

“Crossing Boundaries”: Centre for Education Studies’ Annual Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Student Conference, 10/05/14, University of Warwick

This conference aimed to explore the meanings and practical application of interdisciplinary collaboration in the field of education studies. It was a fantastic opportunity to tentatively dip my toes into a foreign field of study that my thesis will ultimately seek to engage with.

It was with some trepidation that I approached presenting to this audience. What if they said my ideas were obvious and had been repeated for decades in their field? What if my exploration was seen as numbingly theoretical, lacking in any real-world impact in the classroom? “Please remove your romantic idealism from our presence,” they might cry. Thankfully, the organisers and delegates were friendly enough for me to quickly dispel notions of this final image coming to pass. Indeed, as Dr Michael Hammond pointed out in his opening talk, the ideas underlying the first two questions are part-and-parcel of engaging in interdisciplinarity. Occasionally you *will* find that another field takes for granted or has repeatedly explored ideas that you see as profound and original, and sometimes you simply *will* be at odds as to the value of different types of outputs, end-goals, and methodologies. If we are to overcome intellectual arrogance or insecurity and engage fully with interdisciplinarity thought, however, we must embrace the former and identify the latter. If we do not, we risk the interdisciplinary pitfalls Hammond spoke of: a superficial and uncritical sharing of ideas, pushing theories beyond their intended reach, and harbouring a dogmatic theme of ‘interdisciplinarity is always best’.

After Hammond’s opening address, which also looked at how to define interdisciplinarity and expanded further on the pros and cons of interdisciplinary study, I heard Angela Quartermire speak on “Pupils’ perceptions of terrorism: impact on UK counter-terrorism policy”. This talk explained the empirical research Quartermire had been doing in schools into how pupils perceive terrorism. She planned to use her results to aid the development of government policy on how terrorist ideologies can be prevented from ensnaring young people. She found that pupils had a wider range of responses than teachers thought they did/would and that children *wanted* to know more and discuss the topic. However, chances to do so were either lacking or poorly managed. She advocated the need for more clarity in the terminology around the topic, what to discuss and how to do so, and in policy aims.

After the break, I presented my talk on “The ‘Childlike’ Learner”. I explained and explored the core epistemological virtues of the ‘childlike’ learner as found in late nineteenth-century children’s literature: wonder, humility, active engagement with stimulus, and sensitivity to novel routes to knowledge. I then briefly sketched out some thoughts on how I thought this would practically manifest itself in an educational model. The talk seemed to be well received and the resultant suggestions and questions were useful, particularly in considering what my model takes the ultimate aim of education to be. My fears were thus left unrealised and I remain hopeful about collaborating with the Centre for Education in the future.

I then attended Lan-Ting Huang's talk on what teachers should do when faced with an error in the classroom. She outlined for us various ways of correcting a learner from explicit instruction to attempts to simply elicit an answer from the learner. She then had us try to spot the mistakes and forms of teacher correction in some classroom clips.

Next, I chaired Shaidatul Adi Kasuma's talk on "The use of Facebook for English language interaction". This was an interesting talk where Kasuma related to us her attempts to use Facebook in the socially interactive way it was designed for in order to create a community where classes could practice their English without a fear of being laughed at or harshly corrected. She showed us examples of how the group worked nicely but also such limitations as: the difficulties of trying to create a social space that also focused on language skills, the relatively low numbers of engagement due to many of the original fears translating into the Facebook platform, and the fact that those who did partake needed continual guidance and structure from authorities.

After more coffee I went to David Knight's intriguing talk on "What Constitutes a Good Death?" Knight was presenting the results of his running a conceptual card game with a group of clergy members as to what they believed constituted a good death (full paper found here: <http://essential.metapress.com/content/k556081255528061/>). He presented us with the general issues surrounding discussing death (the taboos, the highly individualistic perspective, etc.). He then noted various differences between healthcare, the public, and clergy perceptions of a good death. He concluded that for end of life healthcare to really work towards providing something fulfilling many more perspectives have to be taken into account than currently are.

Finally, I attended Patrick Hampshire's presentation entitled "Accounting for Teacher Agency". Hampshire asked the question: 'how do we understand why teachers do what they do?' He argued that teaching is *embedded* in a culture and it is far from a simple task to observe and grade it. Teaching is a social practice and teachers are inducted into this. We need to understand the teacher in context in order to develop an explanatory narrative for them. He then evaluated different data collection methods in relation to research into this topic.

The day closed with a final discussion of interdisciplinarity and a collection of thoughts on the matter. It certainly seems as though people feel that education studies is and should be an interdisciplinary matter. From my point of view, the conference was successful insofar as it brought a range of people together, stimulated some new ideas and potential collaborations, and helped people make contacts. However, I think without a centralising theme or problem there was a focus missing for true interdisciplinarity. Indeed, some of the issues were very close to those I experienced when reflecting on my own interdisciplinary conference venture, '21st Century Theories of Literature'. On the other hand, the event was a fun, lively, and useful one and I have no doubt that honing the difficult specifics needed for a deeply interdisciplinary conference is a task the Centre for Education Studies will relish trying to take on, and I will be back when they do!