

Excerpts from
Practising Interdisciplinarity in Gender Studies

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Our group decided to focus on *interdisciplinarity*, since this has been a key concept in feminist studies from its inception, and is of relevance across the majority of European institutionalised contexts. We began our work from the shared experience of disappointment that a claim of interdisciplinarity in feminist teaching or research often turns out to be a misleading description of what might be more accurately termed *multidisciplinarity*... In addition, and perhaps most problematically, the term ‘interdisciplinarity’ can sometimes be invoked as a rhetorical ploy obscuring the problems of hastily made connections or inadequately explored discipline-specific histories of terms. The contemporary example of *performativity* has been very helpful for us in thinking this issue through, since it is clearly a key interdisciplinary term central to contemporary women’s, gender and feminist studies, but rarely one that is located in an interdisciplinary context, through, for example, tracing the productive interaction of linguistic theory, political critique and cultural analysis.

Our interest in interdisciplinarity is motivated by both the frustrating ubiquity and vagueness of the *concept* of interdisciplinarity and a consistent lack of commitment on the part of institutions to support the *praxis* of interdisciplinarity. Yet, whatever the persistent problems – conceptual, institutional, practical and otherwise – we have not abandoned our conviction that feminist studies might gain an enormous amount by attention to the practice of interdisciplinarity. It continues to be our belief that interdisciplinarity is one road to (self-) critical and innovative research and teaching, but what interdisciplinarity means should not be assumed to be self-evident. We decided as a group that our focus would be to explore how our working practices (research and teaching) would alter if we took interdisciplinarity as our central concern, rather than as a presumed good or self-evident feature of women’s and gender studies. In particular, we were interested in thinking through how interdisciplinarity might work across the geographical, institutional and generational differences that are formative of the group.

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Despite Foucault’s influential statement that naming something also defines an identity (Foucault, 1981: 44), in our case naming our undertaking, practice and goal ‘interdisciplinary’ did not automatically define an ‘identity’ Of course, everyone in the group has some idea about what interdisciplinarity signifies. But looking back at the history of women’s and gender studies, it seems that the crux of the matter is not so much how ‘interdisciplinarity’ is to be defined, but under what conditions it can flourish....Neither shared knowledge nor intersubjectivity – both crucial to interdisciplinarity – can in effect be attained, unless they are embedded in enduring communities of practice whose members are willing to negotiate hierarchies of knowledge and power relations

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Recent fortunes in institutionalisation may have mainstreamed interdisciplinarity, but they have not provided material and conceptual support for its development. These factors make interdisciplinarity as a radical research or pedagogic position difficult to sustain and, perhaps inevitably, feminists within the academy have increasingly suggested ‘returns’ to disciplinarity as a ‘way out’ of institutional difficulties germane to the field. This move is one that suggests a series of ‘returns’ to disciplinary methodology in particular. In addition, there is a range of institutional constraints that necessitate such a return. For example, in many countries it is very difficult to gain employment within the academy if you are not established in a classical discipline...Moreover, funding of research is in most cases closely tied to discipline(s) in the traditional sense.

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Being part of ATHENA 2, our project has had to be characterised by some kind of ‘European-ness’. ...To take ‘European-ness’ seriously – whether as object or attitude – challenges a trajectory whose lynchpins are predominantly English-language theorists. To think about and through a European interdisciplinarity as potentially more than ‘eurocentrism’ in teaching and

research would be to challenge accepted histories of ideas, theories, and disciplines as much as the accepted ideas, theories, and disciplines themselves....The difficulties of interdisciplinarity, in a way, resemble the difficulties of the political process of European integration. Disciplines 'behave' a lot like the nations involved in the EU integration process. Both have traditions, habits, methods and borders that are defended vehemently when criticised or put under pressure from outside. No 'foreigner' is allowed to tamper with them. Tampering is allowed only after a long and cumbersome process of 'naturalisation', but by then the moment and opportunity for interdisciplinarity and integration is gone or, rather, forfeited.....We would argue that both interdisciplinary practice and European practice should have at least the following two characteristics: be open, rather than fixed; opt for inclusion instead of exclusion. An open and inclusive attitude is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of productive interdisciplinarity and European integration....Until

we learn to become less defensive about our nations and disciplines – through projects such as these – the numbers of trans- or interdisciplinary cosmopolitans will remain small.

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Interdisciplinarity starts with the people who practice it. Our group process confirms this view. Throughout our work together we have discovered that interdisciplinarity is inherently a question of conversation, of dialogue and co-operation. Writing this booklet together has been a good training ground for our plans for the future – assembling and teaching together an interdisciplinary course at several European gender and women's studies centres.

Michel Foucault (1981) [1972, 1977] *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books .

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ISBN: 0-9553586-1-2; 978-0-9553586-1-6