the journal world

# Elusive Theory and Illusive Practice? Editing *Signs*

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BEING INTERDISCIPLINARY (OR, IN THIS CASE, PRACTICING INTERDISCIPLINARITY AS EDITOR OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL) is, as Stanley Fish remarked, "so very hard to do" (15). Writing about it for *PMLA*, a disciplinary journal for those involved in teaching literature, feels abnormal, as if I had retreated into the world of my original training, albeit under some other guise. For as a feminist scholar who is by definition bound to interdisciplinary approaches to her work, as a Germanist trained fairly narrowly in a discipline, and as a woman who by no means thinks that interdisciplinarity or feminism is sufficiently present in the academy, I am nothing if not ambivalent.

Interdisciplinarity is hardly a new issue, and for some time it has been a site of considerable contestation. It has been viewed as grossly politically correct and as practically useful, depending on one's viewpoint. It has been touted as necessary for understanding a complex world. It has offered a refuge for feminists and others attacking the rigidity of the academic disciplinary structure. It has also been considered synonymous with holistic thinking, with hybridization and border crossings, with a synthesis of theory and practice. It has been applied as a descriptive label for newer disciplines like women's studies or cultural studies. And it has been misused by those who really mean multidisciplinarity or area studies or what used to be known as integrative studies.

So—if interdisciplinarity appears to be everything in the academic world nowadays, is it then conceptually nothing? And how can one possibly talk about it? Faced with this problem of articulation, I choose instead to become concrete by describing the editing of an interdisciplinary journal—*Signs*, which, in a deliberately interdisciplinary move, I coedited with Barbara Laslett, a sociologist, at the University of Minnesota from 1990 to 1995.

Our daily practice of interdisciplinarity rapidly made theorizing superfluous. For example, constant negotiations were needed in working with a board of associate editors from a variety of fields who were asked to read and judge manuscripts that usually were not closely related to their specializations. This demanded attention and care by the writers of the

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manuscripts, who knew that the nature of *Signs* required them to transmit their ideas in ways that a diverse audience could understand, as well as by the evaluator-readers. In turn, there were interesting experiments in reading that took for granted the disciplinary base of the editors and associate editors as they reviewed manuscripts but that demanded a stretching of their minds beyond disciplinary strictures. In other words, our practice of interdisciplinarity acknowledged the complexities of such efforts but at the same time recognized the fluidity of boundaries and searched for possibilities for collaborative thinking.

Despite the aim of *Signs* to appeal to readers of all fields, the journal has had little success in creating an audience that will read interdisciplinarily—that is, across disciplines. In fact, when we asked subscribers what they read in a given issue, they revealed themselves to be the antithesis of that audience, for we learned that they invariably sought out articles that appeared, in one way or another and despite the authors' interdisciplinary aims, to address their specializations. Readers did not seem at all interested in articles from disciplines unrelated to their own. They tended to see the journal exclusively from their disciplinary perspectives and most often as lacking—as "too social-science-oriented" (if they were in humanities fields) or "too humanities-oriented" (if they were social scientists). I doubt that this is simply a matter of jargon difference: this is the metalanguage of disciplinarity asserting itself and controlling and limiting what interests us, even in an environment explicitly dedicated to interdisciplinary work.

Even where we as editors thought that we were bridging gaps and creating broader connections, we sometimes found ourselves falling into the same traps. For a series of dual book reviews, for example, we asked representatives of two disciplines—in one instance, English and public administration; in another, literary scholarship and sociology—to read and comment on the same set of new books on a particular topic. Yet as we ruefully said in the last editorial we wrote, we found ourselves asking one or the other reviewer to highlight her discipline-specific reflections more than she had in the review she submitted. As we realized, "Quite unconsciously, we were reconstructing the very distinction between the social sciences and literary studies that feminist scholarship was committed to overcoming" (Laslett and Joeres 510–11).

As always, much of what impeded and troubled us had to do with language, for practicing interdisciplinarity means, on the most basic level, facing the impossibility of being completely fluent in more than one language. In addition, even as we try to acquire multiple fluencies, we always risk garnering the contempt of other disciplines, being accused of slumming, or, for that matter, hearing the self-critical internal voices Lillian Robinson hears: borrowing from Virginia Woolf, Robinson writes of the "angel in the house . . . who sounds more like the bank robot reciting my inadequate balance than any imaginable angel—[and who] scornfully inflates my attempts to use the insights of other disciplines into delusions of polymath grandeur" (278).

This sense of disparate worlds has to do not only with the explication of terms but also with methodological and theoretical concepts that are disciplinary. In the process of interdisciplinarity, these concepts become adapted—taken over, appropriated, and revised to be useful in the new location. That work may be creative, but there is no guarantee that it will seem flattering or indeed acceptable to the discipline whose method is appropriated. In practical terms, *Signs* board meetings of editors and associate editors, although fascinating and exhilarating, nevertheless were most often conducted in a Babel of dialects that required constant explication and frequently resulted less in enlightenment than in multiple misunderstandings.

Feminism and interdisciplinarity alike stress collaboration. The absolute requirement of interdisciplinary work, after all, is that we remain comprehensible to those trained in other disciplines, and this requirement demands that we use

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a common language. Feminism's political roots demand the same accessibility, well beyond the academic world. But that accessibility seems virtually impossible to me, especially if our aim is to speak to larger audiences. Academicspeak is never easily comprehensible, partly because it requires precision, which sometimes means the invention of complex terminology that can best describe what we are pinpointing and elucidating, and partly because simplification risks becoming simplistic and inaccurate. But if we cannot understand each other's jargon, how can we possibly expect to be understandable (let alone interesting and useful) to those outside the academy even though a stated aim of interdisciplinary and feminist work is to bring together a variety of disciplines in an effort to solve social and cultural problems? Yet when I composed an editorial along these lines for *Signs*, the response, although fairly positive, included extremely negative reactions, ranging from accusations that my argument was a simplistic display of subjectivity to a reading of my plea for accessible language as politically reactionary.[1]

For Barbara Laslett and me, it was self-evident that our assumption of the editorship of *Signs* was an interdisciplinary move. But all our efforts to achieve interdisciplinarity seemed additive, concerned with matters of form and structure, and in that way mostly peripheral. Interdisciplinarity, we discovered, at least in the theory and practice of a feminist academic journal, may well complement the feminist insistence on the breaking down of boundaries, but its practice is illusive, as vague and conflicted as its many theories.

And yet those five years editing *Signs* were the most exhilarating I have experienced in my academic career. For one thing, I suspect that my own intellectual struggles over representation, although stemming in large part from the identity-politics battles being waged during the years of *Signs*'s residence in Minnesota, were nevertheless clarified and made precise because I was witnessing and participating in those debates, hearing (if not always understanding) the different languages that interdisciplinary discussions elicit. I am convinced that we all learned to think more exactly about the politics and problems of location, exemplified by the many locations of our editorial group. And I do not believe that we were dilettantish in our forays into other disciplines. We had more often than not a sense that we were all working together, sharing what we could, contributing where we could, and, above all, learning to listen. In the end, then, there were valuable interactions of many sorts, contentious, incomplete, frustratingly slippery, but perhaps that is the nature of interdisciplinary efforts. Like all academics, we theorize more than we practice—we may well assume that we can expound and it will all come to pass. But sometimes, and mostly in spite of ourselves, we make progress toward each other. So journals like *Signs* actually end up functioning after all, elusive, or illusive, as the theory and practice of interdisciplinarity may be.

## Notes

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[1] See Joeres. For the response of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, see McMillen.

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