

Leading for interdisciplinary education: collaboration as transformative resistance

Kristin Ewins¹, Ragnhild Sandvoll², Tone Dyrdal Solbrekke³, Ciaran Sugrue⁴

¹Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden. ²The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway. ³University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway. ⁴University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores the transformative potential of collaboration in interdisciplinary education, drawing on semi-structured interviews with university leaders from Norway, Sweden, and Ireland. It addresses a critical gap in the research by investigating the implications of leadership in navigating the complexities that interdisciplinary education presents amidst entrenched structures and cultures in higher education. The emerging challenge is to resist siloed disciplinary boundaries to transform them into interdisciplinary landscapes of learning and possibilities.

Despite structural and cultural challenges, the paper suggests some ways in which what we call deliberative leadership can nurture interdisciplinary education by harnessing collaboration as a radical act of resistance against existing academic norms and economic constraints. Such leadership requires agency. By advocating for deliberative approaches, including academic hospitality, this research highlights collaboration as a crucial strategy for fostering meaningful educational development.

Full paper

This paper explores the transformative potential of collaboration in interdisciplinary education. The intersection of disciplines within higher education settings is fraught with challenges – political, epistemological, structural, and cultural – which are deeply embedded within the “semantic web” of academia (Frodeman & Klein, 2017, p. 23), including differing purposes, contexts and degrees of integration and interaction. These difficulties are compounded by space-time constraints that often exacerbate the difficulties in managing interdisciplinary initiatives, and systemic support issues where existing administrative systems are frequently ill-equipped to support collaborative, interdepartmental teaching (Bryant et al., 2014). Simultaneously, many university leaders worldwide advocate for interdisciplinary education as a means for addressing wicked problems and other complex sustainability challenges. We are interested in how leaders at all levels of higher education enable interdisciplinary education in this context of conflicting interests, intentions and possibilities.

We draw on empirical data collated within the international research project Academic Hospitality in Interdisciplinary Education, led by the University of Oslo in collaboration with five universities from Europe and Australia. The data comprise observations of interdisciplinary teaching in practice and semi-structured interviews with educational leaders who have formal responsibilities related to interdisciplinarity. These interviews included leaders at various levels: prorectors for education at the macro level, faculty and department leaders at the meso level, and programme leaders and administrators at the micro level. The focus was on the objectives of interdisciplinary education and organisational support. Additionally, teachers and students were interviewed about their experiences with interdisciplinary teaching and learning. We employed an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000) and our analysis was enriched by prior research on leadership in higher education.

We have particularly been inspired by the idea of deliberative leadership – attentive to multiple voices and with public good as an anchoring value – as developed and suggested in Solbrekke and Sugrue (2020) and further developed in Sugrue and Solbrekke (2024) and insights from Barry and Born’s work on interdisciplinarity (2013) to suggest how interdisciplinary education can serve as a transformative space within higher education. For instance, it can act as a site of academic hospitality, where new ideas are welcomed and integrated into a collaborative academic framework (Phipps & Barnett, 2007). This requires a deliberate and transformative leadership capable of addressing and resisting entrenched academic norms (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2020; Mansilla, Feller, & Gardner, 2006).

The paper suggests some ways in which deliberative leadership can nurture interdisciplinary education by harnessing collaboration as a radical act of resistance against existing academic norms and economic constraints. Such leadership requires agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) and a commitment to fostering an environment where interdisciplinary collaboration can thrive despite existing constraints (Power & Handley, 2019). Deliberative leadership plays a critical role in promoting interdisciplinary education through strategies of collaboration and academic hospitality. By advocating for systems that support such educational approaches, leaders can help bridge the gaps between disciplines, fostering richer, more inclusive educational landscapes that anticipate the future needs of higher education.

References

Alvesson, M., & Sköldbberg, K. (2000). *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Barry, A., & Born, G. (2013). *Interdisciplinarity: reconfigurations of the social and natural sciences* (pp. XVI, 278). Routledge.

Bryant, L. H., Niewolny, K., Clark, S., & Watson, C. E. (2014). Complicated Spaces: Negotiating Collaborative Teaching and Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education. *Journal of Effective Teaching* 14(2), 83–101.

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What Is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4), 962–1023.

Frodeman, R., Klein, J. T., & Pacheco, R. C. D. S. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kezar, A. & Elrod, S. (2012). Facilitating Interdisciplinary Learning: Lessons from Project Kaleidoscope. *Change Mag. High. Learn.* 44, 16–25.
- Mansilla, V. B., Feller, I., & Gardner, H. (2006). Quality assessment in interdisciplinary research and education. *Research Evaluation*, 15(1), 69–74.
- Phipps, A. & Barnett, R. (2007). *Academic Hospitality*. Arts Humanities in High. Education, 6, 237–254.
- Power, E. J., & Handley, J. (2019). A best-practice model for integrating interdisciplinarity into the higher education student experience. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(3), 554–570.
- Solbrekke, T. D. and Sugrue, C. (2020). *Leading higher education as and for public good: Rekindling Education as Praxis*. London: Routledge.
- Sugrue, C., & Solbrekke, T. D. (2024). Deliberative leadership: Sustainable practices for public universities? *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, 6(1), 15–42.
- Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2000). *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Barry, A., & Born, G. (2013). *Interdisciplinarity: reconfigurations of the social and natural sciences* (pp. XVI, 278). Routledge.
- Bryant, L. H., Niewolny, K., Clark, S., & Watson, C. E. (2014). Complicated Spaces: Negotiating Collaborative Teaching and Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education. *Journal of Effective Teaching* 14(2), 83–101.
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What Is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4), 962–1023.
- Frodeman, R., Klein, J. T., & Pacheco, R. C. D. S. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kezar, A. & Elrod, S. (2012). Facilitating Interdisciplinary Learning: Lessons from Project Kaleidoscope. *Change Mag. High. Learn.* 44, 16–25.
- Mansilla, V. B., Feller, I., & Gardner, H. (2006). Quality assessment in interdisciplinary research and education. *Research Evaluation*, 15(1), 69–74.
- Phipps, A. & Barnett, R. (2007). *Academic Hospitality*. Arts Humanities in High. Education, 6, 237–254.
- Power, E. J., & Handley, J. (2019). A best-practice model for integrating interdisciplinarity into the higher education student experience. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(3), 554–570.
- Solbrekke, T. D. and Sugrue, C. (2020). *Leading higher education as and for public good: Rekindling Education as Praxis*. London: Routledge.

Sugrue, C., & Solbrekke, T. D. (2024). Deliberative leadership: Sustainable practices for public universities? *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, 6(1), 15–42.