

**'Disciplinarity'**  
**A One-Day Symposium on the History and Future of Academic Disciplines**  
**20<sup>th</sup> April 2012**  
**School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester**

Humans, as a species, seem to have a desire to categorise. This extends not just to the inanimate objects around them, but to themselves and the things they do – personally as well as professionally. The Academy, which breaks up learning and knowledge into defined chunks, is a prime example, and it was those chunks which formed the basis for Representing Re-formation's symposium on 'Disciplinarity', held at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012.<sup>1</sup> Convened by Ross Parry, this conversational – and at times controversial – event dealt with a number of issues in regard to the past, present and future of those discrete packages of understanding that are the 'academic disciplines'.

But why a symposium on disciplinarity? Why here, and why now? There is no doubt that 'interdisciplinarity' is something of a buzz word in the contemporary university, and of course it lies at the heart of Representing Re-formation. But, as Ross noted, Museum Studies is one subject area which has long understood and appreciated its own interstitial disciplinary position. In RAEs of the past, academics working in this department have often been split up, in order to fit into the Assessment's predefined frameworks, and hence have become very self-reflexive, individually, and as a collective. From a personal point of view, this is unsurprising. Given that the object – the museum – is such a naturally diverse, one might say liminal, institution, one which is perhaps descended from the polyvalent temple to the Muses – the Musaeum<sup>2</sup> – it, and it's associated '-ology' may have much value in dissecting and questioning the current model of Higher Education in the UK.

Indeed, as Dr. Phillip Lindley's introduction to Representing Re-formation made clear, it is from such questioning that that project, and thus this symposium, generated. Representing Re-formation, funded by a grant from the Science and Heritage Programme,<sup>3</sup> is imbued with interdisciplinary tendencies – from its origins, through its activities, right up until its final output. Akin to others represented at the symposium this project naturally raises the problematic spectre of disciplinarity, most directly, perhaps, in the concept of Heritage Science. It was this concept, so clearly marrying subjects from the sciences and the arts, which provided the launching point for the day's initial discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Representing Re-formation Events, 'Disciplinarity,' <http://representingreformation.net/get-involved/events/disciplinarity/>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>2</sup> Paula Findlen, 'The museum: its classical etymology and Renaissance genealogy', in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, (London: Ashgate, 2004), pp.159-191, p.161

<sup>3</sup> In 2005-2006, Baroness Sharp of Guildford chaired a House of Lords Select Committee Inquiry into Science and Heritage, which focussed on sustainability in national Cultural Heritage, and a separate interest in digital technologies. Discovering that there were distinct disjunctures between these spheres of research, and that the DCMS had little provision for sustainability at that time, the committee made three recommendations 1. That the DCMS appoint a chief scientist and give explicit recognition to need for conservation, 2. That the Arts and Humanities Research Council to act as champion for Heritage Science and set up a joint research programme with the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, 3. That the Community should work together to develop a national strategy for Heritage Science. As a result, in 2007 the AHRC and EPSRC set up a joint initiative, the Science and Heritage Programme, to take forward some of these recommendations. The initiatives of the programme include ten Collaborative Research Studentships, Thirteen research clusters, eight Post-doctoral fellowships, and seven major interdisciplinary grants, including that which funds Representing Re-formation. Science and Heritage Programme, 'Homepage', <http://www.heritagescience.ac.uk/>, as of 24 April 2012

Ross's question as to whether we can truly speak of a discipline of Heritage Science seemed to initially be answered in the affirmative. When sitting in a room with DART's Dr. Anthony Beck,<sup>4</sup> Professor Vincent Gaffney of VISTA<sup>5</sup>, Dr. Turi King of the Viking DNA project<sup>6</sup> and of course the team from Representing Re-formation, it was hard to think otherwise. But the situation, as ever, is not so simple. In problematising the term 'Heritage Science', and positing that it might be considered a contrivance, even a brand, Ross opened the floor to a discussion which ranged from the historical to the political and social.

As Robert Bud, Keeper of Science and Medicine at the Science Museum London<sup>7</sup> made plain, we are contriving the world all the time. The ways in which we frame the world with epistemological and ontological questions are obviously manufactured products of particular temporal and geographical milieu. Some of these conceptions last longer than others, and indeed it is important to remember that the collaborative, and at times antagonistic, relationship between sciences and heritage has a long history. This is a history which continues today, in institutions such as the TATE<sup>8</sup> with its population of curators, conservators, designers and art historians. Yet it is not just in academic life, nor in the subjects it defines, in which the notion of interdisciplinarity makes its presence felt. It is apparent not simply in Science and Heritage, but in everyday life, for, as Mark Rawlinson, Academic Director of the College of Arts, Humanities and Law at Leicester, stated, in the act of typing and formatting a word document, in some of the smallest and most mundane activities, each and every human being can be situated at an interdisciplinary nexus. But as he also pointed out, if there is anywhere this fact should be taken advantage of, it should be in the University.

At this point there was a risk that the discussion might become too broad ranging. It became apparent, then, that we needed to be more precise in our definitions, to grapple with what we meant by 'disciplinarity', 'interdisciplinarity', and their associated terms; and it was exactly this question to which the next part of the symposium, entitled 'Disciplinarity', turned.

### On 'Disciplinarity'

Where, then, did the demarcated boundaries at issue in the symposium have their origin? Ross provided perhaps the earliest evidence of the Arts-Science divide by invoking Plato's Simile of the Cave.<sup>9</sup> In that cave, shadows are cast upon a wall, shadows which merely represent a fragmentary, partial and deceptive image of reality. Some inhabitants of the cave are fascinated by the shadows, but others are compelled to move back, to try to progress towards a more holistic and complete vision of the world: in this hierarchical gradation, Ross suggested, can be found an analogy of the split between the arts and the sciences, the legacy of which we still live with today.

The classical influence very clearly played out in the Medieval University. Varro's encyclopaedia, *Nine Books of Disciplines*, exercised influence not only upon his Roman contemporaries, but upon

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<sup>4</sup> the DART Project 'Homepage' <http://dartproject.info/WPBlog/>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>5</sup> VISTA: Visual and Spatial Technology Centre, 'Homepage' <http://www.vista.bham.ac.uk/news.html>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>6</sup> University of Leicester, 'Projects: The Impact of Diasporas: The Viking DNA Project,' <http://www2.le.ac.uk/projects/impact-of-diasporas/diasporas-projects/surnames-and-the-y-chromosome/the-viking-dna-project/the-viking-dna-project>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>7</sup> Science Museum 'Homepage,' <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>8</sup> TATE, 'Homepage,' <http://www.tate.org.uk/>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>9</sup> Plato, 'The Simile of the Cave', in *The Republic*, trans. Melissa Lane, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), Part VII, Book VII, pp.240-248

the early schools of the West.<sup>10</sup> Omitting Varro's last two disciplines, medicine and architecture, those who followed used his list to develop the Trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and musical theory).<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the period, however, these distinctions shifted and changed, and by the Renaissance, individuals such as Da Vinci regularly transcended the boundaries of the Liberal Arts and their more recent companions, moral and natural philosophy and metaphysics, and the 'advanced studies' of medicine, law and theology.

That period, of course, also saw the Scientific Revolution, the increasing divergence of 'Science' from 'Philosophy', and the fall of 'Natural Philosophy' as the search for a deistic explanation of the universe. The rise of learned institutions such as the Royal Society, and the Society of Antiquaries, indicated increasing scholarly polarisation, which would continue with the development of university bureaucracy at the end of the nineteenth century. This, Robert Bud suggested, was compounded by the importation of Kant's distinction between transcendental and empirical modes of understanding<sup>12</sup> – a distinction still seen in mathematics in the division of pure from applied.

Individual disciplines themselves have their own, often radically different histories, which we need to understand in order to negotiate their present and future status. In was in this direction that Ross steered the conversation, resulting in a fascinating set of tales from Jennifer Mundy, Phillip Lindley, Mark Rawlinson, Stephen Garrett and Helen Wilkinson, relating the lineages of Art History, English, Mathematics and Museum Studies. A number of issues arose from this discussion. Not the least of these was the deficit in historical knowledge amongst many academics regarding their own disciplines and the resultant lack amongst students; particularly in the case of Mathematics and English. This lack is a particular oddity in the social sciences – a set of studies predicated upon cultural investigation and understanding. Such paucity increases the difficulty of understanding the formation – and indeed the failure – of other disciplines, now and in the future.

This lack of historical knowledge raises an interesting question regarding personal disciplinary identity. Can an individual be said to belong to a discipline – and if so, does it really matter? There is little doubt that for many discussants, clear disciplinary identity was fundamental. Robert Bud, for one, thought that association with a field of study was critical for early stage academics embarking upon their careers, and indeed a strong identity has coloured the career of Lisa Ford at the Yale Center for British Art<sup>13</sup> to such an extent that she has been explicitly identified as 'the Historian', and still feels personally, and professionally, associated with history and its methods.

This notwithstanding, Lisa noted that it is strange to categorise people just to give them a career. There were certainly a number present who would not identify themselves as belonging to a single discipline – if indeed to any discipline at all. Anthony Beck certainly considers himself to be without a discipline – having taken 'Combined Studies' at Newcastle, he now works on projects and research which interest him – no matter which traditional field they might fall into. Adair Richards, Advocate for Representing Re-formation, identifies as interdisciplinary, but notes also that there can be serious issues in doing so. It can be difficult to publish, and problematic to situate yourself within university systems predicated upon existing academic demarcations. It is easy to feel like an outsider and even an imposter in such environment. Speaking personally, I would argue that the entanglement between discipline and person which was sometimes displayed at this symposium is problematic. Whilst I do not believe disciplines to be fixed, concrete extants, I maintain that they

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<sup>10</sup> David Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. to A.D. 1450*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.138

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.138

<sup>12</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge UP, 1998), *passim*

<sup>13</sup> Yale Center for British Art, 'Homepage,' <http://britishart.yale.edu/>, as of 24 April 2012

exist – however virtually and contingently – but that they do so *independently* of the people who use them. Human beings exist outside the tools they use to remodel and make the world. I have studied a number of disciplines and learned their contents and techniques, but have tried not to let myself be defined or limited by them.

Disciplines, then, are useful to an extent – they have a historical background and originate, it seems, often for reasons of need – as is indeed the case with Museum Studies, which as Helen noted was the product of a practical sector of work. Each discipline provides their own useful tools for understanding bits of the world; each creates methodologies, specialist knowledges, and useful identifying factors for individuals encountering the job market. But they can also become ghettoised and limited, too easily antagonistic towards each other, and they can build up dangerous value-laden hierarchies. Plato, after all, would not allow poets into his Republic.

Disciplines are not fixed quantities, and there are certain extants – conscious or otherwise – which exist in the interstices between them. It was, then, to the products which manifest, and the people like Anthony and Adair who work at these interstices which the second main discussion of the day, 'Interdisciplinarity', turned.

### Interdisciplinarity: Something to be Sought?

As there are benefits and costs to disciplinary working, so too are there gains and losses in defining, and working with, interdisciplinary individuals, departments and projects. To open this second session, Ross turned once again to his collaborators, asking the delegates present to describe their experiences of interdisciplinary working, both positive and negative. For, as he said, if we are to make projects such as Representing Re-formation and DART as successful as possible, then we need to understand the triumphs – and the failures – of previous attempts.

Turning first to one of the Representing Re-formation team, Ross asked Lisa Ford to describe her experiences at the Yale Center for British Art. Her degree in Tudor political history made her, she said, a 'strange creature' at the Center. She was seen as 'the real historian,' an individual who brought discipline *into* the institution. Largely populated by art historians, conservators and museum technicians, it seems that YCBA found a great deal of value in employing someone of a different discipline who could bring a fresh perspective to the objects and research in their care.

But can this really be classified as interdisciplinarity? Professor Gaffney pointed out that it is too easy for individuals to identify themselves as interdisciplinary, and to see disciplines too loosely as 'areas which don't matter' defined by 'lines that don't exist'. Problematic implications arise from such ways of thinking, for academics may risk losing clarity regarding what they do, and therefore, perhaps, rigour in enacting it. Lisa's comment on 'Visual Culture' as a disciplinary definition seemed to imply as much. We use this broad term, she suggested, because we do not quite know how to describe the combined study of history and image, and, she went on to say, we use the term 'culture' in a hugely broad sense when we, as academics, study combinations of subjects and methods whose relationships we don't entirely understand. This is potentially a huge issue, for it is important, as Professor Gaffney noted, that we are able to define where distinctions and differences lie. All models of understanding the world are, he suggested, wrong and incomplete. But they are so in different ways, and it is understanding where those deficits can advantageously intersect, and communicating the result, which is the true essence of interdisciplinarity.

So, Ross asked, what are the risks of interdisciplinarity as a concept too loosely and unthinkingly applied? Is it justifiable, for instance, to see those who claim to work in this way as adopting a superficial and selective approach to academic tools and theories? Might this actually inhibit the work of themselves and others, and indeed lead to the reduction, misappropriation and

misinterpretation of strategies grounded in particular disciplines? As Robert Bud noted, the constitution of an explanation varies between disciplines, and the results of one field of study may not satisfy the conditions of another. As Anthony Beck noted, one of the major problems in working in combination is indeed that of communication. Different fields of study and even related disciplines have different languages and rhetorics which do not always sit easily side by side.

It is also crucial, as Professor George Fraser noted, to remember that, for whatever reason, there are antagonisms between associated and divergent disciplines, the seriousness of which should not be underestimated. To present physics as a single discipline, for instance, is hugely reductive, for there are quite distinct differences, and at times intense rivalries, between its sub-fields. Astrophysics and Planetary Science are particularly illustrative of such hostilities. The most important thing to remember, however, is to be communicative and accepting, to realise that, whilst you can never be an expert in every subject, the problems studied and solutions posited by those within subjects outside your personal sphere are, at the least, as important and interesting as yours. Though there are different rhythms and cultures of work in different disciplines, even different departments of ostensibly the same discipline, and though university and funding systems may not be set up for interdisciplinary working, the vital element is conversation. Yet there is, in some quarters, a reticence about opening up those lines of communication. There is a fear of dilution within certain extant academic disciplines, claimed Alex Moseley, an inherent conservatism compounded by university bureaucracy and procedure. This is certainly a major challenge common to those who work interdisciplinarily. It also raises a fundamental issue; if you consider yourself and your work to be inter- or even a-disciplinary, it becomes much harder to build a strong and deep knowledge base from which to work, and difficult, too, to establish the tools and theories you need to create a perspective upon this, and other, pools of information.

So, asks Ross, where have these difficulties been transcended; where has communication worked, where, when and why have projects been successful?

Jennifer Mundy noted that the possibilities for such projects are indeed positive – and that there can be huge successes in working in such a collaborative way. However, she treats the term 'interdisciplinary' with a certain amount of caution. Within TATE, many projects are run through the combination of individuals with vastly different sets of expertise and experience, such as their current 'Art Maps' project with the University of Nottingham,<sup>14</sup> which combines the skills of computer programmers, scientists, conservators, curators, art historians and educators. Jennifer therefore considers it to be multi- rather than inter-disciplinary, a model which she believes most workplaces are moving towards. Yet for the best part of a century, if not longer, industrial research laboratories and much of the museum sector have naturally operated such cultures. On the whole, as Robert Bud pointed out, it was, and is the employment of good experts, with deep and specialised knowledge which made, and will make, such projects viable. In this case, it is not the individuals themselves which are interdisciplinary, but that the issues upon which they focus may be studied in a variety of different ways.

Susan Leigh Starr, as Nicola Beddall-Hill reminded us, named such issues 'boundary objects'. Intangible or concrete, such objects 'inhabit several intersecting social worlds', and are both 'plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.'<sup>15</sup> It is with such boundary objects that the

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<sup>14</sup> TATE, 'Art Maps,' <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/art-maps>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>15</sup> Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer 'Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39', *Social Studies of Science*, 19(3), (August 1989), pp.387-420, p.393



Research Centre for Museums and Galleries<sup>16</sup> works, as Ceri Jones highlighted. Her conception of RCMG is as a place which seeks to 'use the best people to solve the problem at hand'. The Research Centre doesn't, she suggested, think of itself in terms of discipline and as Ross pointed out, it is not disciplines which are discussed in its meetings, but problems and issues – the boundary objects which spur the formation of new multiply experienced teams. Neither, Ceri noted, is it always RCMG which sets those boundary objects up and assembles teams around them. Indeed, on the recent *Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens* study, BGCI approached RCMG as a group with particular strategic expertise thought valuable for re-establishing and developing the social role of botanic gardens.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Stephen Garrett sees his own area of research, fluid mechanics, as a problem-based field. He thinks of himself as a physical scientist, though he is currently placed within the University of Leicester's Department of Mathematics.<sup>18</sup> Internationally, fluid mechanics is positioned in a number of different departments and schools, from physics to engineering, so perhaps it is natural that for Stephen, it is not discipline which is at issue, but the solving of particular problems. The solving of such problems, he emphasised, has always historically been done through bringing experts together in dialogue. Communication, then, remains at the heart of interdisciplinary working.

In wrapping up this part of the discussion, Ross pulled together a number of threads. We should, he highlighted, always remain mindful of the risks involved in talking about 'interdisciplinarity'. We need to remain aware that there is a distinction between individuals, subject areas and projects, and that to indiscriminately accord each of these parts collective 'interdisciplinary' status may well reduce this distinction. It is crucial to remember, also, the differences between the languages and cultures of departments and disciplines, that there are longstanding rivalries impossible to ignore. Perhaps, then, we should learn to think instead in terms of multidisciplinary, to value the importance of specialist knowledges and methods, and to be emotionally and socially intelligent enough to communicate sensitively and productively when the boundaries of experience and expertise collide.

What, then, are the implications of our discussions today? What is the future – what is next for disciplines, for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary projects? Can we entertain the notion of a post-disciplinary world?

### Post-disciplinarity: Future Speculation or Future Reality?

In her book *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill referred to the post-museum – a place in which 'multiple subjectivities and identities can exist', a place which invokes emotion and in which many voices are heard.<sup>19</sup> This, as Ross noted, is a concept which pushes existing boundaries, both physical and conceptual, much like the investigations and discussions which the symposium itself raised. Museum Studies itself was born in an age after the strict traditional academic disciplines were carved out; so can it, and the world in which we find ourselves at the present moment therefore be considered 'post-disciplinary'? In order to answer this question it is crucial to consider the present and future state of our current disciplines, and it was this subject which came next to the floor. Will, Ross asked, our current disciplines retreat, retrench, and re-strengthen their boundaries? Will they dissolve into a fuzzy chaos of post-disciplinarity? Or

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<sup>16</sup> Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, 'Welcome to RCMG,' <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>17</sup> BGCI Education Centre, 'Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens: towards a new social purpose,' <http://www.bgci.org/education/socinc/>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>18</sup> University of Leicester, Department of Mathematics, 'Fluids,' <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/mathematics/research/fluids-1/fluids?searchterm=fluid%20mechanics>, as of 24 April 2012

<sup>19</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.140-144

will something much less extreme, and perhaps more positive, result?

We shall always, as Steven Gunn noted, have 'History'. People will always remain interested in the past. 'History' satisfies a social need; it has a role not just in providing public entertainment, but is also critically important for the establishment and negotiation of national and personal identity. Yet there are those subjects which are often seen as less directly of relevance or interest to everyday life – mathematics, for instance. As far as Stephen Garrett is concerned, mathematics will always be around in some form – it is, after all, the language of science. But how 'pure' and abstract it will remain as a subject in its own right is open to question. There is an increasing tendency to invest in courses and research which promote practical, visible, economic results, and Dr. Garrett is not blind to the possible future of maths being one in which it remains a subsidiary tangent in the context of something else; economics, business, or politics, perhaps. What, then, of art history, a discipline which has already seen massive change in the recent past. As Phillip Lindley stated, academic art history suffered from reification, surrounded as it was – and, I would argue, in some areas still is – with unsavoury hierarchical and commercial connotations. But institutions such as TATE Modern have done much to revolutionize that image, and open up discourses with those who might previously have felt themselves disenfranchised.

In the last few decades, since the rise of the New Museology in particular, museums and their associated organizations have become increasingly transparent and discursive spaces.<sup>20</sup> There is much for the Academy to learn from this. Anthony Beck emphasised the value of Open Science and Open Access publication. The impact of the worldwide web has yet to fully resonate on a social and educative level, yet Anthony believes that by opening up theory and practice, by engaging in crowdsourcing and citizen science, by using the geographically collapsed space of the web to find microexpertise, we can complicate and enrich our presently more limited data.

The concept of Open Access propelled the delegates into a fierce debate. Frank James in particular was eager to present the opposing case. Open Publication, he stated, may look good and may satisfy certain politically correct agendas, but the impact upon small learned societies and individual researchers might well be immense. Small academic organisations which see the majority of their income come from journal publications could well fall away, and if researchers put early drafts and work in progress into the public sphere, then their reputations and expertise might well be tarnished.

Anthony's response was swift. Knowledge systems and the societies around them change, he said, and if learned societies began to falter it would be because they no longer serve a useful or necessary function. Taking on Frank's other point he clarified the definition of Open Access. It does not, he stated, mean that all researchers should be forced to be entirely transparent throughout their research process; this is obviously of particular importance in cases where research is morally sensitive. Rather, as he made plain, Open Access and Open Scholarship are about making research results as widely available as possible, and as rapidly as is viable. As the DART Publication Strategy states,<sup>21</sup> this means being committed to dissemination not just in academic circles, but in more popular, publicly available forums – this, not untrammelled, unmediated production, is what is meant by Open Access.

Robert Bud agreed that such a desire for openness is all very well, but that the authority of the informational sources must be maintained. Open Access must mean that legitimate, authentic and reliable information is clearly distinguished from that which is more suspect. When developing the Brought to Life website for the Wellcome Trust,<sup>22</sup> the Science Museum initially wanted to open it

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Vergo, 'Introduction', in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1989) pp.1-5, p.3

<sup>21</sup> the DART Project, 'Publication Strategy', [http://dartproject.info/WPBlog/?page\\_id=1704](http://dartproject.info/WPBlog/?page_id=1704), as of 24 April 2012

<sup>22</sup> Science Museum, 'Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine,' <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife>, as of 24 April 2012

up to public contributions from its primary target audience – schoolchildren, and those associated with them. But it was, in fact, sectors of that very population which objected to this openness. As far as a number of teachers and parents were concerned, by asking for crowd-sourced contributions in this way, the Wellcome Trust and the Science Museum were violating their status as expert and trustworthy sources of information. As Vincent Gaffney noted, the risk in this is not just that institutions lose their credibility, but that those who wish to learn become swamped in a sea of data in which the reliable and more spurious become increasingly difficult to distinguish.

At this point Professor Gaffney brought another debate to the table by questioning the legitimacy of an individual choosing to describe themselves as purely interdisciplinary. Adair Richards certainly identifies as such, and in his response claimed that working in an interdisciplinary environment required particular skills and a breadth of abilities, which somewhat counter-intuitively might be deemed a specialisation in itself. Facilitating skills and knowledge development, however, is different from actually participating in them and understanding their results. As Professor Gaffney noted, he might work with computer graphics designers, with architects and artists, might facilitate their research and perhaps even be permitted to use their equipment, but he cannot claim to be able to do what they do. It may well be the case that institutional and disciplinary boundaries are moving and making new connections all the time – but we must recognise this as significantly different from any one individual claiming to be interdisciplinary themselves.

Jason Eyre, Lecturer in Learning Development at De Montfort University, then sought to bring some synthesis and closure to the debate. Whilst being somewhat sympathetic to Adair, he maintained that it remains critical to have some kind of ontological and epistemological identity by means of which you may build a view upon the world and a language with which to talk about it. Teaching students from across a variety of disciplines has shown him that each individual inculcates themselves into a particular ontological framework, and that it doesn't matter what this framework actually is, as long as its limitations, flaws and presumptions are recognised. Only then, he claimed, can individuals function successfully in an interdisciplinary context.

In light of all these debates, Ross pointed out the importance of future speculation. Where will disciplines as we understand them individually and generally today, be in ten, twenty, fifty or one hundred years time? Turning to the Mark Rawlinson, he asked whether disciplinary silos will continue to exist, or whether they will become irrelevant if not actively discouraged. But CAHL's director resisted the lure of futurological speculation, claiming that, given the paucity of our general knowledge about the history, formation and change of the disciplines we currently have, to make such predictions would be presumptive and inappropriate, particularly given that we live in an environment in which the University has seen massive growth, and distinctive changes in the ratio of subjects studied.

Ross also recognised that the day had been framed within a very Western paradigm of disciplinarity, and that it would be worthwhile to have the debate in a situation, post-colonial or otherwise, outside the Eurocentric hegemony. To alleviate this issue to a certain degree, he turned toward students from China, including Changying Shen, a visiting Fellow from Beijing Foreign Studies University,<sup>23</sup> who informed the delegation that interdisciplinarity is as hot a topic there as it is in the West. It remains open, however, as to whether this is the case in every circumstance, and indeed whether it will be so in every temporal locale.

Perhaps the best way to answer, to some extent, these questions, is to turn towards those just at the cusp of their careers, for one of the objectives of the Science and Heritage Programme is to

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<sup>23</sup> Beijing Foreign Studies University, English Homepage, <http://en.bfsu.edu.cn/index.html>, as of 24 April 2012



train young researchers and build capacity.<sup>24</sup> To that end, Ross placed the attending postgraduates, Masters and Doctoral, under the spotlight, asking what sense they had of the relevance of the disciplinary debate to themselves and their future prospects. For Catharina Hendrick the issue was a pragmatic one. Both disciplinary grounding and interdisciplinary working will be crucial, she believes. As she stated, amongst academics there is an individualist tendency to defend and possess core specialist knowledges and skills; but no researcher is ever an island, and the ability to collaborate and share is a fundamental way in which the academy continually enriches itself.

Likewise, Representing Re-formation's PhD researcher Nishad Karim doesn't see a future without disciplines. She likes the notion of interdisciplinarity, but suggests that it will, in fact, be multidisciplinary working which will provide the valuable knowledge gains in the future. We should never devalue the deep expertise in any given field, and as Professor Gaffney had noted earlier in the day, it should be remembered that developments in understanding occur within disciplines as well as at their borderlands. For Nishad, the critical factor is getting experts to collaborate and communicate in pursuit of a common goal. To situate an individual as truly interdisciplinary is impossible in the contemporary world, she claimed, for the 'Renaissance Man' belonged to an intellectual milieu in which that which was and could be known about the world was much more circumscribed.

Petrina Foti, a recent doctoral recruit to the School of Museum Studies, claimed not to think of herself as part of a discipline, considering herself to be much more problem oriented. That is not to say, however, that she believes herself to be interdisciplinary *per se*, nor that she would consider disciplines as lacking in value. Like Dr. Rawlinson, she has no idea as to where the future will take her, and the academy – except, hopefully, onto the next project of interest.

It is, as Ross noted, important to bear in mind that long term future, no matter how indeterminate it may be. But what had the symposium brought its attendees in a more immediate sense? During the course of the day, we uncovered a number of large issues. Not the least of these was the awareness that it is a variety of factors which build interdisciplinary – or multidisciplinary – collaborations, including individual drive, serendipity and the contentious issues of politics and funding.

It is important to think historically and remember that contemporary disciplines originated in a variety of places and periods, and for diverse reasons. Both isolated disciplines and more collaborative methods of working have their own advantages and disadvantages – for research and teaching, for the establishment and development of careers, for the building and questioning of expertise and ontological frameworks – and too strong an emphasis on either brings with it significant risks. Underlying all of this, however, is the fundamental importance of communication. If this skill is lost, there can be no academy.

The final word of the day went to Representing Re-formation's Dr. Lindley. It would have been wonderfully helpful, he said, to have had this event before commencing Representing Re-formation, as it has highlighted how important predefining problems and suitable individuals to solve those problems really is. He has learned that chance is a big factor, but that a good project can come to fruition through the persistence of passionate individuals. The day, he said, had been hugely stimulating and thought-provoking, even if at times somewhat alarming; particularly in regard to the apparent 'part-time' nature of many young researcher's careers.

I have been lucky enough to have experienced a number of disciplines, but also lucky to have discovered that I need not be bound by them. As both a new academic and a human being, it is important that I remain able to differentiate my identity from the disciplines whose tools I

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<sup>24</sup> Science and Heritage Programme, 'Science and Heritage', <http://www.heritagescience.ac.uk/science-and-heritage>, as of 5 May 2012

use. I would not consider myself to be interdisciplinary to the extent that such a term suggests either multiple fields of expertise, or a liminal position between them, but I would be willing to consider myself transdisciplinary; for I feel open to the investigative strategies, tools and ontological frameworks of a wide variety of academic fields. This allows me to recognise the value of becoming deeply embroiled in specialist knowledge sets and methodologies but also to see, appreciate, and attempt to solve, their failings and limitations.

Ultimately, whether we consider ourselves members of a disciplinary heartland, border-dwellers, or mobile nomads, the crucial factor is communication. It is only through negotiation, listening and attempting to understand that we can truly enrich knowledge – and no matter the term applied to this process, it is this development, broadening and augmentation of the world which should be the ultimate goal of every academic.

### Jenny Walklate

My involvement with the School of Museum Studies began in 2009 when I completed my MA dissertation with the guidance of Dr. Ross Parry, after which I continued onto the PhD programme under the supervision of Professor Simon J. Knell. My current AHRC Funded Doctoral Research considers the production of museal temporalities, using literary theory and analytical strategies as a tool for their understanding and theorisation. I am fascinated by the fundamental philosophical inquiries at the heart of museology, documentation theory, the philosophy of museal technology, the *unheimlich*, the unreal and irreal, spectrality, *saudades* and other cultural constructions of nostalgic emotion, poetic tangibility and spatial form.