

The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity

Robert S. Frodeman, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 580 pp. \$150.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780199236916.

This volume is a mammoth undertaking, nearly ten years in the making and uniting some eighty contributors. It offers a broad-based (indeed, astonishingly so) introduction to the field of interdisciplinarity, or knowledge production that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. The *Handbook* is divided into five sections: “The Terrain of Knowledge,” which introduces interdisciplinarity (ID) and the study of “knowledge formations”; “Interdisciplinarity in the Disciplines,” short case studies of broad disciplinary areas and the means by which they can (or should) put interdisciplinarity into practice; “Knowledge Interdisciplined,” profiling the emergence of new knowledge formations through interdisciplinarity; “Institutionalizing Interdisciplinarity,” examining the issues with interdisciplinarity and academic processes such as pedagogy, peer review, and the evaluation of research; and “Knowledge Transdisciplined,” partly a challenging, theoretically focused series of essays and partly a small set of case studies that point towards new methods of performing research, primarily in the biological and health sciences. (Trans-disciplinary research here is specifically defined as addressing problems such as disease, pollution, and social issues.) The thoughtful organization makes the book easy to navigate for people with different interests.

A glance at the above list would likely send a chill through the spines of jargon-phobic readers. Anyone sceptical at the litany of cross-, multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity will find enough here to satisfy their lurid fears of academia disappearing up its own fundament. However, once this initial barrier is breached, the book is perfectly readable, if still dense and academic in parts. Most readers will find something pertinent to their own area of expertise and level (administrator, faculty, student). Practical essays on topics such as hiring and facilitating interdisciplinary scholars and graduate students’ perspectives on ID supplement more challenging, theoretical pieces like Veronica Boix Mansilla’s “Learning to Synthesize: The Development of Interdisciplinary Understanding.”

The aim of the essays gathered in this collection is not merely to collect examples, or to provide a history of disciplines, or to prognosticate as to where they might be going. All of these are to be found, but this book probes deeper into the idea of disciplines, their necessity, formation, and ways in which they can be integrated and transformed in practice. According to Robert Frodeman in his introduction, what is needed today is not simply the accumulation of more and more knowledge, but a greater understanding of the fields of knowledge and the relationships between them, and how knowledge percolates through society. Daniel Sarewitz summarizes succinctly: “Reality is not divided up along disciplinary lines” (65). The artificiality of disciplinary boundaries and their mutability—the need to be open to the formation of new disciplines as well as the importation of methods from others—needs to be recognized. This is a message that should be heard given that academic institutions tend to become ossified over time, and practitioners are often very protective of their own fields. The contributors to this volume are conscious of these factors and offer suggestions as to how they might be overcome.

The *Handbook* includes a short chapter on religious studies, contributed by Sarah Fredericks of the University of North Texas. Religious studies may subsume theology, history, philosophy, psychology, art, and much more, and Fredericks notes that it is not surprising that each of these can be multi- or interdisciplinary in their own right,

creating more opportunities for cross-pollination from different disciplines. However, this diversity can itself lead to conflicts over the proper or sanctioned methods of studying an often-charged topic like religion. Also peculiar to religious studies, Fredericks notes, are distinctive ecumenical and interfaith approaches that could be considered analogues to interdisciplinarity, and both of which can present complex difficulties for researchers eager to attack their subjects with new tools.

The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity will be of most interest to theological libraries that do not have the benefit of being part of a larger library system that may well hold this volume. Some may view it outside their collection scope, but this and similar works should nevertheless be considered. While some communities of theological scholars may be more open to interdisciplinary approaches than others, it behooves any researcher, whether student or emeritus professor, to be at least aware of the artificial boundaries that each discipline erects around itself and how these have evolved over time, as well as how these boundaries might be pushed, crossed, or transcended. While this volume is intended primarily for academic administrators and those involved with planning and directing research, there will be value here for scholars at all levels if they are prepared to occasionally deal with some challenging jargon and theoretical density. Each essay includes a substantial bibliography, and the overall production is of a high standard.

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