

Academic hospitality in interdisciplinary education as a form of resistance

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary education is crucial to learning for transformative systems change, which is required as we learn to lean into the climate and nature emergencies. These wicked challenges require space and time for compassionate collaboration across boundaries in a future-fit higher education context. An ethic of hospitality can be understood as inviting guests in unreservedly and creating an opening where they are welcome to arrive as they are (Derrida, 2005; Ruitenberg, 2016). While this may be an unachievable ideal, striving in this direction can stand as valuable resistance to neoliberal perspectives. Based on findings from the Academic Hospitality in Interdisciplinary Education Project – funded by the Research Council of Norway – we draw out key themes that illuminate how contemporary interdisciplinary higher education practices for addressing wicked challenges embody practices and values academic hospitality. We draw upon perspectives from institutional leaders, teachers and students internationally to illuminate the possibilities and constraints.

Full paper

We are currently facing a meta-crisis in which failures to understand how human consciousness is entangled with the global polycrises confound our ability to transcend the Anthropocene. This meta-crisis reflects the ways the many wicked challenges humans face are themselves a product of human-centric embodied ways of being and acting that deny our interbeing with other species and the planet. These wicked challenges include the climate emergency; extensive worldwide biodiversity loss; pandemic risks; conflict; geopolitical instability; and stark inequality (Lawrence et al., 2024; Winkler and Jotzo, 2023). Wicked challenges [i] such as these are characterised by high levels of complexity, uncertainty, and seemingly incompatible worldviews and values of stakeholders (Rittel and Weber, 1973; Veltman et al., 2019).

Interdisciplinary education is central to addressing these wicked challenges (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). This may involve: integration or synthesis; creative friction between disciplines; subordination of one discipline to a project from another discipline or other modes of syncretism (Barry and Born, 2013; Law et al., 2014). In addition to boundaries between disciplines, responding to wicked challenges requires teachers and learners who can work collaboratively across boundaries between academia, policy makers, non-governmental organisations and communities (McCune et al., 2023; Veltman et al., 2019). Being compassionate, caring and hospitable at the edges and boundaries between these communities is uncomfortable but essential.

A care-ethic of hospitality is important for receptive edge and boundary work. This ethic implies radical acceptance and unconditional welcoming of guests whomever they are and whenever they arrive and wherever they hail from (Molz and Gibson, 2007; Ruitenberg, 2016). This evocative concept provides a generative means for us to analyse how interdisciplinary education can subvert, resist, or hospice current dysfunctional systems that sustain the meta-crisis. These collapsing systems involve extractive and neoliberal discourses and practices that frame academics as competitors and students as consumers. Workload allocation models treating academics as resources in service of metrics that ignore the development of teachers and learners as whole persons. Many universities are caught up in numerous tensions between generating income and embracing transformative education, looking after their own balance sheets while not closing their doors to future generations and those least able to pay.

The Academic Hospitality in Interdisciplinary Education Project is led from the University of Oslo in collaboration with The Arctic University of Norway and the Universities of Dublin, Edinburgh, Örebro, and Sydney. Our methodology involved interviews with academics, institutional leaders and administrators about collaboration in interdisciplinary education. We also conducted focus groups with students and teaching observations. We have been analysing our data through the lenses of academic hospitality and the work of Barry and Born (2013) on interdisciplinarity. In this paper we present three cases from our findings that illuminate how interdisciplinary education becomes a space for academic hospitality that can prototype new futures for higher education.

Being hospitable can involve affective welcoming, epistemological openness, honouring guests, and relational ways of being with (Phipps and Barnett 2007; Zemblyas, 2020). In our Örebro setting, the pressures of neoliberalism are mitigated to some extent by a Swedish context in which deliberative, collaborative and trust-based leadership are more in play. The social work and special educational needs teachers in this context worked to read and understand one another's literatures and epistemologies to create hospitable interdisciplinary learning environments. In Sydney, interdisciplinary education, while often seen as being rooted in neoliberal agendas, such as graduate employability and institutional competitiveness, was enacted by engaging students in learning experiences underpinned by democratic values of justice, inclusion and equity. In Edinburgh, there was an emphasis on turning to the *I-Thou* which emphasises honouring our relational nature as human beings, and nurturing the between. Such holding spaces allow teachers and students from diverse disciplines and contexts to explore emergent possibilities by deepening their listening, and learning to relate with greater awareness of the future that is coming into being through us.

By making sense of the experiences and practices that emerge in the liminal spaces between communities and disciplines, we can contribute to imagining better futures for education (Cousquer et al., 2024; Facer, 2020). We need to consider what it feels like to offer and experience hospitality in our educational settings, this is not solely a cognitive endeavour. These discourses of relationality, reciprocity and hospitality challenge imagined futures where neoliberalism pervades most versions of the future and the solutions to the meta-crises are often understood in technologically determinist framings.

[i] We are using 'wicked challenges' rather than the more familiar 'wicked problems' as we feel this is a more productive framing.

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