THE CASE FOR AGREEMENT ABOUT INTERDISCIPLINARITY: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR NICHOLSON'S RESPONSE

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* Professor Nicholson's Contributions to the Nature of Interdisciplinarity *

Professor Nicholson makes several contributions to the on-going discussion about the nature of interdisciplinarity that should not get lost in my comments that follow:

1. "Interdisciplinarity" may indeed prove to be like Wittgenstein's example of "games": we may never find a single definition that encompasses all we wish to include under the term. I agree with her that we may have to settle for similarities instead of universalities. But that is an empirical issue, in my judgment, and one that need not dissuade us from the search for consensus.

2. As we search for consensus, we must beware of becoming intolerant in our pursuit of tolerance. We must not let ourselves become more open to different disciplinary perspectives than we are to differences among interdisciplinarians.

3. Those interdisciplinarians who embrace postmodernism (and I count myself roughly half among them) should be careful about using language that comes out of a foundationalist perspective. Certainly many if not most of us embrace fallibilism, historicism, pragmatism and pluralism (as she suggests), and we should avoid metaphors that conjure up contrary images.

4. More fundamentally, she asks us to place our on-going discussion about the nature of interdisciplinary study in the context of the contemporary epistemological debate between postmodernism and modernism. By doing so, we can clarify how the two discussions relate, and when they do not. And in the

process we should avoid needless confusion and possibly provide new insight into an old debate within interdisciplinary studies by seeing its issues in a new light.

* The Essence of My Disagreement with Professor Nicholson *

We start with a semantic confusion. When she refers to "the interdisciplinary method" she is talking about the structure of knowledge, specifically a foundationalist epistemology. When I use the term, I am talking about a definition, not an epistemology: interdisciplinary study, like science, for example, is defined by a "method" or process, even though there are many different specific "methods" employed by scientists. But unlike mainstream science, there is no consensus among interdisciplinarians about epistemology, and that does not bother me in the least. I am concerned about what we mean when we use the term interdisciplinary study: I have not concerned myself so far about the nature of interdisciplinary knowledge. So at first blush, our differences seem much ado about nothing. She starts from a philosophic issue about knowledge, while I start from a pragmatic concern for the interdisciplinary studies profession – who and what activities should be included, how we are perceived by disciplinarians and how our courses, programs and institutions fare in the disciplinary world of academe.

But we move from those initial concerns to engage common issues, and it is there that our disagreements are substantive not semantic. Professor Nicholson asserts that we can not reach consensus as a profession about the essential nature of interdisciplinary study, nor should we try. She asserts that the route to legitimacy in the eyes of our disciplinary critics is not through consensus of interdiscipiinarians at all, but apparently through letting a thousand flowers bloom and by encouraging their gardeners to talk to each other and by insisting that they use appropriate metaphors during those conversations. In short, our differences become strategic and real when we get beyond the semantic confusion growing out of the differences in our starting points.

It is my contention that, because of her philosophic orientation, Professor Nicholson simply assumes what I am arguing we should try to achieve. In her very language, she presumes what I and others in the Association for Integrative Studies have been working for years to create. Let me make this point by drawing your attention to a number of phrases in her paper. First and most obviously, she uses terms like "interdisciplinary studies" or "interdisciplinarian" throughout as though her audience has some common understanding of which courses or which faculty should come under those headings. Yet that assumption is demonstrabiy false: the term interdisciplinarian is used to mean anything from people engaged in extremely narrow and specialized research in biochemistry to people who teach courses with titles like "The Universe and Its Contents." The term has so little common currency that when we formed this Association in 1979, we called it the

Association for Integrative Studies. And because there are courses out there with the dubious intellectual respectability of my own partly facetious example of "The Universe and Its Contents," the term has quite understandably become a political liability in some quarters. It is my contention that we not only need consensus if the term "interdisciplinary" is to have meaning, but we require critical consensus about good interdisciplinary work if our programs are to have intellectual and political viability. The term must exclude as well as include because some of those thousand flowers are rotting, and others are clearly inferior strains. Without consensus on professional standards as well as definitions, there is no basis for weeding out what are passed off as flowers.

Now that I have set out my concerns, let me proceed with my examination of her language. She cites environmental engineering, women's studies and phenomenology at one point as examples of interdisciplinary fields where valuable work has been done. But on what basis does she decide that they are interdisciplinary? I for one raise my eyebrows (or would, if I had any) at the inclusion of phenomenology. Yet without consensus, who can say her nay? She can plant any flower she wants, call it interdisciplinary, and we must accept the protestation that it is indeed an interdisciplinary field; in fact, its practitioners presumably have equal voice and vote in any discussion that ensues about interdisciplinarity. On a political level, I'm very much concerned about who gets to have a say about the definition, nature and standards of interdisciplinary inquiry.

Professor Nicholson tells us that our open-minded attitude towards diversity is our *raison d'etre*. How does she know that without consensus on what we do? She tells us our knowledge should be located in the "actual practices of (our) community." Yet how do we determine what those practices are when we know not who is in the community. Moreover, are we to take all practices as equally good/useful/worthy of emulation? Have we reached such intellectual sophistication that we have reverted to Perry's stage three – an extreme relativism where every way is as good as any other way, where whatever turns you on is ok? To avoid that condition we need consensus not only at the definitional level but about standards as well. She described objectivity after Rorty as "the best idea we have come up with so far," but she fails to tell us how we identify the "best." Is it by consensus emerging from debate, perhaps? And who gets to participate in the debate – anyone calling her or himself an interdisciplinarian? She says we must embrace postmodernism to avoid defeating our "most important purpose." How does she know what that is? She tells us what our primary responsibilities are as interdisciplinarians. How does she know what they are? She exhorts us to perform "our duties as citizens of the interdisciplinary community." How are we to know what those are, much less which of us is in the community? How we approach interdisciplinary teaching or research – the specific methods we employ and the epistemology underlying them – can usefully vary, as Professor Nicholson correctly

points out, but I submit that we need consensus within the profession about the nature of interdisciplinary study and its standards of excellence, or we do not have a profession.

* How Do   We Reach Consensus on Definitions and Standards? *

1. Interdisciplinarity is defined by process not substance. As one of our members' bumper stickers reads, "Interdisciplinarians do it in every field." Whatever interdisciplinary study has to offer, it can presumably offer it to any problem or issue that is too big for any one discipline to handle, which means in practice most real-world issues. The contribution of interdisciplinary can be thought of as an approach to subject matter, a cluster of habits of the mind, even – I have argued – a series of identifiable steps. Whatever we decide it is that distinguishes the interdisciplinary approach, it seems appropriate to call it a process or a method or even a paradigm. Professor Nicholson's misinterpretation of my references to the interdisciplinary method makes it apparent that we must be careful to specify what we do and do not mean by "method" – a set of defining characteristics, not an epistemology – and to specify that reference to "a" method does not necessarily imply a rejection of postmodernism or the acceptance of modernism.

2. The really interesting question in this discussion is how we do settle on a definition. Like Professor Nicholson, I would reject the suggestion that we borrow our interdisciplinary "principle" from disciplines, but I disagree that we are left without any alternative sources. After all, the disciplines themselves evolved identifying characteristics and professional standards somehow, and even though interdisciplinary studies can not simply borrow these characteristics, we can learn from them how such characteristics develop. Here is where Professor Nicholson's point about disciplines being social and political communities takes on special significance. I see the interdisciplinary principle emanating out of a struggle among scholars who share some common concerns and motivations. That struggle is not only or even necessarily about epistemology; it may not even be about first principles but about end goals. The test of which principle to accept may not be its truth value but its effectiveness in achieving certain objectives.

Let me illustrate this last point because it is central to understanding the discussions during the last half decade within our profession. Some interdisciplinarians denigrate the contributions of the disciplines, seeking to supplant them with interdisciplinary studies, while others seek complementary roles for the disciplines and interdisciplinary studies. Some interdisciplinarians emphasize the use of pre-packaged models of integration such as Marxism, structuralism, phenomenology, or systems theory while others stress the individual, contextual and on-going nature of integration. My personal position has

been to stress complementarity between the disciplines and interdisciplinary studies, and to downplay the significance of pre-packaged models of integration. The reasons I have taken these stands are instructive in the context of this discussion. I have not been guided by some *a priori* sense of the "right" way to do interdisciplinary work; my reason has not been philosophical at all. Rather, my considerations have been political and value-laden. I argue for complementarity because I see the entrenched power of the disciplines and the futility of a direct frontal assault on them. To some extent, I am finding virtue in necessity when I point out the value of reciprocity between specialization and generalization, between analysis and synthesis, between reductionism and holism. After all, many interdisciplinarians recognize that good interdisciplinary scholarship has to be specialized as well: the specialization is simply by topic rather than discipline. And when I argue against pre-packaged models, I am working backwards from some educational outcomes I have observed and value, outcomes like tolerance for ambiguity and diversity that blossoms into a celebration of diversity, like a heightened appreciation for complexity, like mental flexibility and agility, like creativity. Outcomes such as these seem valuable to me in the pluralistic and rapidly-changing world we are entering, and these outcomes are not particularly fostered by employing pre-packaged models of integration while they are, I believe, maximized by struggling to come up with one's own synthesis within the context of each problem. It's not that pre-packaged models are wrong; they are simply less desirable given my value-system. I submit that it is political judgments and personal values more than philosophical analyses that do and should determine the definition of interdisciplinarity and the standards of excellence associated with it.