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American Quarterly, Volume 68, Number 2, June 2016, pp. 361-365 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0016>



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# What Is This Thing Called Interdisciplinarity? Teaching Interdisciplinary Methods Courses in American Studies

*Rebecca Hill*

**A**s a program director tasked with teaching a graduate-level American studies methods course, as well as with devising assessment rubrics for our MA program, I have been increasingly interested in this thing called interdisciplinarity. During the assessment process our faculty had to articulate interdisciplinarity as a learning outcome, and we realized that our varied understandings of it as being about “different sources” or “different methods” had led us to divergent ideas of what made a successful work of American studies. We ultimately revised our learning outcome to read: “Combines diverse methods to study American cultural products and practices.” This definition is widespread and seems simple; yet it masks complexities.<sup>1</sup>

In this vein, I organized a panel on how American studies programs define interdisciplinarity for the association’s annual meeting. “What Is This Thing Called Interdisciplinarity?” brought together Andrew Ross of American studies at New York University; Shelley Streeby of critical gender studies and ethnic studies at UC San Diego; Wendy Kozol, chair of comparative American studies at Oberlin; Kevin Murphy, chair of American studies at Minnesota; and Julie Sze, director of American studies at UC Davis. Each panelist posed a question to be answered in a five-minute talk and to spark discussion with the audience. These questions were “Is American studies a haven or a cause?”; “Is there an American studies type?”; “Should we just get rid of disciplines and departments, and if not, then what is the value of maintaining disciplines?”; “Is ethnic studies interdisciplinarity different from / similar to American studies interdisciplinarity and what can we learn about thinking about the two together?”; and “How does interdisciplinarity operate outside the academy?”

While American studies has held up interdisciplinarity as a sign of its own maverick status, calls for interdisciplinarity are also currently widespread among administrators. Like other calls for flexibility against bureaucracy within neo-

liberal governance, this rhetoric about innovation, flexibility, and creativity can be an appealing window-dressing for attacks on faculty governance, enabling deans to create new administrative forms that do away with department chairs and tenure lines. Traditional disciplines may also be threatened. In a recent survey by the ASA's committee on programs and centers, American studies program leaders identified "turf battles" with departments as a problem. This context may explain two recent scholarly works portraying interdisciplinarity as a threat. Jerry Jacobs describes it as "hype" and a threat to knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Harvey Graff has described cultural studies' version of interdisciplinarity as incoherent.<sup>3</sup> Certain interdisciplinary attempts might indeed be superficial. Historians might read literary or visual texts as simple reflections of the time period or of the author's consciousness, while literary critics claim to be doing "history" with a literary interpretation of a court case, or refer to a series of novels as an "archive." It is partly because of the tenuous status of American studies institutionally that it is important that we articulate our methods clearly so that we neither produce superficial scholarship nor duplicate the work of traditional disciplines under a different name. One place that this articulation happens is in the American studies methods class.

My own question on the panel, "Is interdisciplinarity liberation or a threat?" came out of teaching experiences in my American studies MA-level methods course, in which my students study four commonly used methods in American studies: history, literary/film criticism, visual culture, and ethnography. During the semester, I introduce these methods by having them read models of interdisciplinary scholarship grounded in specific disciplinary methods while asking them to pay particular attention to footnotes and appendixes.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning, each student picks a single general topic (from "the police" to "Metro-Atlanta's Coptic Christians"), writes four building-block papers using these methods, and then expands two of them into a final paper. How they cut and mix is up to them. As soon as they start brainstorming topics, students realize the limits of disciplinary framing. They mostly come from disciplinary majors, which have taught them to see with disciplinary eyes, to approach research one way out of habit. One student's initial "1920s prohibition" topic had to expand to "drug and alcohol prohibition" to include ethnography. That student's building blocks pulled family histories of bootlegging children from census records, commented on furtive behaviors of campus smokers, semiotically read prohibition posters, and did an ideological critique of the film *Maria, Full of Grace*. While reading examples and working on their building blocks, students write weekly reflective online posts and talk in class about the experience of using each method. The process isn't without conflict. Some students come in

identifying with a major as if it were a sports team, and as soon as it's time to try an unfamiliar method, they become further entrenched in a disciplinary identity. My technique for dealing with this resistance is to treat the students as disciplinary experts in a cross-disciplinary conversation in the classroom. History majors explain the difference between secondary and primary sources; anthropology majors tell everyone about cultural relativism; English majors explain the different modes of literary criticism.

This is not an antidisciplinary course. I make the students follow rules in order to practice different methods, even if I indicate that these rules are “for the sake of the exercise.” To continue with sports metaphors, a former student told me recently that she saw me as an academic personal trainer. I tell them “no” and “yes, you have to.” To English majors: “no, you cannot use a novel as your primary source”; to history majors: “yes, you have to read theory.” Last year, everyone except the history majors wanted to do the “history of the present,” and I made a new rule against it. I made the rule not because it's not legitimate but because studying the very recent past may not provide students with the experience of trying to understand the past, that ungraspable object that makes historical research and writing so challenging. These rules are about respecting craft in research and learning from disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship. The craft of interdisciplinarity, while not unique to American studies, has long been central to the field. It is the craft of shifting from one method to another, being able to stand between two conversations and listen well enough to pull them together, using methods that might contradict each other and finding ways to use the contradictions. We might think of this shifting as being like learning different languages.

I ask them to read for methodology first by figuring out what questions scholars have asked and then about the techniques and sources they use to answer those questions. In defining disciplines this way, we have found simple but profound differences among them. Historians ask, without thinking consciously about it: “Where did it come from? How do things change? And “what was it like in the past?” and use any kind of “document” from the past they can find. Literary scholars, regardless of what theory they are using as a frame, ask about what texts mean and how they produce meaning—not just by “close reading” but by reading with attention to literary forms. Sociologists and anthropologists read social interactions in order to answer quite different questions about social hierarchies and cultural norms in daily life.

On the one hand, differences in method are as simple as the questions above, but within any large disciplinary frame, there are huge methodological differences—for instance, between materialist and cultural historians, or between

many different types of literary theory. Recently, a furious argument about Amy Wilkins's award-winning sociological study of white youth subcultures, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians*, helped me understand some key differences between the ethnographic approaches of anthropologists and sociologists. Some students were angry about what they perceived as Wilkins's judgments of her subjects, insisting that she follow rules they had learned in anthropology about cultural relativism. Later, I began to think that disciplinary norms in anthropology have to do with a goal of cultural translation, while sociological ethnography has had a different goal, often critically explaining social hierarchies or solving social problems.

Another key text is Tiya Miles's *House on Diamond Hill*, which combines ethnographic and historical research, pursuing answers to two questions: "Why do people visit historic house museums?" (ethnographic) and "Who were / what happened to the people who lived in this house?" (historical). Miles beautifully integrates these questions into a concise and coherent book. However, had this been a dissertation project, asking two questions might have been verboten, since graduate advisers often define "good dissertations" as works that address only one question, and some students think that it is "wrong" for Miles to have more than one research question. If training in American studies were to follow conventional truisms of "doable research," students might be discouraged from interdisciplinarity from the outset. Here we can see how actual interdisciplinarity might work against neoliberal expectations for education: by encouraging students to do projects that are too difficult, too full of contradictions, too hard to make legible in an academic marketplace where traditional disciplines dominate. There is a contradiction between neoliberal rhetoric about interdisciplinary innovation and students' and faculty's reasonable risk aversion in a competitive job market, whether it means choosing a safe major or a safe dissertation project. Can we predict whether a student's proposed project will lead to job market failure or a MacArthur "genius grant"?

American studies is not a "safe major," and many students begin to experience interdisciplinarity as a threat as they try on new methods. In these conversations, I've learned with them as they test the boundaries of their majors and methods in order to figure out what makes them distinct. I worry that in emphasizing the differences between approaches that I can overstate things, so I also ask students to think about what disciplines share. As one student remarked on a discussion board:

Many of the questions that . . . arose in the work we have studied have to do with identity, the creation of identity, and the establishment of identity as a subculture. In this same vein,

many of the questions relate to how individuals or groups relate their identity back to larger society. I noticed this in [Bridget] Brown's piece through individual explanations of how abductees "proved" the validity of their story when it was challenged by hegemonic ideas.

In thinking about the connection of "story" to "subculture," this student had articulated (without having read James Clifford) a key similarity between literary criticism and ethnographic interpretation.

The experience of seeing the limits of their previous academic training through comparison can be scary or exciting to students: they see an open window to new kinds of research; they feel like rookies again after having been the star players as senior majors in single disciplines where they knew all the rules. Some would prefer it if there was one method that we could just train them all to use. Eventually, most come to claim a new "American studies" identity, proudly embracing the maverick status of Jay Mechling's American Studies Type.<sup>5</sup> Though it is hard for any graduate research methods course to be liberatory, teaching research methods has helped me think deeply *with* my students about how we produce knowledge—an exercise that makes me think more creatively about method in my own work. This experience is why many of us find interdisciplinary research experiences so liberating. Here we are allowed not just to ask *more* questions but to *question* the questions we are used to asking, to mix insights from multiple types of scholarship, to finally break habits we didn't know we had.

#### Notes

1. Mark Rice provides as examples learning outcomes "applying two or more disciplinary approaches," as well as "evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different disciplinary approaches" ("Some Thoughts on Creating Goals and Outcomes for American Studies Programs," ASA White Papers, [www.theasa.net/about/page/white\\_papers/](http://www.theasa.net/about/page/white_papers/) [accessed November 13, 2015]).
2. Jerry Jacobs, *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
3. Harvey Graff, *Undisciplining Knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).
4. The examples are history: Tiya Miles, *House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); literary/film: Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); ethnography: Oneka LaBennett, *She's Mad Real: Popular Culture and West Indian Girls in Brooklyn* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Amy Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and visual culture: Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, with additional examples from Paula Rabinowitz, David Morgan, and Robin Bernstein; and interdisciplinary tour-de-force: Bridget Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
5. Jay Mechling, "American Studies as a Social Movement," in *An American Mosaic*, ed. Marshall Fishwick (New York: American Heritage, 1996), 15–26.