALIDITY

Space in this article does not permit a full discussion of considerations of validity in defining “good” interdisciplinary research. What can be noted,

though, is that many of the criteria that have been advanced by (certain) researchers emphasizing the importance of democratization of knowledge-construction in society can be considered relevant to the assessment of interdisciplinary study. This can be argued to be the case whether or not the interdisciplinary endeavor is explicitly linked to some action research agenda.¹⁰

Criteria can be forwarded which allow quality inquiry to be judged in terms of its possible contribution to more “democratic” forms of relationship (between the people involved and with the cosmos more generally). For instance, we can judge it in terms of whether it can be argued to enhance people’s reflexive capacities, so that they are better able to account for their understanding-and-action as a matter of discursive accountability (Romm, 1996a). We can also judge it in terms of whether it can be argued to contribute to an ethical relationship between those involved—thereby connecting ethics and epistemology (Lather, 1995, p. 55). And we can judge it in terms of whether it seems to be “accountable to people’s struggle for . . . self-determination” [thereby increasing people’s sense of how they can widen their choices] (Lather, 1995, p. 42).

Lather’s (1991, p. 60) notion of what she calls “maximal reciprocity” in the inquiry process can be regarded as a kind of umbrella symbol which creates the space to explore (in practice) the meaning of these various criteria (among others). This territory can be cultivated in a variety of ways. For example, one way is for those creating constructions of whatever kind to submit these to the invitation of continuing discourse (as, e.g., described by Brauer, 1996; Golding, 1996; Weil, 1996). Another way is for those engaging in in-depth interviewing to recognize that provision can be made for dialogical processes which allow different parties to develop their own lines of questioning. Smaling (1995, pp. 30–31) points out in this regard that coresearchership can operate in interviewing contexts by empowering “respondents” to explore with “interviewers” ways of addressing questions which they define of relevance. Alternatively, those creating “findings” from the use of methods such as surveys (where questions are asked in terms of some defined research agenda) need to point at the same time to possible openings for the reappropriation and reshaping of the findings by other audiences—by pointing to the way in which the original results embodied specific modes of generating responses. [See Romm (1996d, pp. 188–192) for an account of how audience participation can feature in such research agendas.]

Another way of striving for “reciprocity” in processes of inquiry is to become involved in setting up group discussions whereby people can mutually

¹⁰ Action research literature pointing to democratization of knowledge construction as one of the key principles of human inquiry includes, *inter alia*, Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991), Gustavsen (1992), McKay and Romm (1992), Fals-Borda (1996), Reason (1988, 1994), Heron (1996), and McIntyre (1996).

explore issues of concern, with the intention of developing an appreciation of the complexities involved in defining options for (accountable) action. (The focus group discussions mentioned above in the discussion of the WLSA project can be read as an instance of this.)

Suggestions such as these—which have been explored and extended by a myriad of researchers—may be used to cast some light on the way in which quality in interdisciplinary inquiry might be appreciated. This is because they cast light on possibilities for encapsulating a concern for more democratic forms of inquiry as part of the practice of “good” research. Spaul (1997, p. 64), too, highlights that demands for (more) interdisciplinarity (as opposed to disciplinary alone) has something to do with handling the tension between “exclusive expertise and [in the arena of information science] the growing democratisation of information technology.”

Spaul’s arguing for interdisciplinarity in these terms echoes the concerns of Beck (1991). Beck (1991, p. 54) suggests that our historical trajectory is traversing a qualitative move away from the “nineteenth century ideas of rationality, social structures, and ways of coping that are traditional to modernity.” Modernity is developing to the point where the hoped-for (and disciplined) location of specific causes as a way of containing and tackling identifiable problems is meaningless in the light of the way in which uncertainty currently manifests in society. To address these lived uncertainties, Beck argues, requires changing the “accountability rules” which govern the way in which science is used to create recommendations for tackling problems. Changing these “accountability rules” in turn implies new ways of practicing science (Beck, 1991, p. 11). Old-style science needs to reorganize itself, around the recognition that its functioning as an expert-led system of knowledge-production might serve to create a malfunctioning public sphere. In this respect Beck concurs with Habermas (1974, 1984, 1989).

What is highlighted in these calls for (increased) interdisciplinarity is the democratic potential that is opened up as researcher accountability is defined as moving outside of the scope of the terms of reference of disciplinary inquiry. “Researchers” are no longer seen as accountable primarily to some academic community apparently trained in assessing with what “confidence” results can be accepted as “valid.” Rather, it becomes recognized that processes (and purposes) of any inquiry in society can always be revisited by both so-called professional researchers and others in society.

The call toward increased interdisciplinarity can be seen as an instance of the need for more public discussion regarding ways of approaching research issues more generally. This call, though, as has been elucidated by Beck (1991), is linked to a recognition that disciplinary attention often serves, through its mode of operation, to exclude such discussion. What is important is to revitalize the realm of social discussion about ways of approaching our inquiries. In this

discussion, of course, space for disciplinary endeavors can still be created (and must be created if the source disciplines feeding interdisciplinarity are to be sustained). But at least the development of disciplinarity need not be seen as a closed enterprise. The resources that it throws up can be used, at points, by those wishing to operate in what Weil (1997a) labels “a different key”: to work the space between and beyond disciplinary boundaries.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has presented an argument for seeing interdisciplinary practice as tied to reflexivity. It was suggested that what distinguishes an interdisciplinary approach from multidisciplinary team projects is the seriousness of people’s reflexive endeavors to reexamine their initial points of focus through encounter with opposing source points. It was argued that it is part of our responsibilities as inquirers to consider (at least) the possible relevance of working the space between disciplines. This can be considered as a way of exploring fresh avenues for understanding-and-action in “the world.” Reference to the quality of this kind of practice was made using a case example.

Assessing the quality of people’s interdisciplinary endeavors involves judgments which are necessarily inconclusive. This inconclusiveness, however, need not be seen as a weakness; rather it can be seen as a signal that the assessment of all research in society is—and must be—an ongoing process in which all those concerned about the effects of knowledge-construction might participate. This creates opportunities for enhanced discursive accountability on all our parts—insofar as we are willing to encounter different arguments about, and experiences of, possible criteria that might be proposed as ways of judging the quality of research processes and products in society.

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