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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

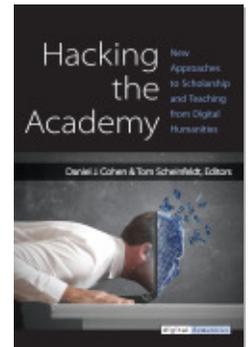
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Voices

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Ethan Watrall, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, David Parry

Many institutions pride themselves on encouraging interdisciplinary scholarship. However, the reality is that it is much easier to have a traditional, one-field identity—e.g., English, geology, physics, etc.—than it is to create and maintain an interdisciplinary identity. The very structure of most universities is based on a model of one scholar, one discipline—the unit of discipline being the department. Departments are usually walled gardens, little islands of thought and practice that are surrounded by moats filled with sharks, and patrolled by giant killer robots with instructions to kill on sight. (What? Your department doesn't have giant killer robots?)

—ETHAN WATRALL

Debates about field definition are often less about determining what good work in a field might be than they are about turf wars—turf wars driven less by intellectual questions than by institutional and economic imperatives. I wonder about the cost of that disciplinarity; about the degree to which we are now being disciplined by our need to define the field. What conversations won't take place, now that our structure has become officially institutionalized? I hope that we can find a way—and perhaps a way that might model a new mode of interdisciplinary affiliation for the university at large—to imagine our borders less as walled structures than as the containing elements of Venn diagrams, somehow semipermeable, allowing for overlap and intermingling, rather than producing territorial invasion and defense.

—KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK

If what the digital does is just take the old disciplines and make them digital, leaving disciplinarity and the silo structure of the university intact, it will have failed. I want to see the digital transform not just the content or practice of the disciplines, but the very idea of disciplinarity.

—DAVID PARRY

