

## Interdisciplinarity and the SOAS Journal for Graduate Research

There are many current debates concerning interdisciplinarity, not to mention trans-, multi-, or pluri-disciplinarity. However, for the purposes of the *SOAS Journal for Graduate Research* (SJGR), it is understood that pluri-/multi-disciplinarity evokes multiple juxtaposed disciplinary perspectives and topics. Interdisciplinarity implies a melding of disciplinary approaches in order to tackle wider problems and questions; transdisciplinarity references the utopic idea of surpassing disciplinary conceptions, frameworks and methods in order to form a unified approach.

These ideas are age-old but since the 1990s have produced a highly fashionable discourse in academia. Most institutions claim to encourage interdisciplinarity and funding bodies often favour some notion of it. Perhaps the prevalence of interdisciplinarity has come about through the frustration engendered by the fragmentation of academic knowledge into increasingly specialised, jargonistic and individual projects that often leave others, even those within the same sub-discipline, alienated, as many students can be heard to bemoan. On the other hand, the SJGR appreciates the benefits of a disciplinary approach in producing detailed, methodologically sound and specialised knowledge.

The *SJGR* is consciously engaging with these ideas through a shared sense that other students and disciplines may have much to offer us (and vice versa), if only we could communicate effectively with one another, and because we recognise how many difficulties there are even in being *multidisciplinary*, let alone interdisciplinarity. There have been many challenges that the SJGR has faced in this regard. I shall summarise those that I feel will be ongoing sources of difficulty and inspiration for editorial teams to come.

Most members of SJGR appear to have had some inspiring and some frustrating experiences of other disciplines and interdisciplinarity. Of course, most so-called disciplines are to some extent interdisciplinarity, and specific interests and individual personalities push students towards, for example, the political or mathematical sides of economics. Ethnomusicology has always drawn on musicology and anthropology, as well as aspects of politics, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, history and more, whilst forming its own distinctive canon of disciplinary literature. We have all dabbled in different disciplines, with erratic results. Some of us had attempted various kinds of multidisciplinary discussion groups or collaborative work that seemed to yield very satisfying 'diplomatic' results between disciplines, but of little academic value.

At SOAS, there are certain institutional conditions that both encourage and inhibit interdisciplinary communication. On the one hand, the emphasis on regional specialisation means that students of politics, economics, history and anthropology may come together under the auspices of studying, for example, 'sub-Saharan Africa' or 'Japan'. On the other hand, however, if one's area of expertise does not fall into certain regions or countries favoured by SOAS, it may become hard to communicate with peers across disciplines and geographical regions, despite the fact that one may be studying similar issues, such as gender, diaspora or religion. Furthermore, as a journal, we discovered that time constraints are major obstacles when completing increasingly prescribed and bureaucratic PhD programmes, often within the deadline of three years of funding. In this context, disciplinary training is paramount, but leaves precious little time or resources for considering the often elusive benefits of interdisciplinarity.

It is hard to become an expert in two disciplines, let alone the number we currently have represented on the SGJR committee (around eight). This is partly because of the specific theory, methods, language and canon of literature that each discipline has developed. Related problems seem to be the use of the same word by many disciplines (for example, 'culture' or 'society') and the conflicting discourses it may invoke, and unfamiliarity with colleagues' disciplinary methodology and jargon that placed additional constraints on communication. It appeared that we were unused to explaining ourselves in detail to students from other disciplines. From the point of view of editing a journal, as a small group of intensely specialised post-graduate students, it was impossible to guarantee that we would have the necessary expertise to evaluate the breadth of articles submitted to SJGR.

With these experiences and emerging issues, initiated by an economist, the SJGR began as a mass of diplomatic activity between representatives of different disciplines. It felt great to make contact, be together, begin to discuss the interesting and exciting topics people were studying. Yet, it became clear that our discussions would remain diplomatic and practical, and through the strengths and limitations of our disciplinary training, our academic collaboration would have to begin in the written format as a joint consideration of a juxtaposition of disciplinary studies.

## **Crossing Boundaries**

We chose a theme for the first issue of the journal that we felt could be approached by all the social science, humanities and language disciplines represented at SOAS. 'Crossing Boundaries' was to be loosely interpreted in order to encourage submission of a wide variety of work. The 'real' discussion would take place when the articles were submitted. And here, we encountered predictable problems mostly connected to the fact that we only felt truly

comfortable discussing aspects relating to our own disciplines. We were understandably wary of treading on other disciplinary toes whilst enjoying the chance to engage with perspective other than those of our particular disciplines.

Nevertheless, we achieved something of what we grandly set out to do, namely that students from different disciplines collaborated towards a common goal, the first issue of SJGR. As interdisciplinarity becomes more commonplace and experience grows, so it will become easier to collaborate on the journal and hold productive academic discussions between students of different disciplines. We may even progress from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinarity as confidence grows. This is certainly a challenge for future editions of the journal. However, we begin with a modest offering of multiple disciplinary perspectives on the common theme of 'Crossing Boundaries', which we hope will serve as a springboard for collaborations to come.

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