



Kreber , Carolin (Ed.) (2009) *The University and Its Disciplines: Teaching and Learning Within and Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries* . NY: Routledge

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Reviewed by Mark Oromaner
New York City

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In her preface, Carolin Kreber, accurately summarizes a growing awareness among academics and policy makers that . “... in a world characterized by rapid change, complexity and uncertainty, problems do not present themselves as distinct subjects but increasingly within trans-disciplinary contexts, thereby calling for graduate outcomes that go beyond specialized knowledge and skills” (p. xvii). Reflection about the socialization of academics (within disciplines), the reward structure of academia (teaching and publishing within disciplines), and the structure of academic organizations (discipline- based departments) will suggest that this awareness can be quite traumatic and its implications quite revolutionary.

In June 2005, the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment at the University of Edinburgh held a two-day conference on “Teaching and Learning within and beyond Disciplinary Boundaries.” Kreber is the Director of the Centre and Professor of Higher and Community Education at Edinburgh. The five presentations at the Conference came from educational researchers from in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the

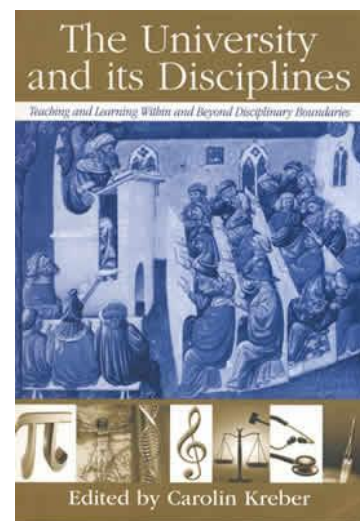
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United States. The volume comprises the presentations, two reactive papers per presentation, two introductory – and two concluding – papers. The focused nature of the Conference and the structure of the book (e.g., reactive papers) result in a tightly knit collection with a fair amount of cross-referencing. All of this is likely to enhance the appeal of *The University and its Disciplines* to education developers, professionals in faculty, staff, & organization-development, or researchers in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Although, as I suggested above, significant issues are raised, I doubt that the audience will be as diverse as Kreber projects (e.g., new and experienced faculty with teaching responsibilities). She does state that the book is very appropriate for courses in teaching and learning in higher education. This may be true, however, as Vicky Gunn asks in her reaction to another paper from the perspective of an “educationalist,” – “Why should we who belong to different disciplines allow another discipline to determine how we might teach?” (p. 172). In addition, the North American - UK university affiliations of the authors of the presentations is likely to limit the audience of the book. For instance, the vast majority of undergraduates in the U.S. attend either a four-year teaching institution or a community college.

The book is divided into seven parts. Kreber contributes both of the introductory papers (Part I). Her major points in the first chapter are that universities increasingly face the dual challenges of preparing students for advanced and specialized study, and for a complex and uncertain post-graduation world. These challenges raise familiar and difficult questions, (e.g., In terms of outcomes, what can be expected of a college graduate? Should there be a common curriculum for all students?). She also makes the valuable distinction between learning “subjects” – what is looked at and learning “disciplines” – what is looked through or with. The former is context-bound and the latter is context-transcendent. More than a few students have done well in a subject but are incapable of applying what they have learned outside of the class. In the second paper Kreber shifts her attention to faculty teaching. She briefly recounts the rise of specialization within the research university, the need to transcend disciplinary silos, and the role of teaching, learning and assessment programs in encouraging and supporting dialogue across disciplines. Together these chapters provide an excellent peek into the underlying issues explored in the remaining papers.



In terms of presentations and reactive papers, I will limit my discussion to the presentations. Interested readers will have to go to the book for the critiques, findings, and insights contained in the ten reactive papers.

In her presentation (“The Commons: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters”) in Part II, Janet Gail Donald, McGill University, reports on her comparative research on teaching and learning in engineering, law, and English. Her “disquieting” finding is the existence of “signature pedagogies.” The implication “... is that teaching and learning may be highly specific to a discipline or program: a ‘university education’ is a non-empirical phenomenon” (p.46). However, all is not lost. There are underlying common thinking processes (i.e., identify the context, recognize organizing principles, change perspectives) that provide the potential for interdisciplinary communication. Donald’s discussion is reminiscent of Thomas S. Kuhn’s (1970) discussion of “paradigms.” In their presentation (“Ways of Thinking and Practicing in Biology and History: Disciplinary Aspects of Teaching and Learning Environments”) in Part III, Dai Hounsell and Charles Anderson of the University of Edinburgh report on their findings from interviews with undergraduate students and faculty. Although their main conclusion parallels that of Donald, i.e., students in different disciplines learn distinct ways of thinking and practicing, they point to the importance of understanding the dynamic processes of interaction and construction by faculty and students. In addition, they argue that these processes must be understood within the constraints of a particular academic environment. In place of a universal approach to the teaching of a discipline, the message here is quite clear, “... development activities are best directed at considering how teaching activities can be carefully crafted to pursue disciplinary practices in ways that are well-tailored to the situation of specific groups of students and what can be achieved in a local setting” (p.78).

Part IV continues the socio-cultural perspective. In their presentation paper (“Guiding Students into a Discipline: The Significance of the Teacher”), Andy Northedge, Open University, and Jan McArthur, Lancaster University, explore the role of the teacher in the new technology/information age. What are the implications of the widespread access to information? Is

the student-teacher relationship necessary? They argue that whatever the model of teaching or technology employed, “(w)hat is critical is to ensure that the teaching context and process allow states of teacher-student intersubjectivity to be achieved” (p.115). A state of intersubjectivity “refers to an activity of mutual meaning making between two or more people,” (p.113). The role of the teacher is to focus the students’ attention and to bring shared assumptions so that they are all paying attention to the same aspect of the world. In Kuhnian terms, to ensure that they are all working within the same paradigm.

In Part V. Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, Miami University, (“Educating Students for Self-Authorship: Learning Partnerships to Achieve Complex Outcomes”), makes a central contribution to the collection with her observation that in order to face the challenges of the transdisciplinary contexts, “(t)hey (graduates) require a transformation from authority dependence to self-authorship, or the capacity to internally define one’s beliefs, identity and social relations” (p.143). This transformation is dependent on the existence of Learning Partnerships (LPs). For faculty this means a change in the definition of their role and that of the student (e.g., defining learning as mutually constructing meaning, situating learning in learners’ experience).

In Part VI, Paul Trowler, Lancaster University, makes the final and most sophisticated theoretical contribution (“Beyond Epistemological Essentialism: Academic Tribes in the Twenty-First Century”). He raises the classical sociological issues of the role of social structures, agency, and power, and questions the position of disciplinary determinism (“Epistemological Essentialism”). Although the importance of power is cited in a number of the papers, it is usually within the context of the faculty-student relationship. Trowler has reminded us that power relationships certainly exist at the department and institutional levels. His theoretical discussion is grounded in his work in South Africa on the merger of four smaller institutions into one.

The final Part (VII) contains two papers. In the first “Assessment for Career and Citizenship” Mantz Yorke, Lancaster University, raises the issue of assessment of outcomes that are not discipline-specific. In the second “Teaching Within and Beyond the Disciplines: The Challenge for Faculty,” Velda

McCune, University of Edinburgh, reviews and summarizes many of the major themes of the collection and their impact on teaching.

Faculty, staff, and administrators who are looking for best practices or teaching tips will not find them here. However, professionals who have the responsibility to ponder the nature of higher education in the twenty - first century will find a provocative and rewarding basis for their work here.

Reference

Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Second Edition) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

About the Reviewer

Mark Oromaner is a retired sociologist whose research on the impact of publications and on the intellectual and social organization of sociology has appeared in numerous journals. He has served on the editorial boards of a number of journals in higher education and sociology, and as book review editor for *The Journal of Staff, Program, & Organization Development*.

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