Diverse perspectives and lived experiences of educational work

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Introduction

In the current higher education context, performative metrics encourage us to categorise our work as teaching or research or engagement. While institutional rhetoric often promotes collaborations across disciplinary boundaries and with industry and community groups, bureaucratic structures often discourage any straying from familiar disciplinary areas. Such structural rigidity not only underappreciates the complexity of the educational work being undertaken in these collaborations, but fails to recognise the nuances that exist in the overlapping spaces within and between these categories. Meanwhile, we know that contemporary challenges in a globalising world do not necessarily fit neatly within traditional disciplinary or institutional boundaries. As teacher educators and education researchers, we derive great energy and insights from working and researching within these ‘borderlands’. The forms of educational work that exist at the edges of these academic imperatives are often rich, challenging and of significant value in terms of meaningful learning experiences. They are, however, little understood and as a result can be undervalued and misunderstood by the academy.

This Special Issue is devoted to informing understandings of educational work through original research contributions that explore this concept and its interdisciplinary applications. In keeping with the aims and scope of the journal more broadly, contributors to this issue were invited to provide perspectives on interdisciplinary educational work in a range of local, national and international contexts. We wanted to

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challenge and extend thinking about what constitutes educational work. This Special Issue also seeks to provide a forum within which the community of education researchers more broadly can make informed contributions to the conversations around interdisciplinary educational work and the opportunities and challenges that this construct poses. While many may consider the work of educators to be isolated to teaching in lecture theatres or classrooms, the work of educators is incredibly varied and operates in all sorts of border spaces. Importantly, this Special Issue provides an opportunity to showcase and celebrate research recognising this interdisciplinarity in education.

**Background**

Seddon (2016) and Newman et al. (2014) coined the term ‘educational work’ to describe the activity of a heterogeneous group of professionals, with expertise in different disciplines, collaborating on a project to “enable learning” (Newman et al., 2014, p. 323). Typically, the varied disciplines and identities of the individuals within such a group bring different knowledge and skills as well as make different contributions to the educational work in which they are engaged. The work undertaken by the group is, simultaneously, shaped by the heterogeneous educational disciplines and identities that the individuals bring to it. However, as the literature shows, the challenges faced by heterogeneous groups collaborating on educational work should not be underestimated. The “spaces of orientation” (Newman et al., 2014, p. 323) where the educational workers come together invariably involve complex negotiations as colleagues from different backgrounds seek to develop a shared understanding of the educational enterprise in which they are engaged.

Kraus and Sultana (2008) identify three areas of difference that typically complicate and enrich these educational work negotiations (see Table 1):

1. Different disciplines;
2. Different paradigms of knowledge; and
3. Different educational spaces.

Rather than framing such differences as obstacles to educational work, Bauman (2000) argues that they are a necessary precondition for what he refers to as “liquid modernity”, and in a sense they allow us to address new and emerging problems and issues in a globalising world. Newman et al. (2014) also note the richness of knowledge and learning that can emerge as heterogeneous educational workers “grapple with learning new tasks and identities in new places… in collaboration with others” (p. 322).

**Our own journeys in interdisciplinary educational work**

The initial catalyst for this Special Issue about interdisciplinary educational work was the shared experience of the three guest editors working in an interdisciplinary team for an interfaculty grant at Monash University (Fitzgerald et al., 2020).
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Table 1  Areas of educational work (Kraus & Sultana, 2008)

| Different disciplines | Different paradigms of knowledge | Different educational spaces |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Participants from a heterogeneous education group are accustomed to teaching and researching in different disciplines, with contrasting curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices | Assumptions about what constitutes knowledge vary acutely depending on the different disciplines from within which participants come to an educational work project | Participants who work in different institutional and administrative spaces are accustomed to particular ways of operating, and they tend to take different things for granted in those operations |
Before this grant, we had also collaborated on several projects and publications that involved engaging with others across discipline, social and cultural contexts (e.g. Fitzgerald et al., 2017, 2018). Throughout these projects, we developed a strong belief that working within and across boundaries can generate important professional learning for us as individuals and as a team, as well as promoting opportunities for learning and growth for others, such as pre-service teachers, mentor teachers and academics. To illustrate the learning we have gained from these interdisciplinary experiences, we each present a brief narrative that positions our thinking in relation to educational work.

Ange: the power in language and numbers

My first introduction to the construct of ‘educational work’ was through an inter-faculty project that I participated in with Judy and Graham over a couple of years before subsequently engaging in some research around that shared interdisciplinary experience (see Fitzgerald et al., 2020). This introduction ended up being an ‘ah-ha’ moment in my professional life. Through self-reflection, I started to recognise that the professional work that most energised me, that I was most proud of and that I grew the most from could, in fact, be defined as educational work. While I was very cognisant that the work I most valued and that was the most powerful in my career involved working on and crossing boundaries, this new connection helped me to better understand the purpose underpinning what I do and why it matters. Being able to grasp and articulate the ‘why it matters’ element is what is most important to me at this particular juncture. Having a construct like educational work to hang my professional hat on helps me to legitimise the non-quantifiable and marginalised aspects of my work by providing a space in which to connect with others who do and value the same type of work. It seems to me that there is a sense of safety and belonging not only through power in numbers, but a shared language.

Graham: more than we can imagine or achieve in our familiar spaces

‘We want to develop an international professional experience program in South Africa for our pre-service teachers in the final stages of their teacher education. Would you be interested in leading a pilot later this year?’ This initial conversation with the Associate Dean Education in our Faculty of Education in early 2009 was the launching point for a rich journey for me of leading and/or researching interdisciplinary, international professional experience programs. Such programs have evolved to the stage where Australian universities now typically collaborate not just with schools in international settings, but also with pre-schools, community-based organisations, industries and/or universities in various overseas countries. Each partner organisation, and each individual who works with them, brings a different mix of skills, experience, knowledge and cultures to the program, and these serve to enrich and complicate the experience of a teaching placement that a single faculty of education in a university could not have imagined on its own. Through collaborating with Ange and Judy on a number of interdisciplinary education projects since then, I have continued to appreciate how much I learn from my colleagues in these
Diverse perspectives and lived experiences of educational work projects, and how inspiring it is to work across disciplines and contribute to new knowledge and practices along the way.

Judy: crossing boundaries and working in unfamiliar spaces

Looking back on my career in education, I can see a thread that runs through most of my experiences as a teacher/teacher educator/researcher. This thread involves the frequent transitions between educational spaces and contexts, which I have made over this time. Much of my research has involved exploring the process of becoming a teacher or teacher educator in a range of new and often unfamiliar educational contexts: transitioning from school teacher to university-based teacher educator; working in university and in school classrooms, mentoring pre-service teachers during their professional experience placements, both locally and in international settings; working with a range of school-based mentor teachers during these placements; and working in collaborative projects with academic and school-based colleagues. All this ‘boundary work’ has involved the ‘complex negotiations’ that Newman et al. (2014) identified, and it has ensured that my work as an educator/researcher has been an ever-evolving learning experience. This learning has never been in isolation. It has been enriched by the people I have worked with, whether informally or within formal collaborative research projects or teaching roles, and by the spaces I have inhabited. Therefore, interdisciplinary and cross cultural spaces have been an integral part of my educational work and learning.

An invitation to interdisciplinary educational work

In seeking contributions to this Special Issue, we invited researchers and educators to experiment with narrative methodologies as they told their stories of engaging in ‘interdisciplinary educational work’. To assist, we proposed a number of categories, detailed below, as ‘hooks’ for their narrative. While the following list was not intended to be exhaustive, it acted as a guide for potential contributors in how to position their own research with respect to the theme.

- **Interdisciplinary work** (e.g. between different disciplinary knowledges, methodological approaches, scholarly traditions, etc.);
- **Cross-faculty work** (e.g. collaborations between different faculties, schools and departments, etc.);
- **Boundary work** (e.g. between various spaces: academic/professional, school/university, public/private, etc.);
- **Educational workers coming from diverse contexts** (e.g. informal learning settings—museums, zoos, etc.; outside classroom contexts—home schooling, hospital-based, etc.);
- **Challenges and opportunities posed by different spaces** (e.g. international collaborations, school–university partnerships, industry links, etc.); and
- **Globalised experiences** (e.g. study tours, work integrated learning, service learning, professional experiences, etc.).
To challenge contributors in their exploration of the concept of educational work, we also posed questions that might provide a shared context from which to grapple with lived experiences of this construct. The authors considered questions such as: what is interdisciplinary educational work?; how is it enacted in your particular context?; what challenges and opportunities have you encountered in interdisciplinary educational work?; why and how might individuals and groups in higher education collaborate across disciplinary borders to ‘enable learning’?; who benefits from interdisciplinary educational work and how?; and what policy discourses (at local, national or international levels) encourage and/or inhibit educational work?

The collection itself

The papers in this Special Issue are largely positioned within an Australian context, but there are also contributions from Canada and Portugal. It is evident across the papers that institutional and/or system support for the development and continuation of this work is paramount. The value of the collaboration is significant for the participants themselves as well as for other stakeholders. The participants gained enormously in their understanding of their own and others’ disciplines and professional knowledge, and in their own identities (Kraus & Sultana, 2008). As editors, this collection of papers reminds us that the domain of educational work is diverse, rich and complex, which acts to enrich our understandings of the role that education and educative experiences can play in enacting meaningful learning and personal growth.

Some of the papers in this collection present accounts of interdisciplinary educational work within single universities in Australia. They describe colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds coming together to co-develop an interdisciplinary project within that institution. In one paper, Brandenburg, Smith, Higgins and Coursivanos reflect on the experience of working within a newly established interdisciplinary research group. Their paper reports on the contrasting aspirations and motivations of the group members, and the ways in which institutional policies, grant opportunities and mentoring support shaped those aspirations and motivations. In a study reported on in another paper, Colton, Mignone and Newport-Peace investigate the benefits and challenges of co-developing an interdisciplinary teaching and learning unit for undergraduate students in their university. They began separately by writing reflexive autobiographical narratives of their experience, and then employed dialogic writing practices to analyse the ways in which this project required them to negotiate what they call ‘nodes of tension’ in their collaboration.

Other papers show heterogeneous groups within a single school or a university reaching out to collaborate with industry professionals and community-based organisations. Their interdisciplinary educational work is typically driven by a social justice agenda that wishes to respect, learn from and contribute positively to the knowledge, culture and practices of these communities. Krishnamoorthy and Ayre explore their experiences as a school-based educator and a psychologist working together in an interconnected, cross-sectoral system of care that included health care, child welfare, juvenile justice, housing and other community services. They document and analyse their collaborative efforts to respond to the needs of young people in schools.
who are exposed to traumatic and adverse life experiences. Hill and MacDonald, from Canada, present an inspiring duo-ethnographic study, documenting their collaboration with members of the Indigenous Skwxwú7mesh Nation, with whom they co-designed two community-based Master of Education programs for postgraduate students. Using reflexive narrative methods, and problematising their identities as ‘White Settlers’ in a middle-class university, they seek to respect and make visible the material, cultural, relational and knowledge landscapes of their collaboration.

Another group of papers identifies educators in cross-institutional collaborations connecting with a range of stakeholders. Da Silva, Senra, Sampaio and Oliveira, from two Portuguese higher education institutions, worked for one year in a cross-disciplinary team of academics—from educational sciences, computer sciences and engineering—to develop a mobile app that assessed the educational quality of youth-related initiatives in the borderlands of Portugal. In their paper, they describe the experience of developing the app, learning more about these Portuguese youth, engaging with industry professionals who had expertise in developing apps or designing quality support programs for youths, and managing a whole spectrum of tensions in these interactions, as well as the tensions in their own team. Working across two Australian universities and an arts and social change organisation, Wise, MacDonald, Badham, Brown and Rankin, write about a range of interdisciplinary case studies where collaborations between the education sector, creative industries and community were established to contribute to social justice projects. Their analysis teases out the contrasting perspectives of schoolteachers, artists and creative content producers who collaborated on projects that sought to creatively address the multi-faceted challenges of youth in disadvantaged community settings.

Finally, working within a specialised ‘Faculty of Transdisciplinary Innovation’, Kligyte, Buck, Le Hunte, Ulis, McGregor and Wilson present a reflexive case study about a virtual Work Integrated Learning (WIL) project they designed and led for undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their paper engages with the conceptual lenses of liminality and third space to illuminate the different dimensions of transdisciplinary education work when university-based educators and industry-based professionals collaborated on the creation of this innovative virtual workplace simulation project.

Conclusion

This Special Issue draws on a wide variety of institutional, policy and cultural spaces to showcase the distinctive experiences and relationships that constitute and/or contribute to interdisciplinary educational work. Using a range of reflexive narrative-based methodologies and theoretical frameworks, the authors make visible a variety of ways in which individuals and groups in schools, higher education institutions, industries and communities are able to collaborate across disciplinary borders to ‘enable learning’ (Newman et al., 2014). In the process of this ‘making visible’, the papers collectively highlight the importance of respectful dialogue, persistence, flexibility, and institutional and system-wide structures and resources that must support this educational work.
The collection of papers stands as a powerful piece of advocacy for interdisciplinary educational work and all that it can contribute to knowledge and practice in higher education and related spaces. And yet the authors eschew the easier path of constructing idealised stories of interdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships. They pull no punches in their accounts, occasionally identifying challenges, tensions and frustrations encountered through the longer-term journey of building and sustaining relationships, practices and knowledge. Importantly, they also educate, raise questions and inspire hope in the possibilities of interdisciplinary educational work now, and into the future.

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