

Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries: New Challenges to Higher Education

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a gradual burring of boundaries between core academic disciplines such as linguistics, economics, politics, sociology, etc. There are many factors which have contributed to this change, for example our global economy where networking, transparency, learning, and knowledge management seem to be the key to capital, consumers, the press, etc. Such developments point towards increasingly interdisciplinary knowledge. Some universities have reacted to this demand for interdisciplinarity and the result has been an increase in new cross-disciplinary subjects where for instance students of international business, accounting, negotiation, etc. are introduced to subjects which, 10 or 15 years ago, would have been restricted to the “soft” subjects in the humanities.

The need for an integrated perspective is indisputable. But how do institutions of higher education go about integrating their subjects - producing meaningful study programmes and research projects? At the Aarhus School of Business, Denmark (with a Faculty of Language and Business Communication and a Faculty of Business Administration) we have for years been working with various ways to integrate our research and study programmes. The most recent initiative is our international BA in Marketing and Management Communication (BAMMC). Using this initiative as an example, the aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities of cross-disciplinarity as seen through the BAMMC.

“No man is an island”, the familiar quote says, but the same holds true for issues. As the real problems of the world are both complex and multifaceted¹ – to say the least – then it should come as no surprise if we start thinking seriously about educating students along the lines of complex and multifaceted problem solving. As an analogue to the argument that: “[p]roblem-oriented training promotes spontaneous analogical transfer: Memory oriented training promotes memory for training”(Needham/Begg 1991). Cross-disciplinary programmes should likewise help promote the students’ awareness of issues and methods stretching far beyond the boundaries of just one discipline, in turn enabling them to explore the interrelations of these issues and methods, and encouraging them take on a more holistic approach to solving not only a specific problem, but problems in general. The underlying notion being that exposure to the knowledge, skills and problem solving methods of other disciplines will – mutatis mutandis – enhance and deepen the students understanding of any given problem. Or as Mark van Doren states as early as 1943:

The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if he revises his view with every succeeding year, has begun the life of learning.

So why not let the students begin their “life of learning” by designing programmes that explicitly facilitate – rather than obstruct – a holistic perspective by integrating different disciplines from the outset.²

2 From (mono)disciplinarity to cross-disciplinarity

Cross-disciplinary programmes are a controversial issue in academia as well as in business and industry. In both environments they tend to elicit concern as well as hope. Traditionally the pattern of university organization is a crystallization of disciplines, in as much as dominant disciplines form departments and departments make up the structural framework of universities. And traditionally each discipline has its own perspective, its own language and nomenclature, its own history, its own resources, in effect constituting a community of its own. As is the case with all communities, its boundaries may function not only as interfaces but as barriers. The latter more often than not being the case:

In the earlier decades of the century [i.e. the twentieth], research was characteristically confined within traditional boundaries of disciplines that had themselves been defined only a few generations earlier. The anthropologist and the historian rarely ventured into each other’s realms; nor did the chemist and the physicist. But in the years since World War II the continuing appearance of new departments and new programs that merge fields has proven repeatedly the permeability of the lines between disciplines.
(Boyer Commission 1998: 23)

While there is certainly a place for specialized disciplines when it comes to research as well as designing new programmes, we must not overlook that boundaries also constitute limitations. As we have seen in the first section (above) real problems are not neatly compartmentalized and their solutions even less so; they have fuzzy edges, they may be suspended between any number of (historic) disciplines. This gives rise to the argument that the most effective knowledge worker of tomorrow – and these are exactly whom we are dealing with – will have to be educated in a cross-disciplinary environment.

This in turn leads us to yet another question. From which point of view is a new program to be defined: primarily from the point of view of departmental interests or primarily from the point of view of students’ needs in relation to the job market? Steering a course between the Scylla of departmental concerns and politics and the Charybdis of too many individual student wishes, we opt for a rather pragmatic approach. The general idea behind it being that we feel we have an obligation to expand the students’ scope of knowledge and skills beyond the confines of one or two disciplines, since the students, whom we educate most likely will work in a world where information from a variety of disciplines must be integrated. Based

¹ See also Kastberg 2000 and Boud 1987.

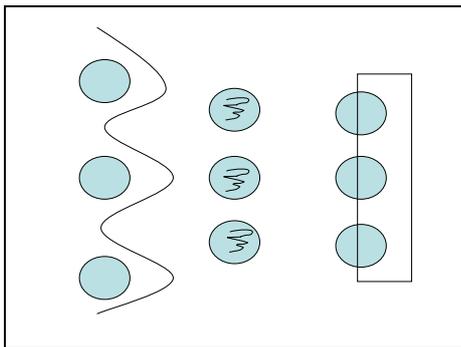
² See also Kastberg 2001.

on a thorough analysis of the competences that students will be needing upon graduation, we have therefore compiled a list of topics – regardless of departmental affinity – which seek to satisfy the interests of both parties, as it were. Needless to say, a prerequisite for successful cross-disciplinarity in this sense is a very high degree of collaboration, coordination and communication (Schlesky 1963) as well as a highly motivated faculty. But first and foremost the central element in cross-disciplinary collaboration is conveying to both students and faculty an understanding and appreciation of the different perspectives, knowledge, skills, values, and purposes of each of the disciplines represented in the collaboration.

3 Cross-disciplinarity in programme design

Students are typically asked to place themselves in one specific discipline and from within that discipline to choose a “track” of a “major”. And even if students may choose electives in addition to his or her obligatory courses, the electives are more often than not limited in number as well as content. The idea of some kind of a major and minor plus a number of electives seems to be not only permeating higher education but indeed structuring it.

We are not saying that some sort of cross-disciplinarity – in a broad sense of the word – cannot or may not occur within such traditional programmes, but we argue that it is generally not constitutive for an entire programme, and therefore not cross-disciplinary in our, stricter sense of the word. When it comes to the implementation of real, as it were, cross-disciplinarity in programme design, we speak with von Hentig, when he abstracts three general approaches:



(The illustration is based on von Hentig 1987:41)

In the above illustration, the circles represent disciplines whereas the lines illustrate the way in which the disciplines are related, i.e. how cross-disciplinarity comes into existence. Seen from the left, the first figure shows how a cross-disciplinary relationship comes into existence between three disciplines due to the fact that they are being encompassed by one overarching theory. The second approach sees the relationship as coming into existence due to the same methodological principle permeating the three different disciplines. And finally, in the third and last approach cross-disciplinarity is a result of three disciplines having to deal with the same complex (research) object. Dealing with an object as complex and as multifaceted [sic!] as marketing and management communication, we found that no one theory could encompass all fields dealt with in the programme, and that no one methodological principle could unify our work within these fields. Consequently our programme was envisioned and designed along the lines of the third approach to cross-disciplinarity.³

4 Management & communication: a field of integration

³ For an account of another programme (re)designed along these lines, see Kastberg 2002.

One area in which the barriers between disciplines and tasks are particularly blurred is organisational communication/Public Relations and management. In many universities throughout the world these disciplines are still part of separate programmes taught at separate faculties and schools (Faculty of Arts vs. Business Schools/Faculties), although there is a clear tendency of innovation and integration of these functions in companies and agencies.

The context of integrated communication

The integrated approach is born with the changes in society, new organisational forms and an enhanced status of communication in companies and organisations.

In post-modernity globalisation, complexity, change and learning are crucial elements. A refusal to change is a refusal to develop and a refusal to take part in the fruits of innovation. In order to cope with complex systems of technology, national legalisations, social and capital movements in a global world, etc. business ethics, transparency and reliability have become the business virtues of the new century.

Furthermore, organisations and companies are submitted to new forms of organisations and methods of management. Project management, networking, knowledge management, reputation and change management is the rule and break down the walls between organisations, authorities, managers and employees, professions and the public and private spheres. In today's organisations value based management, social responsibility and motivation is the key to success rather than productivity and technical performance.

The boundaries of specific tasks and skills in the past are vanishing in modern project and network oriented companies and organisations. Former separate areas and functions such as advertising, marketing, public relations, internal and external, local and global communication overlap with the shift of focus from customer and product-oriented communication towards corporate communication and stakeholder management. Public communication with consumer groups, NGO's, political authorities, employees and other stakeholders have grown considerably during the past 5-10 years and have increased the demand for stronger coherence and consistency in the way companies act and communicate with their stakeholders.

Consequently, we see a boom of companies and organisations - higher education institutions are no exception – going through long and expensive branding processes in order to define and consolidate their identities, as well as making sure they have a solid and coherent image in the public. Corporate governance, code of conducts, sustainability and corporate social responsibility reports have come into existence to convince us that the new corporate branding wave is more than yet another buzz-word.

Corporate communication

According to Cees Van Riel, who is professor of Corporate Communication at the Business School at Erasmus University, *Corporate Communication* is a holistic concept which integrates marketing communication, organisational communication and management communication. In the introduction to his book: *Principles of Corporate Communication* (Van Riel 1992), which is well known as a major contribution to business communication research, he writes:

It [i.e. corporate communication] may be seen as a framework in which various communications specialists – working from a mutually established strategic framework – can integrate their own communications input. The basic philosophy underlying this framework can be described as directing the company's communication policies from within the “corporate strategy – corporate identity – corporate image” triangle (op.cit.: 1).

While public relations and marketing communication departments used to monopolise communication, management communication (communication by senior managers with internal and external stakeholders) has experienced an incredible increase within certain functional domains such as “financial management” (investor relations), “production management” (environmental communication) and “personal management” (labour market communication) (op.cit.: 2). However, these specialised activities do not always lead to the creation of new communication departments within the company. In order to overcome the risk of contradiction and fragmentation following the expansion of sources of communication within the company, Van Riel emphasises the importance of adopting an integrated approach harmonising communication from all sources by assuring a common set of starting points (CSP) for every act of communication. Only by developing a common platform relating the company strategy, identity and image is it possible to direct the communication policies (op.cit.: 19) and this is what the corporate approach of communication can do for the company. He defines the concept as follows:

Corporate communication is an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonised as effectively and efficiently as possible, so as to create a favourable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent (op. cit.: 26).

With the growing role of the corporate dimension, business communication as such has become a strategic management tool, an interdisciplinary field leading on to new areas of interest in marketing, and public relations management such as ‘experiential’ marketing & culture, branding, reputation, issues management, etc. Consequently, communication planning and analysis has grown into a field which is crucial at every level and in every unit of today’s companies.

5 Case study: The BA MMC programme

In his article: “Reinventing the Business School for the Global Information Age” (2000), Jerry Wind accounts for the problems encountered by many Business Schools due to the lack of adapting their curriculum to the stage of globalisation. Risk management, crises management and information management, are signed out as overseen areas of in Business students curriculum due to rigid structures and teaching methods at business schools. Therefore, he claims, that in order to cope with the understanding and handling of management in a global digital world, business schools have to open up for interdisciplinary courses and co-teaching.

In Danish business schools traditional BA programmes in business or language are structured as separate programmes administered by different faculties.⁴ The Business Faculty offers a BA in Business Administration (taught in Danish or in English), and a variety of Master Business programmes and a MBA. Until the end of the 90’s the Faculty of Language and Business Communication⁵ only offered foreign languages learning BA-programmes composed of two core language modules (English, German, French and Spanish) and with a module of either of the languages and a specialisation in translation and interpreting at master level. However, since 2000 the faculty has added a range of two modules programmes combining one language with either Communication or European Studies to its portfolio. Except for a common basic course in study techniques and culture, the modules of the two modules BA programmes are planned and taught separately, so that the structure correspond more or less to the first figure shown in the illustration above. However, in order to anticipate some of the above-mentioned changes of the structure and functions in

⁴ Danish Business Schools have two faculties. A Business Faculty running programmes in Business and a Faculty of Language (or Language and Communication as at the Aarhus School of Business), running programmes in Language and/or Communication.

⁵ Named “the ‘Faculty of Modern Languages’ until September 2003.

certain professions such as communication in a business context, the faculty of Language and Business Communication launched a new international BA programme in marketing & management communication (BA MMC) in September 2003.

The purpose of the BA MMC programme is to provide bachelors with skills in marketing and management communication, enabling them to operate as communication officers in international or national organisations or companies using English as their corporate language or preparing them to take a master's degree in communication on the international higher education market. It is cross-disciplinary programme focusing on communication while integrating language studies and business economics. It provides students with the necessary tools for planning and carrying out tasks within communication, marketing, branding and Public Relations (planning communication activities, campaigns, and events, creation and editing websites, writing press releases, reports, product presentations, and company profiles, etc.).

The programme is composed of three blocks of interdisciplinary areas: *Communication*, *Business* and *Language* (English) in which the first constitutes the most important ECTS weight (70 ECTS). The course and semester overview appears from the following table:

Course and semester overview

Semester	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Business	Organisational Psychology		Marketing Management	Managerial Accounting		Project Management
				Organisational Theory/HRM		
Communi- cation		Media	Corporate Communication	Cultural Theory and Analysis	Integrated Advertising Communication	
		Communication Theory and Reception Analysis				
		Discourse Analysis			Discourse Analysis	
Language	Communicative Grammar	Communicative Grammar	Written, Oral, and Visual (Graphic) Communication	Written, Oral, and Visual (Graphic) Communication		Bachelor's thesis
	Written, Oral, and Visual (Graphic) Communication	Written, Oral, and Visual (Graphic) Communication				
	Introduction to Business Organisations					

Compared to the above-mentioned two modules BA programmes the BA MMC programme is structured as a one string programme integrating *Communication, Business and language*. The academic profile of the programme demands recruitment of teachers and researcher from both the Business and the Language and Communication Faculty and within the latter the recruitment calls on both teachers and researchers of Communication Studies (academics with a background in either corporate journalism, organisational communication, media studies, etc.) and of Language Studies (academics specialised in literature, linguistics, translation, etc.). Since it is an integrated programme, many courses demand a high degree of coordination.

An example of a coordinated course: Written, Oral and Visual Communication

One of the courses in the programme is called: Written, Oral and Visual Communication. As can be seen in the above graphic overview it is labelled a ‘language course’ and it runs for a total of four semesters. Cross-disciplinarity in connection with this course can be seen at a number of different levels. Let us point to the two most prominent:

- Cross-disciplinarity in terms of progression and interdependence of content
- Cross-disciplinarity in terms of exams

Progression and interdependence of content

The course runs for four consecutive semesters and each semester has its own sphere of topics, as shown in the illustration below:

Written, Oral and Visual Communication	
Semester	Content
1st	Personal Communication, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - presentational speaking - public speaking - including relevant ICT training (in e.g. presentational software)
2nd	Corporate Journalism, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - story telling - informational graphics - including relevant ICT training (in e.g. DTP software)
3rd	Corporate Communication on the Net, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cyberliteracy - multimodal discourse - interactivity and community - including relevant ICT training (in e.g. Internet software)
4th	Academic Writing, e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - scientific rhetoric - argumentation

As a example, we may take a closer look at “Written, Oral and Visual Communication” in the 3rd semester, called “Corporate Communication and the Net”, and the interdependencies of this particular course with other courses offered in the programme, both in terms of content and in terms of text linguistic skills.

At the level of content

In the 3rd semester the course in “Written, Oral and Visual Communication” relates explicitly to and incorporates aspects of the courses in:

- “Organizational Psychology” (e.g. what can a Net communicator do to activate different audiences?)
- “Media” (e.g. how can the Net communicator make the best use of the different media systems?)
- “Corporate Communication” (e.g. to what extent is Net communication a corporate issue?)
- “Communication Theory and Reception Analysis” (e.g, how can a ‘uses and gratifications approach’ be applied when it comes to Net communication?)

At the level of text linguistic skills

In the 3rd semester the course in “Written, Oral and Visual Communication” relates explicitly to and incorporates aspects of the courses in:

- “Communicative grammar“(e.g. what resources may the Net communicator draw upon to ensure stylistic appropriateness and grammatical correctness?)
- “Discourse Analysis” (e.g. how does the Net communicator ensure that s/he is producing texts that are true to the situational and generic norms?)

In order to further the cross-disciplinarity, assignments from other courses (from the other blocks) serve as objects of study in the “Written, Oral and Visual” classes. But what is very important in terms of cross-disciplinarity is that students are not merely encouraged to draw upon knowledge, skills and resources from different fields and disciplines when participating in the courses, rather it is a ‘condition sine qua non’ for participating.

Exams

As this course is made up of three spheres of competences – oral, written and visual – all three competences are tried, either individually or in a combination. And when it comes to taking these exams, we find cross-disciplinarity yet again, because the exams attached to this course are always parts of other exams.

It is up to the individual students when s/he wants to be tried in these competences; so the student may choose to make an exam of her/his oral competences part of an exam in, say, “Organizational Psychology” or “Marketing Management”, and her/his written competences part of an exam in “Corporate Communication” and so forth. Or s/he may choose to postpone the exams in these competences till the very end of the programme, combining them with the BA thesis.

In terms of cross-disciplinarity we should once again like to stress that students are not encouraged to merely draw upon knowledge, skills and resources from different fields and disciplines when taking an exam, no, the very fact that they do so – and explicitly so – is a prerequisite for passing that exam.

Summary

In this article we have argued that the kind of cross-disciplinarity which is a result of several disciplines having to deal with the same complex (research) object is the most suitable theoretical framework for designing cross-disciplinary programmes of the type we have presented. The complexity of our object as well as the cross-disciplinary collaboration was exemplified by the development of a specific area: *corporate communication* which is considered a new strategic management tool in today’s companies and

organisations. Furthermore, the complexity of the required coordination was illustrated at three different levels.

- At inter-faculty level, where traditionally unrelated faculties and departments have joined forces in order to reach a common goal.
- At programme level, where different disciplines have been integrated in order to develop new programmes.
- At course level, where the day-to-day teachings in one course as well as its exams have been explicitly interrelated with the content of other courses and their exams.

Putting our programme into a more societal perspective, and looking upon it from an abstract point of view, we think that the competences, which our students acquire during the programme, are very much the same competences on which the idea of life-long learning is built.

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