



What Interdisciplinary Research Training can tell us about teaching in higher education

Transcript of recorded interview: Kirstin Mills talking with Agnes Bosanquet (October 2023)

Agnes Bosanquet: Thank you for talking with me today. Kirsten, I'm really looking forward to our conversation. As I have with other discussions in this series, I thought I would start by asking you about your area. So what is interdisciplinary research training?

Kirstin Mills: Thank you so much for having me, Agnes. I'm really excited to talk about this. My role is the director of the Master of Research program in the Faculty of Arts and interdisciplinarity is something that we really try to foster through this program, drawing on the strengths of all the wonderful disciplines in the faculty and bringing them into communication with each other. It's a big question – what is interdisciplinarity or what is interdisciplinary research training?

The main thing is that we're trying to train people in how to do research and how to become researchers, whether that is in academia or in industry or not-for-profit organisations. There's such a broad application for research these days. It's increasingly done outside of the borders of the university or academia. A lot of these areas that research is being conducted in don't necessarily align with the disciplinary boundaries that we have within the university system. So what we want to do is help students understand how to think and how to design their research and how to explain their work, within but also beyond their disciplinary boundaries so that it makes sense to everybody and they can demonstrate that relevance to society and the world more broadly.

Agnes Bosanquet: You mentioned disciplinary boundaries and I wonder if I can go back a step to get your understanding of what disciplines are, especially the disciplines that you're working with in Arts.

Kirstin Mills: Absolutely. A discipline is basically a way of organising knowledge and expertise in academia so that we don't have a giant melting pot of all the work we do from science to medicine to arts and business and everything in between. It basically demarcates areas of specialisation, and through that it provides a necessary basis for judging the quality of research in different areas through things like peer review, of course, and also allows for a basis upon which to trust the expertise of people working in particular areas which is really important when we're using our research and to communicate with the public and to put that research out into the world.

The Faculty of Arts is a very, very big faculty. We have a great many disciplines grouped into different departments and schools. These include history, archaeology, education, law, literature, languages, media studies, creative arts, indigenous studies, philosophy, anthropology, politics, international relations, sociology, geography and planning, security studies and criminology. And this is, of course, just to list some of them. We've got a great many of these disciplines that can be broken down even further. We've got music studies, for example, and performing arts. We do a lot of different work and there's a lot of brilliant fields that are that have collections of experts within them within our faculty. They have this strong sense of disciplinary belonging, and this is wonderful. This is very necessary and there are great strengths that come from that

sense of belonging to a particular discipline and the kind of pathways it can chart for how to be successful within that discipline as well. But one of the potential downsides, if we just stick to this model, is that it can result in the silo-ing of knowledge of research, and we miss that opportunity to have those conversations in between different areas and bringing people together. I think for me it's at this point in between disciplines where a lot of innovation happens where we can learn from what other people are doing. We can get as creative as possible, and that's where the magic really happens.

Agnes Bosanquet: So what is your disciplinary background?

Kirstin Mills: My disciplinary background is in literary studies, but even in my approach to literary studies, I bring in a lot of elements of history, of media studies and of adaptation studies. So there's a lot of different areas that I bring into my work, and I think this helps with my attitude towards disciplinary belonging. And the value of speaking to other disciplines and learning how you can stretch your own thinking and come up with new ideas.

Agnes Bosanquet: Your Master of Research students come from all of that very long list of disciplines. I'm interested in how you how you approach teaching students to think in interdisciplinary ways.

Kirstin Mills: There's a lot of different things you can do there. I think, firstly, helping students understand what it is to belong to a discipline. Some people come into a Master of Research and don't necessarily have an awareness that they have been trained specifically within a particular discipline. Part of interdisciplinarity is recognising disciplines. You can't have interdisciplinarity without those disciplines as a strong part of that. It's always about the balance. Part of interdisciplinary research training for me and the Master of research is about establishing a really healthy and strong respect for the value of disciplines and then helping students recognise not just their own discipline and their sense of belonging to it, but the value of the disciplines of the other students around them.

What we do is we bring a lot of students from different disciplines into the same classes, and we foster those conversations where we might have a general research problem. We might think of a particular social issue, for example, or a political issue and we have a conversation. How would you approach this from your discipline? What kinds of ideas are most interesting to you? What kinds of theories or perhaps methods would you bring to the table, and how would you design a research project to do with this issue? It's amazing to see the huge variety of different kinds of projects that can emerge on the one single topic or issue when they're done across different disciplines. Then having this awareness of that difference, but also the points of similarity and connection is really useful because that's where you can foster those relationships and go deeper and start learning. What can I learn? What kind of insights might I get from learning from someone who does things a little bit differently?

Agnes Bosanquet: It's clear from what you're saying that that the experience students bring to the classes really important. I'm interested in the skills that they are developing through that work of thinking in interdisciplinary ways together. How would you describe those skills?

Kirstin Mills: For me, the way I approach trying to teach a lot of the research skills that we offer in our program is largely through firstly through a mindset, a particular kind of mindset they adopt. My teaching philosophy revolves around what I call the three C's, which is curiosity, critical thinking and creativity. I think every successful researcher needs these three things. Firstly, they need to be curious, they need to be curious about what's going on in their own

discipline and the particular topics that really light them up, that they get excited about and they want to pursue, but also really curious about how might other people approach this? What kind of insights can I get from reading more broadly outside my discipline? Hand in hand with that has to come critical thinking, the ability to really critically assess the kinds of sources that they're discovering on the kind of research they're doing and the opinions of other people. And then finally, the creativity, the ability to recognise those points where innovation is possible, to think a little bit outside the box and think differently. And again, I think this comes often in conversation with other disciplines, whether that's through reading or from interacting with other students in class.

We do a lot of reflective work. We help students really think about who they are, the kinds of knowledge that they bring to the table, the kinds of training that they've already had. We get them to actually be able to articulate what that is, and then think, OK, what's the next step, what, how do I want to develop further? So I do that through a lot of reflective writing. I get them to basically, turn the lens on themselves and examine their own assumptions, their own biases, and where they want to where they want to expand further, and also reflecting on what they're proud of within their work as well, and develop that confidence.

Agnes Bosanquet: I really like that you have that 3C framework for your philosophy of teaching. I think that's a great way of articulating that for your own teaching, but for also the skills that you want that you want to recognise in students. I want to explore a little bit more about your teaching and practice. You've mentioned reflective writing. What are other things that you do in class with students?

Kirstin Mills: So another thing we do is a lot of student collaboration, so getting them to actually have those conversations in class. One of the tasks we do is a peer review exercise where, as they're drafting one of their assessments where they have to produce a research proposal, we get them in class in groups to peer review that work. I teach them how to do this, obviously being respectful and constructive with feedback. And they find that immensely valuable. Just having outside eyes - and I'm talking outside of discipline, so interdisciplinary opinions on how clearly they are communicating their ideas. I think this is something that is of value for all disciplines, especially with writing if the aim is to very clearly communicate your ideas and be engaging as possible. Getting somebody who is not used to reading the kinds of writing that is normally produced in your discipline, getting them to look at the piece of writing is a great way to test how well you're doing there. It's always great to sort of try this out on friends and family as well. You know, people outside the university system even.

I find that interdisciplinary work of bringing students together and getting them to actually, empowering them, I guess, to have opinions about their work and share their ideas with each other and benefit from each other's knowledge is a beautiful way to illustrate the benefits of interdisciplinary relationships and networking.

Agnes Bosanquet: In our earlier conversation, as we were thinking about our discussion today, two of the things you mentioned in relation to how you work with students, I think it goes back to that point I made earlier about your recognition of their earlier experience. You talked about the lived experience of students and asking questions. Do you want to add anything about that?

Kirstin Mills: Yeah, I think it's really important to recognise that all students and all researchers and all students learning to be researchers bring a lived experience to their work. This isn't something that can be left at the door, really. We're entangled. Our lives are entangled with the kinds of work we're doing. And I think recognising that in our students and in ourselves and in

our researchers is really important, not only to be able to support them in the best ways that we can, but also to help them recognise the benefits of that. I think finding a point of [connection], some way you can relate to the research you're doing, of thinking about why it's meaningful to you is incredibly important. It helps stoke that passion that's required to see a project through, particularly if you're going to write a thesis as the people who do the second year of our masters program [do] end up writing an independent thesis. And so you need that passion. You need to understand the why behind the work you're doing. I find that connection to their personal lived experience is incredibly valuable there. It also helps students realise that research isn't just a cerebral, purely academic endeavour. It is done by real people. Real people in the world. And that means that if other real people can do research, so can they.

Agnes Bosanquet: One of those questions is really articulating why they're doing that work and their passion for it. Is there another way that focus on asking questions comes through as well?

Kirstin Mills: Yeah, absolutely. Research is all about questions. It's all about being curious enough to keep asking questions. Sometimes it's also about knowing when to stop, so we also teach how to design a research project, and part of that is how to design the scope of a project and what's feasible within a certain time limit. But I always advise students to keep writing their questions down and just put them aside and they might be able to pick them up in the future. I think the spirit of research is about asking questions and being filled with questions.

That includes adopting that critical mindset where you are resistantly reading what you come across, whether that is research sources, other bits of scholarship, whether it's your lecturers' opinions or whether it's the media. I find that particularly important in our 21st century media saturated world. Our students need to be able to critically and resistantly read everything in the world. I think a research degree, and particularly that interdisciplinary focus where you're aware of your own area, you're aware of your own stance and you are considering the opinions of others and the kind of other work that's out there, I think that's a really powerful position to learn those skills in.

Agnes Bosanquet: I would love to explore that idea of resistant or critical reading a bit more. That sounds like really powerful. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and how it's something you teach and why it's important for students? You've started to touch on that. I'd love to hear more.

Kirstin Mills: Sure. And part of this is coming back to my literary background. I taught in Literature for a long time and I bring some of that into what I teach in the Master of Research program as well in terms of how to take a text and understand the techniques it's using to invite you to interpret it in a particular way. So, basically, dispelling the myth that there is a particular meaning embedded in a text and all we have to do is take it out. Texts are constructed in a particular way to invite us to interpret them in particular ways. And so I teach this in the Master of Research program largely through my writing unit, where I'm teaching students how to reverse engineer pieces of scholarship so they can understand how they've been constructed to be either effective, or if they were less effective, so they can then apply those techniques to their own work. They also really enjoy this process, I think. I've found that's a really nice way to empower students as well. So you unite the critical thinking ability with the awareness of how they can then employ those techniques in their own writing.

Agnes Bosanquet: This takes me back to something you mentioned earlier, which was reflective writing. I wonder if you can tell me a bit more about reflective writing, why it's valuable, and how you teach reflective writing with your students.

Kirstin Mills: Absolutely. Reflective writing is basically the embodiment of a thinking process where we just reflect on where we're currently at, where we've been, where we are now, and where we would like to go next. We often do this anyway, but we're not always consciously aware of this kind of reflective thinking. So often, you know, if we're driving home after work in the car, we might think back over our day and think, oh, I would have done that differently if I could. Or here's what I'll try to do differently tomorrow. Or that worked really well, I'd like to do more of that next week, whatever it is. I try to make this process a conscious exercise for my students by getting them to produce reflective writing. It's a really personal, informal form of writing so they don't have to worry about normal disciplinary norms or academic sort of standards for their writing. It reads more like a diary. And it's a free space where they can basically just untangle their thoughts and think back about their learning journey and the kinds of different activities they've done, or readings that might have jumped out as useful to them. And have a point where they actually think about that consciously so that they can make active decisions about how to utilise that knowledge.

I think it does two things. Firstly, I think it provides a strong sense of direction through awareness of where they've come from, and it also allows them to develop confidence in what they've achieved so far. Because what I found with research training in particular is that students have their eye on this daunting project of producing a thesis by the end of the program. It can sometimes overshadow the small steps that it actually takes to get there. No one ever produced a thesis overnight. It's not something that you do in one massive hit. You achieve it in small steps along the way, and I think it's crucial to be able to look at what you've done and feel confident that it was good work and that it is building toward something. Uniting that with the vision that reflective thinking and reflective writing can provide about where you've been and where you want to go next – where it would be most fruitful to put your energies next – is an excellent way to make sure that you stay on track throughout that process.

Agnes Bosanquet: I have to say you've got a lovely turn of phrase in describing that, the way you talk about reflective writing as an embodiment of a thinking process. I found that a really rich description.

Kirstin Mills: Thank you.

Agnes Bosanquet: I wonder, in summary of our conversation, if you can tell me what university teachers across campus can do to develop the interdisciplinary skills such as you're talking about, resistant reading and reflective writing. What are your lessons for other teachers?

Kirstin Mills: I think embodying that spirit of interdisciplinary or the value of interdisciplinarity is really important. I know a lot of our classes, particularly in our undergraduate programs, are organised within particular disciplines. If students are completing a major, they'll often come up quite cleanly within a discipline, but I'm sure they will have experience with other students or other classes that that are outside those boundaries. They'll also have awareness and experiences in the world that are beyond their academic disciplinary walls. Finding opportunities to highlight those and bring them into the conversation, I think is really helpful. I think that can also help foster a sense of inclusivity and helping students feel like their real world experience is valued in the academic classroom and that they can bring that to their learning journey and help them to understand the value of the kinds of ideas being discussed in the discipline, but also how similar problems might be treated differently in other disciplines or even beyond the disciplinary framework altogether. I think through conversation, I think, is often the most exciting way that can develop, but backing that up with a reflective writing practice where students can get really

personal about their relationship to their learning and the kinds of journeys that they've been on so far and empowering them to think about what they want to do next. Taking, I guess, custodianship of their learning in a way is I think that would be really valuable for all disciplines.

Agnes Bosanquet: And do you see a place for resistant reading across different disciplines as well?

Kirstin Mills: Definitely, I do. Yes, I think all disciplines treat scholarly reading and research by bringing in resistant reading, whether they call it that or not. I think this is probably a concept that's coming more out of my literary and media studies training, but being, not negative, but preparing to assess and critique how a piece of writing has been constructed and the kinds of assumptions that lie behind it that might not be on the surface, is absolutely crucial. And this is particularly if you're going to be a researcher. If you're going to publish your thoughts you need to be able to be sure that you have critically tested everything that you're bringing into that study and I think that's the case no matter what you're learning, whether you're producing an essay for a unit in biology or whether it's literary studies or history or anything in between, that ability to critically assess sources is invaluable and again, it translates into the real world, so to speak, as well in just navigating as a human in our media saturated world.

Agnes Bosanquet: It sounds to me that one of the things you're trying to develop in students is that skill of evaluative judgement, that that comes in with the peer review process. It comes through the resistant reading and reflective writing which is really that evaluative judgement of your own experience. Is that a term that you would use to describe it?

Kirstin Mills: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And I think, again, being in a position to evaluate something implies a certain level of expertise already. Again, it's about empowering students with a sense that they are able to do that. They are able to evaluate sources around them. If we're training students to be thinkers and leaders, we're training people to be researchers. They need to adopt and inhabit that position of, you know, that evaluative outlook.

Agnes Bosanquet: Well, thank you so much Kirstin for that discussion. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Kirstin Mills: I'd just like to thank you for having me.

Agnes Bosanquet: Look, I find I find these conversations so rich and interesting. And when you came to me and said you wanted to talk about interdisciplinary research training and what it can teach other disciplines or teach the university, I thought, oh, that's going to be an interesting conversation. It wasn't where my mind had first gone when I started thinking about what disciplines can teach us, so I really thank you for expanding my thinking about the disciplines and about how we teach across the university.

Kirstin Mills: Thank you so much for the opportunity.