

## The Culture of Babel: Interdisciplinarity as Adaptation in Multicultureland

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**Abstract:** The 16<sup>th</sup> annual AIS conference at Duquesne University (1994) had as its theme "Beyond Babel." This paper, a version of which was presented at the conference, examines that theme in terms of a pair of opposed ideas: (1) That integrative interdisciplinary work must move the academy beyond the Babel it has become under the influence of disciplinary specialization. (2) That integrative interdisciplinary work must not interfere with the intensive disciplinary specialization the academy allows in the study of human diversity, which has been the human condition since and beyond Babel. Points developed in the discussion of these ideas lead to a qualified notion of interdisciplinarity as a means of coping with and using the differentiated bodies of knowledge that specialization necessarily produces.

Two PIECES OF WRITING—one ancient, one recent—will serve to frame my topic. The first is, of course, Genesis 11, 1-9.

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. ... And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. . . . And the Lord said, Behold the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down there and confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. [1939, p. 13]

The second writing comes from the eloquent pen of Elizabeth K. Minnich in her capacity as scribe for a draft report of the American Association of Colleges entitled *Liberal Learning, Diversity, and Democratic Commitments, From Contradictions to Generative Tensions: "E Pluribus Unum?"*

The "canon wars" are . . . about curriculum, which has always involved positions on what counts as knowledge, what it means to be human, what social orders are and should be . . . Even to attempt a listing [for any now appropriate canon] is difficult and risky: daily [the listing changes as misleadingly singular,] falsely universalized and decontextualized senses [of] who "we" are and what "democracy" and "liberal education" mean are undone.

Undoing imposed and in fact partial collective terms and unjustly exclusionary . . . practices and scholarship is obviously all to the good—but what then?

. . . [N]either we nor anyone can propose singular solutions to the struggles in which we are presently engaged . . . : what, after all, would that mean? That we all hold the same views, share the same values, honor the same commitments and . . . can agree on how to express them in specific course syllabi and whole curricula? Such agreement seems to us not only exceedingly unlikely, but inappropriate as a goal. Liberal education is precisely *not* instruction in any dogma, moral, political or intellectual. It is . . . predicated on commitment to *practices* of inquiry, and to *arts* of intellect, memory, imagination, feeling, judgment. Such arts and practices are developed through being thoughtfully exercised in communities that acknowledge their *dependence* upon—far beyond mere toleration of—differences.

[W]e believe that issues of "cultural diversity" which are at the center of contemporary curricular debate are not a problem for liberal learning, but a resource and a goal. To explore what that might mean, we bracket [both] the falsifying nostalgia for singularly defined "good old days" [and] .... the kind of despair that refuses either the possibilities or the responsibilities of democracy because of its very real failures. We choose to explore and try to learn from the contestations and generative tensions that are givens in egalitarian democratic practices as in all honest scholarly inquiry. We choose to focus on the development of our capacities for associated living through a far more inclusive study of forms, creeds, positions, texts, subjects, works, from the "center" and from the "margins," "inside" and "out." [1994, pp. 1-3].

To see the framing these two statements provide, consider an imaginary chronology based upon them:

*Before* Babel, according to Genesis, there is unity among humans—one language, one speech, and mutual understanding that enables people to actualize their visions—to *do* what they have imagined.

*At* Babel, again according to Genesis, there is a divine destruction of unity and the capacities dependent upon it, accomplished by a confounding of the common language that ends mutual understanding and that leads to a scattering of humans across the face of the earth.

*Beyond* Babel, *now*, according to Minnich, there is no unity and, importantly, neither moral nor practical reason to pursue unity. *Beyond* Babel, diversity, not unity, is the condition of human existence. We must acknowledge our dependence on difference and foster those capacities which "engage [us] anew with the arts of democracy as of inquiry, [and that] open us to each other, ourselves and the world" [p.2].

Minnich is speaking about the academy now and, by implication, about the wider reaches of social existence. Genesis is speaking about Shinar long ago. But Genesis is with us now, and its "Babel" is, as it long has been, a favorite metonym of interdisciplinarians for the academy confounded by the differentiating effects of disciplinary specialization.

This last point offers both context and focus to my topic: Interdisciplinarians, seeing the academy as a Babel of disciplines, are apt to see a pair of problems as central in their milieu:

1. How to ensure access to the range of disciplines that constitute our Babel and that are needed to deal with some problem, topic or theme. "Access" here means *both* getting instruction in a range of relevant fields and being able to understand the content of instruction as it is meant.
2. How to make coherent use of the instruction thus received. "Coherency" here means incorporating ideas and information generated in several different disciplines into more inclusive understandings—into bodies of knowledge about a phenomenon that have been studied separately and differently but that can be considered together as matters that are related or alike.

Minnich seems to me to be arguing that the second of these two problems may be one that shouldn't be solved. For integration might help to keep in place the quite different set of problems she identifies—the "[misleadingly singular,] falsely universalized and decontextualized senses [of] who 'we' are and what 'democracy' and liberal education mean . . . [the] partial collective terms and unjustly exclusionary . . . practices and scholarship . . . [and] the falsifying nostalgia for singularly defined 'good old days'" [3].

This scholarly preoccupation, multiculturalism, should not be confused with the diversity to which it refers. The diversity exists, after all, regardless of whether scholars pay attention to it, and it has been with us since Babel. The scholarly preoccupation is not that old. Its age is indicated by increasing attention paid to diversity over the past twenty plus years in the regular instructional and research activities of universities. In this sense, it has not taken long for multiculturalism to affect profoundly the demographics of the academy, the organization of its instructional, investigative, administrative and service functions, and the uses of its interior and exterior spaces. These effects constitute the "multicultureland" of my title.

Now, suppose we take "culture" to be a people's adaptive repertoire—the residue of strategies, developed while facing problems, that a people keep and use to construe and cope with emergent problems in their environment. The notion of "interdisciplinarity as adaptation," then, puts interdisciplinarity among the ways that denizens of the academy have of construing and coping with its problems. What sort of an adaptive device is interdisciplinarity when the Babel it must deal with is multicultureland—a place, to be sure, affected by the multiplication of voices, but also a place with many inhabitants who like it that way?

This question invites us to consider interdisciplinarity, including its image of the academy as Babel, as itself a part of the culture of Babel. To do this, it will be useful to return to my imagined chronology, this time putting interdisciplinarians in it.

*Before* Babel there is unity. It is not clear from Genesis whether the people who partake of this unity understand that upon it depends their capacity for actualizing whatever they imagine to do. But it is clear that they construe their environment as containing a threat to both their unity and their proximity. The problem, as they see it, is how to protect and promote their unity in a way that will also keep them from being scattered across the face of the earth. Their

solution is to embody their unity (build a city), exercise it (build a tower up to heaven), give it an identity (create a name). Turning from the plain of Shinar to the academy, we may say that the interdisciplinarian sees threat in the growth of disciplinary specialization and solution in efforts to promote and protect the *university*.

At Babel, the divine confounding imposes a new problem—how to regain the mutual understanding that established our capacities for effective action. Genesis leaves no doubt that the loss is linguistically effected—a consequence of how God compels us now to use language and make speech. But Genesis doesn't say whether, in view of this change, reality itself remains a unity upon which coherent understanding could operate effectively. Interdisciplinarians, proclaiming that the Lord didn't create the universe according to the departmental structure of research universities, are given to seeking ways back to the lost unity and the effectiveness it allowed. The image of the academy as Babel invokes the confounding effects of the separate languages that disciplinary specialization generates. And getting *beyond* Babel involves learning to speak across these languages and integrating what they separately allow us to say.

Let me develop this point a bit in terms of the social and behavioral sciences which, being sore afflicted with the effects of disciplinary specialization, offer us a case in point.

Specialization of knowledge in this area ranks high among the necessary evils. The forming of disciplines by narrowing the focus of professional instruction and inquiry seems to have been necessary to the finding out of much that we now know—perhaps because complex phenomena can only be mastered by analytic subdivision; perhaps because the disciplines emerged during industrialization when the subdivision of tasks seemed a good solution to all production problems, including the production of knowledge. Whatever its cause, disciplinary specialization has generated an exponential growth of what we know about ourselves.

For all its achievements, disciplinary specialization has created a fundamental problem by dividing human activity into numerous dimensions, levels, aspects and functions that are studied through no less than seven major specialized disciplines in the social sciences alone, and a potentially unlimited number of special perspectives: What we know about ourselves is so inaccessible and partial as to be both difficult and dangerous to use.

Inaccessibility follows from the tendency of specialties to form their own conceptions, methodologies and terms of professional discourse. Specialization in a discipline or perspective is largely a matter of mastering its elements—its conceptions, methodologies and findings—and learning to see and to express the world in these terms. Separately developed and used to guide thought, inquiry, communication and instruction within each field, these elements define a discipline's boundaries—even to the point of excluding representations of human behavior based on criteria other than its own standards of meaning, validity, reliability and truth. Not surprisingly, therefore, we now have several discrete bodies of knowledge about human behavior that are different and often incommensurable.

All of this specialization does make the critically important point that human behavior is open to many ways of being investigated and understood. It also makes the companion point that these developments put hard conditions upon the collective use of what we know. Obviously, one must be familiar with the elements of a specialty to grasp its bearing upon some topic or problem and to understand its knowledge claims as they are meant. This is what makes so much of what we know so inaccessible and hard to use.

Less obvious, perhaps because somewhat embarrassing, is the fact that our specialized knowledge is both partial and synecdochic—partial in the sense of being concerned with, even confined to, the significance of factors identified by each discipline's own conceptions; synecdochic in the sense of being given to portraying the whole category of human behavior as if it resembled the part that each specialty has, in its own parochial manner, studied. This is what makes our specialized knowledge dangerous to use: It allows us to present in terms of limited, isolated sets of factors, human situations that are actually compounded of many interacting factors.

Granting the necessity of specialization—that we can't know everything before knowing anything—we cannot avoid the problems of using the knowledge it produces. Ways must be found to incorporate the knowledge generated by specialized disciplines and perspectives into more inclusive understandings—into bodies of knowledge about factors of human behavior that have been studied separately and differently but that can be examined together as things that are interactive or alike.

This last observation is essentially what we mean by coherency or integration. Its basic tasks involve drawing what the specialties know or may discover separately into conceptual frameworks that show how the complex array of factors constituting the general category of human behavior can be investigated together rather than separately and differently. Without such endeavors, we should have no way of conducting inquiries that seek understandings less partial and synecdochic and dangerous than those which already exist.

This notion of integration underscores the moral and practical imperative inherent in interdisciplinarity as a way of construing and coping with the problems of the academy rendered Babelish by specialization. Other benefits are also thought to follow from the way that interdisciplinary remedies for Babel rely on bringing together the separated languages of disciplines and/or what has been learned through their use:

1. Promoting familiarity with the elements of several disciplines generates flexibility—a basis for using alternative approaches to inquiry, explanation, problem-solving and action.

2. Raising questions for one field through the perspective of another challenges established views and promotes innovation.
3. Emphasizing the limiting effects of perspectives promotes a more equitable approach to studying human affairs—one which assumes that the perspectives of the people being studied may reveal significant causal and explanatory matters that the perspectives of researchers may miss.

But the crucial benefit is that of integration or coherency. Investigating factors of behavior together that are usually examined separately and differently yields findings more comprehensive than those produced by specialized inquiry—findings which may move us closer to reality and to reliable bases for action while protecting us from the misleading use of partial understandings presented as wholes.

I want to stress this matter of integration or coherency because it helps to understand how interdisciplinarity becomes different when we consider ourselves not at Babel, but beyond it.

Before Babel, indeed right up to the point of the confounding at Babel, it makes sense to operate within the given unity because there isn't anything else. In the academy so imagined, there would be no need for interdisciplinarity as a way of construing and coping with the problems of specialization because the problems would not exist.

At Babel, the divine confounding destroys the unity upon which common understandings and effective actions rest. In the academy imagined this way, the specialized disciplines are necessary evils, and efforts to synthesize them—to practice interdisciplinarity—seem right to pursue as a way of improving our understandings and bases for action. Specializations, however necessary they may be, are not morally or pragmatically protected.

Beyond Babel, the divine confounding is embedded in the causal structure of reality—or, at least, of human reality. Particularity, speciality, difference, diversity—these sire our condition, and nothing we do is morally or pragmatically right that doesn't acknowledge that fact. Since the confounding at Babel and the subsequent scattering from that place, images of unity falsely represent reality because reality contains our differences. In the academy imagined as beyond Babel, unities have the same synecdochic failings as the interdisciplinary critique assigns to specializations, and the additional characteristic of serving as devices of exclusion, exploitation and oppression. This hangs the same charge on the interdisciplinarian's quest for reunification that interdisciplinarity hung on specialization.

Beyond Babel, then, emergent specialties begin to be seen as responses to false and oppressive onenesses, responses that bring together different things that the false unities ignored or hid. In this setting, emergent specialties come to be seen as things to be morally and pragmatically protected against the force of misleading integrations.

This view is most readily encountered in discussions of multiculturalism in what is now the United States, so let me return to that part of my topic.

The multicultural approach to the study of diversity is not limited by any simple use of the term "culture." To be sure, the familiar sense of "culture" is there—say, to risk a definition, "culture" as patterns of mental and physical behavior, and the products thereof, that are shared within a group and transmitted across its generations.

But application of the term to a multiplicity of groups within any population makes the use of global terms like, say, "American culture" or "Asian American culture" or "African American culture" problematic because all such terms refer to internally diverse population segments. This much complication is increased by the fact that multiculturalism also allows lines of cleavage in a population that are usually associated with social structure or chronology to designate cultures in their own right—hence middle class culture, the culture of poverty, the culture of the South, teen culture, boomer culture, women's culture, gay culture, 60's culture, etc.

Clearly, multiculturalism as preoccupation with diversity opens an enormous domain conceptually and curricularly. But multiculturalism also has a limiting face: it is not concerned with all the diversity there is. Rather, it focuses attention on past and present groupings that are not exclusively composed of heterosexual males of European origin, groupings whose presence in, contributions to, oppression by, and effects on mainstream American society have been inadequately considered in the academy.

A further narrowing follows from the idea that attention is not properly paid to the cultures in question if they are not presented *by* people whose membership in those cultures informs their scholarship *to* people among whom there are members of those same cultures.

Questions of turf follow unavoidably: Universities have, over the past twenty years or so, hired scholars prepared to present understandings generated in emergent fields like Women Studies and the variants of Ethnic Studies. Their entry has, by and large, followed either of two paths—one that disperses faculty versed in emergent fields among long established, discipline-based departments; another that concentrates such faculty in newly created programs, departments and schools focused on their fields. Passage along both paths has been contested, of course, and people using one have in fact blocked traffic on the other. But passage along both paths has occurred, establishing many intersecting turfs. If topics associated with Black or Asian or La Raza or Women or Gay and Lesbian are only allowed in departments of those names, then each of those departments will have to become a virtual university. If some kind of claim over topical domains is not allowed to such departments, they may very well disappear as conventional departments hire their people and teach their courses.

- A dizzying expansion of meanings for the concept of culture.
- A focus on cultures until now not much considered.
- A demand that these culture be taught by and to people who belong to them.
- A likely expansion of serious turf questions.

All are problematic features of the academy that have increased as multiculturalism has increased. At Babel, these are features that exacerbate the interdisciplinarians' root problems of access and coherence. Beyond Babel, these features present a different sense of the problematic. For, as specialties, they are now to be protected.

There can be no doubt that the emerging fields are specializations in the sense of declaring the uniqueness of their perspectives and the correctness of exploring the world exclusively in terms of those perspectives as they are presented by people specially qualified to direct that activity. And, unquestionably, perspectives derived from the life experiences of specific groups, placed at the centers of these fields, have produced large bodies of knowledge missed by disciplinary specialties that are themselves, according to the new specialists, creatures of particular ethnic and gender perspectives. It is just for such reasons that fields like Women Studies and the variants of Ethnic Studies see themselves as fast developing into formal disciplines, each with its own set of centering conceptions, warranted methodologies and established results.

It is as specialties that the fields associated with multiculturalism are to be protected from what Minnich aptly calls appropriation by inclusion. In one sense, of course, this is a matter of trying to avoid co-optation of what ought to be independent undertakings. But there is something deeper here, I think: repudiation of a crucial aspect of much interdisciplinary thinking, which argues that syntheses have a kind of corrective priority over what is being synthesized. Whatever a specialized inquiry finds must yield to the findings of an inquiry that uses more than that specialty. This corrective priority is something that the restoration of unity claim at Babel arrogates to itself. Understandably, then, it is something that proponents of the diversity claims made beyond Babel must challenge—and worry about.

But without that corrective priority, we come to an odd point: interdisciplinarity promotes Babelizing. For just as we cannot doubt that the new fields are specialties, we cannot doubt that they have many of interdisciplinarity's defining characteristics: Given to drawing on personnel, ideas and information from diverse areas, they espouse the critique of the effects of disciplinary specialization to invoke the aims of flexibility, challenge, innovation, equability, and ultimately greater coherence that are supposed to follow from interdisciplinary effort.

While this is perhaps most easily seen in terms of new studies associated with multiculturalism, it is equally noticeable in many other domains of what now is identified as interdisciplinarity:

In a *New York Times* article [3/23/94, p. A19] entitled "Academic Disciplines Increasingly Entwine, Recasting Scholarship," William H. Honan casts interdisciplinary studies as not new but definitely "one of the hottest trends in current academic life." From Robert Pollack's book, *Signs of Life*, which argues that human DNA is best understood as a work of literature, through the blending of law, evolutionary biology and philosophy by Mrs. Dershowitz, Gould and Nozick in a Harvard course called "Thinking About Thinking," to formations in the natural sciences like molecular biophysics, Honan identifies literally dozens of initiatives cutting across the university. While some of the arrangements do replace the specialties from which they sprang—botany and zoology are said to be fading before new disciplines like structural biology and cognitive biology—many do not, with the result that the total list of fields increases. And while some participants in this process suggest that the proliferation of specialties is just a temporary effort to get at a greater interconnectedness, even those who make this point see its realization as a work of the next century. Until then, it seems that, beyond Babel, interdisciplinarity is a proliferator of new specialties—a way of coping with Babel that actually makes it more Babelish.

Finding ourselves beyond Babel, we interdisciplinarians would do well to notice some ways in which the academy-as-Babel image itself has been misleading. By stressing restoration of unity, this image calls attention away from the fact that activities justified by our own critique of specialization have a way of generating more specialties—not because synthesis isn't intended and offered, but because completeness isn't immediately possible (even the offered syntheses are partial) and because the entity that results will want to pursue its own synecdoches. The same reasoning suggests that the "at Babel" imagery can mislead insofar as it leaves tacit the corrective priority that the "restoration of unity" claim arrogates to itself—imperfect or incomplete syntheses may very well be a basis no better for correcting specialized knowledge than are other specialized knowledges. Inclusion by appropriation may just be wrong.

We come finally, then, to irony: Since Babel, interdisciplinarity has been in some respects misleading—in generating specialties even while decrying specialization, calling for more completeness and coherency of knowledge than it can deliver. But interdisciplinarity as a way of construing and coping remains an essential form of adaptation—we still have to cope with the problem of accessing specialties, and we still have to bring knowledges developed separately into association. Neither these things nor the flexibility, challenge, innovation and equability of outlook associated with interdisciplinary work are likely to happen in fields devoted to their own imageries. Indeed, it is Minnich, exponent of undoing "imposed and in fact partial collective terms and unjustly exclusionary . . . practices and scholarship," who

asks whether, after the undoing, there is "nothing left but rampant relativism, radically atomistic pluralism, chaos and strife ... [a denial of] the worth and agency of those [who are now to be] included, . . . a jumble of undifferentiated 'many?'" To answer no, she proposes that we must treat the struggles driven by our diversity as generative tensions rather than as contradictions—something that only operates if we remain willing and able to pay attention to each other, (p. 3ff) And this last is something central to the interdisciplinary agenda that specialists have long made it clear they are more than willing to do without.

Second, in view of this point, it will be important to promote and protect programs that have "generative tension" as their *raison d'être*. Such programs are apt to keep on providing opportunities to raise and to pursue the interdisciplinary quests for access and integration. By contrast, programs that become devoted to their own syntheses, spawned as they may have been by interdisciplinary effort, seldom remain devoted to maintaining that effort after they are in place.

Third, it remains important to field curricula that require attention to the divided disciplinary and perspectival specializations rather than allowing attention to just one. It is only through the systematic juxtaposition of the elements of different fields that we can come to grips with the problem of how to benefit from what they have discovered separately.

It is proper, finally, to ask why we should bother trying to preserve the interdisciplinary game—the constant pursuit of access and coherency or integration—beyond Babel. My answer can be simply put: By bringing together ideas and information from many specialties, we are bringing more of the ultimate intransigence of reality to bear upon any claims we put forward about that reality. Claims that can survive the challenge of so many different kinds of data gathered and used in so many different ways—that can hold up in the face of so many different ways of being wrong—are claims that we ignore at our peril.

Such claims cannot be developed without the continued pursuit of specialized work. Such claims will not be developed without the continued pursuit of interdisciplinary work.

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## References

- The Holy Scriptures*. (1939) "Revised In Accordance With Jewish Tradition And Modern Biblical Scholarship," Hebrew Publishing Company of New York.
- Honan, W.H. (3/23/94). "Academic Disciplines Increasingly Entwine, Recasting Scholarship." *New York Times*, p. A19. [Honan attributes the "God/universities" quip to J. A. Armstrong of MIT.]
- Minnich, E. K. (January, 1994) *Liberal Learning, Diversity, and Democratic Commitments, From Contradictions to Generative Tensions: "E Pluribus Unum?"* An unfinished draft report from The American Commitments National Panel, American Association of Colleges and Universities," shared at this stage as part of a broad national dialogue." Washington, DC.

## ERRATA

### ISSUES IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES, 1996

Page 90, the paragraph on line 9 should read:

Minnich seems to me to be arguing that the second of these two problems may be one that shouldn't be solved. For "integration" might help to keep in place the quite different set of problems she identifies—the "[misleadingly singular,] falsely universalized and decontextualized sense [of] who 'we' are and what 'democracy' and 'liberal education' mean. . . [the] partial collective terms and unjustly exclusionary . . . practices and scholarship. . . [and] the falsifying nostalgia for singularly defined 'good old days.'" As an alternative, Minnich offers us an image of the academy as habitat of scholars preoccupied with diversity in the human population—of the world, of course, but, more particularly and more modestly, of what is now the United States. In this academy, "issues of 'cultural diversity'. . . are not a problem for liberal learning, but a resource and a goal" [p.3].

Pages 93-94, the paragraphs beginning on line 21 of page 93 and ending on line 22 of page 94, should not be indented.

Page 98 should begin with:

How to cope with the present situation? I have three suggestions:

First, recall that while interdisciplinarity has contributed to the further Babelizing of the academy, the specialties it has spawned and hopes to protect are themselves interdisciplinary in character. This means that more and more people of the academy have been exposed to interdisciplinary activity, so that for more people than ever the front-end costs of interdisciplinary training have been paid. These are people more than usual inclined to balk at the limits of the "specialized" uses of fields in which they were trained. My information here is anecdotal but persuasive—a certain number of students at the undergraduate and graduate level are beginning to leave the new fields because, despite their interdisciplinary rhetoric, the fields are too soon becoming restrictive and synecdochic.