
The Scope of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

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THE SCOPE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

J. W. MOHR*

I. POSITION STATEMENT:

This paper will look at elementary conditions of interdisciplinary collaboration and their implication for research, teaching and practice. All three phrases are interrelated in terms of the definition and structures of social problems as well as the dynamics of dealing with them. Teaching at the university level through the various disciplines provides methodological approaches to human and social problems, but specialization creates diversity in orientation, focus, and communication. Since our major intellectual orientation today is an analytical one (although this is changing), the intellectual status of a discipline depends on massive reductions of complex phenomena. Historically, this has led the basic academic disciplines to engage in incestual relationships (at best selective breeding) and professional schools — having had a late and ambivalent entry into the house of intellect — to erect a facade of consistency. With the 'natural' sciences (*sic!*) in the lead in terms of scientific prestige and resources, their methodologies became predominant with their undisputed success in the 'objective' realm. Professions based on them flourished equally. The barber became a surgeon and the tinkerer an engineer. The humanities and the social sciences became uneasy if not dis-eased. Academic theology and philosophy, the ancient integrators, remain at best as narrow specialties.

The position of law is a curious one. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, its relationship to academia has been tenuous. Its prestige and success rested mainly on the breakdown of the social significance of theology and philosophy and the unclaimed spoils of a feudal society (My Lord). It still presents itself as a unified system (law, lawyers, law teachers, legal system) which, to the outsider, is a miracle in mystification.

When it comes to problems such as the urban ills and their study, it does not take long to realize that problems are not neatly divided into disciplines and that satisfactory understanding cannot be obtained by the application of one approach and/or one method. But complexity frightens us because it shakes our identity as professionals and exposes our insufficiency. In human affairs, the predominant goal is still salvation and the preferred method panacea. And every human enterprise claims to offer some, if not all of it. This is not only expressed in the advertising of soap, but in the promotion of academic insights and skills.

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With the increase in the complexity of social organizations as typified by the modern city (why are truth and banality such close allies?) the organized and the organic are increasingly in conflict. Every partial solution tends to increase stresses in related life areas whether they are environmental (throughways, housing developments), social (poverty programmes) or psychological (parents are unfit). In principle there will be a high level of consensus concerning the need for interdisciplinary approaches. There will be an agreement — at least in this group — that law is involved in all these areas. There should also be little doubt that Solomon is a rare human phenomenon and that all the knowledge necessary — let alone wisdom — to approach complex problems cannot be combined in one person and cannot be taught in an integrated manner. What are then the conditions that facilitate mutual supplementation, that allow us to talk to each other and even understand some of it?

II. DISCUSSION

Obstacles to Interdisciplinary Collaboration

We have implicitly accepted that interdisciplinary collaboration is, if not necessarily a good thing, so at least a necessity in urban legal studies. We have, to some degree, justified this assumption by saying that the problems encountered do not follow the lines of academic disciplines. Thinking about this, and considering my scant knowledge in this area and the degree of expertise which is assembled here, I felt that we might best focus on some very basic issues of cognitive cohesion, the nature of expertise and the division of labour. It is only fair to admit right at the outset that many of the problems that occurred to me in going over these issues arose out of a dichotomy between conceptualization and experience. This dichotomy is not only inherent in the subject of teaching, but seems to be one of the major obstacles in urban planning itself. Jane Jacobs gives one answer to this dichotomy: "Which avenues of thinking are apt to be useful and to help yield the truth depends not on how we might prefer to think about a subject, but rather on the inherent nature of the subject itself."¹ I accept this principle without equivocation, most likely because it fits the intellectual tradition I have imbibed as well as adopted beginning with Husserl's shibboleth 'Back to the Things Themselves!'. But, the simplicity of the statement is deceptive. Husserl already raises the two basic questions: "How can we be sure that cognition accords with the things as they exist in themselves, that it gets "at them"? What do things in themselves care about our ways of thinking and the logical rules governing them?"² I see that I have already talked myself into the first point I was going to make which concerns the cognitive substructure of interdisciplinary collaboration.

¹ Jacobs, J. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Random House, 1961, p. 428.

² Husserl, E. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Martinus Nijhof, The Hague, 1964, p. 1.

a. *Problems of Cognition*

The basic propositions are, or seem to be, clear. Anything that humans relate to, partakes of their own complexity.³ We are rarely satisfied by having water explained as H₂O, since this formula does not seem to say anything about the vicissitudes of thirst, of enjoying the sun's play on water or of being drenched. On the other hand, we are well aware that if we should keep all these things in mind at the same time, science — at least as we know it — would be impossible. Chemistry became what it is because it extracted itself from the questions of alchemy, questions which are all but forgotten, but which nevertheless supplied the energy for the enterprise. Reduction is the power of cognition, a fact of which the dreamer Descartes, who helped leading us up this garden path, must have been well aware. By reduction I do not mean here just simplification in a structural sense, but partialization of human questions. And the step from reduction to reductionism, it seems to me, occurs most commonly and particularly at the point at which the results of the analysis of partialized and objectified questions are assumed to be directly applicable to human problems.

Scientists have always attempted, even if only halfheartedly, to keep their enterprise "pure" and to leave the application of their results to others. I could never understand the distinction between "pure" and "applied" research since there did not seem to be any scientific logic for it, until I learned to see that this is not an intellectual distinction but a political one. The "pure" scientist divests himself of his social responsibility. Now he may have good reasons for doing so in the interest of science or simply in order to get on with his job. The innocence which is claimed, however, can by now only be in the nature of bad faith.⁴ At best, scientific innocence has kicked us out of the heavens and reduced us to a naked ape and at worst it threatens us with extinction. Why in this light we should persist in studies, urban-legal or otherwise, and talk about the scope of interdisciplinary collaboration would be mystifying were it not for the fatal fact that we cannot un-know or dis-know. We simply cannot go back home again, we can only go on to know more and hope for the best.

Looking at Academia, one can easily discern that the more "objective" (which simply means object oriented) a discipline became, the more powerful were its methods and its results. This worked well for those disciplines which could isolate objects out of the fabric of the quest for human meaning. Since nothing succeeds like success and since most of our practical reasoning is based on analogy, imitation was pursued with a vengeance. If one looks at something like the 'Analysis for the Advancement of Learning Human and Divine' by Bacon and compares it with the structure of our universities today, one realizes what has happened.⁵ But, again, there is no turning back. There can only be a struggle for perspective. We cannot eliminate cause and effect

³ O'Neill, J. *Authority and the Body Politic*. Paper, Five-State Philosophy Conference, Clemson University, S.C., March 7-8, 1969.

⁴ Mohr, J. W. "Innocence, Responsibility and Perspective: Some Thoughts on a Research Programme," *Canadian Welfare*, 19/2, April 1967.

⁵ Bacon, F. *The Advancement of Learning*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1926, p. 74.

models from the social sciences nor concepts like averages or probability. We can only recognize their limitations when they are applied to human situations.

Some lessons for interdisciplinary studies seem to emerge. When we deal with a phenomenon like the city, which is a form of relationship between man and his world, there is hardly any discipline that does not have a bearing on it. It is not only impossible to integrate all these sciences in terms of their conceptual diversities, it is also impossible to find a rank order of loading. This can only be determined by value system which cannot be derived from the sciences themselves. Whether the model is a *civitas dei* or a zoo it will have shortcomings for humans who (on the average and with a high level of probability) want to range from one to the other.

Since law presumably is the formal regulation of conduct between human beings and their institutions, this regulation (again presumably) should be as close to the actual conduct as possible. Quantity and diversity has taken much of this conduct out of eye-level observation, and the rate of social change makes new regulations necessary in ever-increasing numbers. The effects and results of these regulations are again largely beyond eye-level accounting. The politics of experience becomes largely the politics of data and 'the case', often atypical in the first place, will no longer do even as a measurement of the outside limits of manoeuvre. We are thus forced to look for method and measurement provided by various sciences. Political science has long been a part of this scene, but was short on measurements; economics has perhaps been most successful in entering the public domain, although some interpret this as a sell-out, and recently psychology, sociology and their various hybrids have made increasing claims of being able to elucidate public behaviour. The amateur and the dilettante (who by definition love and enjoy what they are doing) are fighting a hopeless rearguard action. Living has become serious business — of a kind.

If it has not been already obvious before, it should be clear now that we have partly slid and partly talked ourselves into a complex situation to which each discipline has — or at least claims to have — some part answer. Academia has become important in the public domain. The least we can do is try and find out what we have in mind before we peddle our wares. The student who, by necessity, has to be misled into segmental knowledge has to recognize its limitations. No one discipline can do this of and by itself. There is a need of an adversary or inquisitional system, otherwise we become menacing experts.

b. Problems of Expertise

Recurrent jokes about the expert, if nothing else, leads one to think that there is a general uneasiness about people who know better how we should live than we do ourselves. We commonly contend that a little knowledge is dangerous, but we tend to forget that everybody has only a little knowledge and consequently is dangerous. And the more decisive this knowledge becomes the more dangerous it is. This has been so since the beginning of time as Genesis will tell us. However, we did not leave it to the expert then and have suffered by it. And so we have been looking for

substitute experts ever since. We still suffer; yet we cannot do without them, they have become an addiction. Which leads me to an illustration.

In a recent seminar with postgraduates in psychiatry, a number of participants adamantly maintained that the major contribution of psychiatry was not in the field of social psychiatry (which I happened to represent) but in the field of chemo-therapy. Now, I have no doubt that the 'wonder drugs', as they were called if you remember, have helped a number of people to carry on their lives and stay out of institutions. Expertise has paid off. One need not question the value of these drugs along the lines of Ron Laing or Thomas Szasz, although they cannot be ignored.⁶ What concerned me was that the students' claim was made without looking at the associated total social costs from tranquilized housewife to crazed "speed" freak. As science was not able to contain its achievements, neither were the professions.

Jane Jacobs gives innumerable examples of this kind of 'splitting' of specific results and side effects which I am sure are all familiar to you.⁷ Daniel Moynihan in his recent swan song of community action in the war on poverty complains that — 'the divergence of the various theories was such that what would serve to cure in one case would exacerbate in the other. A big bet was being made. No responsible person had any business acting as if it were a sure thing.'⁸ He contends that key decisions were made by lawyers and economists who were unfamiliar with social science theories on which various programmes were based. He seems to believe that we can extricate ourselves from such dilemmas by limiting the social sciences. "*The role of social science lies not in the formation of social policy but in the measurement of its results*" (his italics).⁹ How one avoids these measurements becoming theoretical constructs and the basis for future policy he does not say. Presumably this is why one measures effects in the first place. He himself recognizes later that "the 'movement of the social system into self-consciousness' has been accompanied by increasingly sophisticated efforts to shape and direct that system. Increasingly social scientists are recruited for such attempts; increasingly they themselves initiate them".¹⁰ He then looks to answers in professional ethics, but this of course will not do. Even older professions who have a pretty good record of ethical practice in terms of their own internal consistency have an outright lousy record in terms of social policies. Expertise is power and no institutionalized group can be trusted to limit their power of their own accord. There is a need for understanding the vicissitudes of social science research and the expertise that can be derived from it on the part of the legislator, policy maker, draftsman of regulations, the courts and partisan counsel in practice.

Although of recent vintage — at least in this country — it is fairly well accepted by now that the behavioural and social sciences have a place in

⁶ Laing, R. D. *The Politics of Experience*. Penguin Books, 1967.

Szasz, T. S. *The Myth of Mental Illness*. Harper, 1961.

⁷ Jacobs, J. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Random House, 1961.

⁸ Moynihan, D. P. *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*. The Free Press, 1969, p. 171.

⁹ Moynihan, p. 193.

¹⁰ Moynihan, p. 201.

legal studies. It is not at all clear, nor should it be at this time, what their place is and how they relate to teaching, research and practice. There is considerable concern about bastardisation and ambivalence about what it might do to THE LAW. It is interesting to listen to the rhetoric that develops. The law and the teaching of it is described as: hardheaded, tough, clearly analytical, demanding, precise, rigorous, practical, sensible, balanced and purposeful. There is clearly a masculine image which social scientists can always translate as: rigid, pedantic, aggressive, moralistic, punitive, trivial, static, artificial and sterile.¹¹

c. *The Division of Labour*

It is interesting to note that Durkheim's argument in his 'Division of Labour in Society' is mainly based on notions of law and theories of sanctions. In the preface to the second edition he adds 'Some Notes on Occupational Groups' where he says: '. . . We have especially insisted on showing that the division of labour cannot be held responsible as is sometimes unjustly charged; that it does not necessarily produce dispersion and incoherence, but that functions when they are sufficiently in contact with one another tend to stabilize and regulate themselves'. This principle is good enough for academic collaboration although, as Durkheim points out, it is not sufficient for society as a whole. 'A moral or juridical regulation essentially expresses, then, social needs that society alone can feel; it rests in a state of opinion, and all opinion is a collective thing produced by collective elaboration.'¹²

In terms of study and research, the problem of division of labour between disciplines could be seen as a relatively simple one. We may return to our initial proposition and say that the subject or question itself should determine the methods needed for their exploration. The only trouble is that this already presupposes an awareness of methods and areas of knowledge as the question unfolds. And this obviously brings us to teaching. Having taken a very cursory look at the intellectual complexity of the various scientific disciplines which might have a bearing on legal problems, what could profitably be done in terms of teaching? Obviously very little, since each discipline has its own slate of courses and its voluminous literature, an abridgement of which only breeds superficiality. And yet, the situation is not entirely hopeless if we think in terms of learning rather than teaching. The accumulation of organized and pre-digested knowledge is a sterile affair in any case until it is applied to a fresh, concrete and living problem. And there is no dearth of fresh, concrete and living problems as far as I can see nor could I foresee a time when this would be the case.

I am frankly appalled when students who have already spent three to six years at the university still do not know what their questions are. I say 'still' and yet I am not sure it was not those years that made them forget their questions. When one attempts to dig up these questions from under the rubble of knowledge one finds that they were big ones and could never be

¹¹ Mehl, P. E. *Clinical vs. Statistical Prediction*. University of Minnesota Press, 1964.

¹² Durkheim, E. *The Division of Labor in Society*. The Free Press, 1964, pp. 4, 5.

dealt with in the span of a term essay, a paper or even a thesis. It sometimes seems like castration on the installment plan. As one only can honestly teach what one has found necessary and useful in one's own quest so can the student only meaningfully accept what relates to his world and his questions. All we can really do is to sensitize the student to the possibilities that are around for solving real or imaginary problems. The difference between the two can only be a question of outcome.

With this in mind, one does not really have to worry about practice even if one did know what the student was exactly going to do later on, which in terms of law graduates one cannot be sure. In any event, much of the knowledge and specific techniques that we may impart is bound to be outdated in a few years and their stringent inculcation may retard rather than enhance further developments. Interdisciplinary collaboration and the learning that flows from it can create an openness and a flexibility which is increasingly needed and can never be outdated if it becomes an attitude and style of life.

Much of what has been said so far is largely a thing of the past. The division of labour between disciplines depends more and more on who does what where, at what time. This expresses itself in the proliferation of institutes and centers and the names of loose groupings such as life sciences or health sciences. Departments which still carry a traditional name such as psychology may share little more than the name from place to place. Professional schools equally recognize that to remain in the forefront of where the action is they have to respond to new intellectual developments and social needs rather than servicing their profession as they have known it. There is hope that, with the increasing social awareness, man and his way of being in the world will move to the centre of our studies which, by this very movement, will become *ipso facto* interdisciplinary.

