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In Support of Disciplinarity in Teaching Sociology: Reflections from Ireland

Amanda Haynes

Abstract
This article argues for the importance of disciplinarity in the education of novice sociologists and considers the impact of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) on opportunities for undergraduate students to achieve a command of the discipline. The promotion of modularization and generic skills integral to establishing the EHEA can be understood as incrementally undermining disciplinarity. Moreover, values enshrined in the EHEA specifically disadvantage sociological disciplinarity by promoting service to the market over mastery of a discipline. This article presents the Republic of Ireland as an example of a national context in which sociology is most commonly taught within multidisciplinary degree programs and argues that the Irish experience may be portentous of more global trends, linking the structural position of sociology in Ireland to the wider European policy context. Finally, the article explores ways in which sociologists teaching in such contexts can nonetheless promote disciplinarity.

Keywords
discipline, disciplinarity, marketization, commodification, modularization

THE VALUE OF A DISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

Over the course of the past decade, it has become increasingly difficult to argue for the value of disciplinarity. The necessity of interdisciplinarity, if not post-disciplinarity, has taken on the status of common sense (Cooper 2012). In recent decades,

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reflections on the discipline of sociology and the academy more generally have tended to depict disciplinarity as an intellectual cul de sac and an antediluvian artifact of a long disappeared university system that supported the self-indulgent scholarly pursuits of a well-heeled elite (see e.g., Sayer 2003). Interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, is lauded as the gold standard of the progressive modern university (Biagioli 2009; Cooper 2012). Interdisciplinarity offers the potential for creativity, innovation, application, value added, and synergy. These laudable goals are to be achieved via collaborative, collective, team-based, boundary-blurring, and border-crossing activities. Characterized in this fashion, the necessity of interdisciplinarity can become almost a given—a fundamental operating assumption for the modern university, its management, and faculty.

From this perspective, the demise of the disciplines is regarded as “historically necessary” (Marcovich and Shinn 2011:585). Practices and policies that serve to reproduce disciplinary boundaries are critiqued as obstacles to progress. Vocal defense of disciplinary boundaries implicates one in seemingly pedagogically and academically damaging ring-fencing of resources. Disciplinary boundaries, it is implied, serve affiliates of disciplinary communities but at the expense of relevant and creative teaching and learning.

This article will argue that these perspectives on (inter)disciplinarity are reflected in international, particularly European higher education policy and are directly related to the repurposing of undergraduate education to the production of workers with transferable skills who can adjust to fluctuating market demand (Berndtson 2011). Interdisciplinarity is represented as flexible, problem oriented, and consequently, better suited to the needs of the market. As McLennan (2003:551) warns, there is “a functional rationale for interdisciplinarity—such as . . . consumer shifts in undergraduate course/topic preferences, all couched within a New Managerialist trumpeting of generic skills, joined-up thinking, evidence-based policy and so on.” In Europe at least, the role of undergraduate education in producing the disciplinary specialist is increasingly devalued, with national governments such as Ireland cautioning against early specialization (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2011) and, in the UK, a divorcing of subject from discipline, which Parker (2002:374) argues represents “part of the marketing practice of ‘disassociation’ . . . to strip university departments of their sense of exclusivity and of inherent value.”

Following Linder et al. (2014), who regard the development of disciplinary literacy as the reason d’être for any undergraduate degree program, this article argues for the necessity of disciplinarity, particularly at the level of undergraduate teaching. It is founded in a valuing of disciplinarity (Parker 2002), including as a solid footing for interdisciplinary collaboration (Burawoy 2009) but primarily for the value of an experientially informed, coherent approach to knowledge and knowledge production. While the boundaried nature of the academic discipline has been critiqued as undemocratic and static (Gregson 2003; Sayer 2003), there are important benefits to their “trans-historical, stable, organizational and intellectual” character (Marcovich and Shinn 2011:584). Johnston (2003) asserts that

**disciplinary expert**

It can be argued that a disciplinary education reproduces intellectual communities that are defined by an integrated tradition of *episteme*, namely, theoretical knowledge; *techne*, namely, applied knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2001; Flyvberg, Landman, and Schram 2012); and *phronesis*, namely, practical wisdom or “knowledge that is sensitive to its application in specific settings and is therefore able to manage itself” (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012:1), a combination, lacking in modular approaches to education, that is important to the capacity to act confidently in the world in a critically reflexive manner (Psoinos 2013). Writing of the search for a disciplinary identity in those fields of study that are defined by their interdisciplinarity, Pulkkinen (2015) and Mäyrä, Van Looy, and Quandt (2013) highlight some of the uncertainty that the absence of a disciplinary identity produces in students: What type of scholarship should they pursue? How should they approach their object of study? To what bodies of scholarship should they refer and contribute? Against what standards will their work be evaluated? In what ways might they seek or might they wish to prevent their work being used? As Abbott (2001) argues, in the absence of omniscience, disciplines provide informed parameters to the necessarily partial pursuit of knowledge. There are clear-cut examples of grassroots interdisciplinary endeavors of excellent pedagogic and political pedigree, for example, in the form of
Equality Studies, Gender Studies, and Women’s Studies programs. But not all interdisciplinary undertakings are dominated by academics drawn together at grassroots level by shared political and critical orientations. Interdisciplinary programs and units developed at the behest of management are more likely to benefit from institutional support. However, there is a danger that top-down–initiated drives toward interdisciplinary might be vulnerable not just to a lack of coherency but also to a value-blind approach if de-coupled from either disciplinary or politicized grassroots origins.

THE CONDITIONS NECESSARY TO DISCIPLINARY

A disciplinary undergraduate education can be understood as a process of “disciplinary becoming,” defined by Dressen-Hammouda (2008:234) as one whereby “students gain their ‘disciplinary voice’ (Matsuda & Tardy 2007) and come to master the genres of their new disciplinary community.” This is the means by which they become literate in their discipline, namely, proficient in generating and using disciplinary knowledge (Linder et al. 2014). To become literate sociologists, students require immersion in a coherent program of study that provides them with the opportunity to engage with sociological canon. Although it has been argued that sociology lacks such a cohesive center (Urry 1981), McLean, Abbas, and Ashwin’s (2015:185) examination of curriculum documents in the UK found a “strong [theoretical, empirical and methodological] core which conveys singularity.”

McLean et al. (2015) argue, however, that to become sociologists, students require more than just “established, handed on knowledge.” Drawing on Bourdieudian (1984) frame and genre theory, Dressen-Hammouda (2008) clarifies that students must acquire not only the “materialized genres” employed in their disciplinary community, namely, the linguistic, textual, behavioral, and so on codes through which members communicate but also an entire range of tacit “ways of being, seeing and acting together.” McLean et al. (2015) concur that to “become” a member of a disciplinary community, such as sociology, it is necessary both to learn about the tools and knowledge of the discipline but also to learn how sociologists approach, evaluate, and interpret their work. Muller (2009:214) links the development of strong disciplinary identity to the development of “voice.” He argues that secure attachment to as well as understanding of a disciplinary community is a necessary precursor to “becoming a recognized innovator in an established tradition.” A firm grounding in a discipline’s skill sets and cognitive tools, combined with a sense of belonging to that community, cultivate active (including critical) participation in that community. For the student and graduate, it follows that the capacity to participate confidently and meaningfully in academic and public discourse are facilitated by a strong disciplinary identity. McLean et al. (2015:181) argue that without the development of a sociological habitus—namely, “a disciplinary identity that is characterized by thinking in open-minded ways about human behavior, by questioning the relationship between individuals and the conditions they find themselves in and by being oriented to improving society”—students can act as repositories of established sociological knowledge but will have weak capacity to apply their learning. In this sense, identity work is core to the process of disciplinary becoming. The process of developing a sociological habitus (Bourdieu 1990) is also a process of growing identification as a sociologist.

In summary, access to the sociological community involves the acquisition of what Bernstein (1996, 2000) referred to as “pedagogic rights” (McLean and Abbas 2010). Understood as capabilities, these relate to the personal, namely, confidence in one’s disciplinary literacy; social, namely, one’s sense of belonging to the sociological community; and political, namely, the capacity to participate in “discussion and action” (McLean and Abbas 2014). The development of these capabilities is inextricably interlinked with the acquisition of specialist sociological knowledge (McLean et al. 2015). The process of engaging with sociological canon gives students confidence in their disciplinary voice, a sense of identity as sociologists, and exposure to others who also identify as part of the sociological community and from whom they might learn the tacit ways of being a sociologist. Research indicates that identification with a discipline stimulates engagement, which is in turn key to learning [McKinney 2007].

CHALLENGES TO A DISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

In this section, I outline some of the structural challenges to “becoming” a sociologist in Ireland, particularly focusing on the dominance of multidisciplinary programs at the undergraduate level. I connect developments in this area to European higher education policy and more specifically to processes of marketization and commodification.
Sociology in Irish Undergraduate Degree Programs

Ireland is a country of 4.7 million people served by 7 universities, 14 institutes of technology, and 7 colleges of education (DES 2011) with a 60 percent participation rate in higher education (Hazelkorn 2014:1344). The social sciences remain among the most popular fields of study among new entrants (Higher Education Authority [HEA] 2014). At the time of writing however, it is possible to complete a single honors undergraduate degree in sociology in only one higher education institution in the Republic of Ireland (University College Cork). The majority of institutes of technology offer sociology only as a dimension of vocationally focused programs, in most instances relating to social care. Most universities offer the option of taking sociology as a subject stream but only as a joint major. Only 2 of the 7 universities in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin and the University of Limerick, offer applicants the opportunity to enter programs that include sociology in the title, and in the latter institution, all but one of these degrees will be subsumed into a large liberal arts program from September 2017. This new liberal arts program will be the second in Ireland to offer the option of a single honors degree in sociology but, as in University College Cork, only from the second year of the program.

The National Policy Context

The development of Ireland’s national higher education sector is guided by the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (also referred to as the Hunt report) launched in 2011. The strategy is described by Murphy (2014:482) as the “blueprint for the development of Irish higher education.” This strategy includes as core goals increasing the relevance of provision to the economy and society (Department of Education and Skills 2016). Developed following the collapse of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger economy, Hazelkorn (2014) characterizes the strategy as emphasizing performance and accountability. Structurally, this focus will translate into a shrinking of the Irish higher education sector as “mergers and acquisitions, long considered a feature of the corporate world, now form part of Irish higher education life” (Hazelkorn 2014:1351). Ideologically, authors such as Holborow (2012:92–95) argue that the Hunt Report places Irish higher education in the service of capitalism:

Official government policy on Higher Education in Ireland, as presented in the Hunt Report . . . makes the assumption, widely repeated elsewhere in Irish society, that the provision of highly skilled graduates will be the route to economic recovery. . . . The report’s view of the content of higher education can be summed up in one word—skills.

The European Policy Context

Irish higher education policy is strongly influenced by and reflective of global trends toward the marketization and commodification of higher education that do not favor the disciplinary integrity of sociology. Structural reforms to the higher education sector have been shaped by a 2004 OECD review that recommended “sweeping internal changes such as new-style management, cost efficiency and more accountability” (Bradley 2007:301–02) and, more significantly, calls for responsiveness to commercial interests. Pressures to make the publicly funded higher education institution (HEI) a commercially viable entity also informed the development of the European Higher Education Area, through what is referred to as the Bologna process.

The Bologna process (1999–2011) was a European project involving 47 national higher education systems, including Ireland, which established a European Higher Education Area. Aiming to facilitate the movement of graduates and students throughout Europe, the project involved radical interventions into national systems of higher education toward the standardization of qualifications (Cerych 2002). While the project also involved significant reform to the governance and structure of HEIs, pedagogically, its aims were advanced primarily through the imposition of modularization and the quantification of learning achieved through the definition of learning outcomes.

A central tenet of the Bologna Declaration (1999) that marked the commencement of the project to create a European Higher Education Area was “the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of this European higher educational space.” Critics of the Bologna process point to neoliberal economic values as the underlying principles informing the program of work. Lorenz (2006) critiques what he perceives as the reification of commercial value and the principle that post Bologna, knowledge is only worth generating if it has monetary worth. The focus on marketable knowledge extends to undergraduate teaching, where an emphasis is placed on applied learning and employability, “not the ‘cultivated man’, not the ‘specialist’ type of man as identified by Weber” (Marin 2014:71).
While there are important processes of democratization at play here, from a disciplinary perspective, the Bologna process has made a significant contribution to constructing a European policy environment far more favorable to STEM than the humanities and social sciences. Murphy (2014:475) agrees that the Bologna process, in placing higher education in the service of “the interests of the labour market,” has differing implications for individual disciplines. Tomić-Koludrović (2009) concurs that:

those fields oriented more toward practical knowledge and skills can be said to be less profoundly affected by the current restructuring of the curriculum and change of the goals and philosophy of the educational process. The same goes for the commercialization of research that has actually been enthusiastically embraced by many researchers in natural, technical and medical sciences. Those most adversely affected by and opposed to the change seem to be scholars in the humanities and social sciences. (P. 3)

Although the popularity of sociology with undergraduate students is an important buffer against the effects of a neoliberal agenda, the implications of this policy focus extend beyond considerations of undergraduate demand to the capacity of the individual HEI to generate income through the commercialization of knowledge, which Kathleen Lynch (2006) in turn links to the desire on the part of the State to roll back on its commitments to publicly fund higher education. Thus, in the neoliberal HEI, a “commercially viable” discipline is not merely one that recruits significant numbers of undergraduate students but increasingly one whose faculty are engaged in lucrative research. Transposed into Ireland’s National Strategy (2011): “In the future, higher education will need to be more proactive in commercialization and knowledge transfer, and will have to pursue this in collaboration with others in enterprise and the wider society.”

In the UK, Stanley (2009:8) notes that between 2001 and 2008, “women’s studies has been largely absorbed into a range of other areas; the sociology of health and illness has mainly been returned in related medical areas; and ditto the return elsewhere of economic sociology, educational sociology, the sociology of organizations, sociological geography, and development studies.” This dispersal is framed positively by Stanley as the sociological “colonization” of other disciplines, but other UK faculty understand them as “the neoliberal-led restructuring of universities . . . leading to a dismantling or reconfiguring of disciplinary departments” (Wainwright et al. 2014:410), Dart (2015) links such developments to the marketization of higher education, asserting that modular systems facilitate the closure of courses that don’t maintain high rates of enrollment.

In Northern Ireland, across our border with the UK, the absorption of sociology into other disciplines has been overtly driven by marketization. “Privileging techne over episteme” (Marin 2014:72) in a manner consistent with the Bologna process, the management of Queens University Belfast has chosen to close both their single honors programs in sociology and in anthropology. Although Queens was ranked within the top 10 percent of UK universities with respect to student satisfaction with the teaching of sociology (Guardian UK 2016), the program is to be terminated, and faculty who are not made redundant are to be subsumed into the School of Education (The Last Round 2016). The vice-chancellor of Queen’s University Belfast, Patrick Johnston, is on record as having stated that rather than offering sociology and anthropology as unique degree programs, the University intends “to strengthen those subjects by allowing them to partner with other subject areas which actually make their relevance more connected” (University Times 2016).

**Marketization and Disciplinarity**

Both European and Irish higher education policies therefore favor STEM, positioning sociology as vulnerable to structural changes designed to promote the marketization of higher education and its students. Both policy environments also promote practices, which are contrary to the conditions necessary for the development of disciplinary specialists. Specifically, the standardization of higher education across the common European Higher Education Area has relied in great part on the imposition of modularization and the requirement for learning to be packaged and evaluated in terms of predefined learning outcomes. While such developments have certain pedagogical merits, from a disciplinary perspective, they can be argued to constitute a threat. Both Muller (2009) and Bridges (2000) argue that modularization undermines the disciplinary coherence of the student’s learning experience. In discussing the success of the professions in instilling a sense of identity in their graduates, Muller (2009:214) emphasizes the importance
of boundaries to such processes and sees disciplinary identity as depending very much on “a degree of insulation, or ‘necessary distance.’” Weller (2012) concurs that the capacity to “mix and match” modules threatens disciplinary learning while failing to enhance graduate employability in the absence of cohesively structured interdisciplinary programs. Mike Savage (2010) expresses concerns that modularization has led to sociology courses being offered as a disconnected smorgasbord. In an Irish context, Harvey, Hayes, and O’Rourke (2013:46) found that 60 percent of respondents in their Irish higher education institution felt that modularization “fragments the learning process,” and more than 33 percent considered it a “barrier to an integrated approach to learning.” In research on one of the growing streams of modular undergraduate programs in the UK, Dart (2015:5) finds “little evidence of students being introduced to any of the main sociological paradigms.”

The other key curricular impact of the Bologna process, learning outcomes, are “statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do after completion of learning” (Leney, Gordon, and Adam 2009:9) and can be understood as “essential to the commodification of learning and hence to the desire to audit and monitor the performance of those involved” (Hussey and Smith 2002:231) Parker (2002) asserts that the requirement to employ pre-defined descriptors, which such an auditing culture necessitates, tends to produce generic learning outcomes that disappear disciplinary standards.

Some analyses consider the orientation of undergraduate higher education away from disciplinary specialization to be an established objective of the Bologna process. Berndtson (2011) argues that a preference for an interdisciplinary undergraduate system is inherent in the explicit prioritizing of techné to be attained via bespoke pathways through a modular system. In support of this correlation, he cites an evaluation of the Bologna process commissioned by the European Union’s Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers:

To achieve labour-market relevance of the first degree, curricular content needs to be reshuffled and become more applied at an earlier stage, while some theoretical foundations move “upwards” into the graduate phase. On the other hand, a gain is achieved in that learning paths become more flexible, students have more scope for interdisciplinary orientation. (CHEPS 2006:53)

Movement toward a general undergraduate education is replicated in Irish national education policy, at least in the foundational year of the undergraduate degree. The Hunt Report calls for higher education institutions to “offer broad-based courses and more interdisciplinary learning opportunities for students in the first year of their undergraduate studies” (DES 2011:18), effectively recommending against investment in programs that are wholly dedicated to a single discipline. The call is not restricted to the first year however, and the Report commends those institutions who have promoted interdisciplinarity throughout the undergraduate experience by “enabling and encouraging students to choose modules outside the area of their chosen specialization” (DES 2011:56). The Irish national strategy document specifically links the motivation for enhancing the interdisciplinarity of the Irish undergraduate experience to the policies of the European Higher Education Area: “The implementation of modularisation and semesterisation, introduced under the Bologna process, provides the opportunity for greater interdisciplinarity in student learning—an opportunity that has not yet been fully exploited by Irish higher education institutions” (DES 2011:56). In the intervening years, Ireland’s Higher Education Authority has translated such aspirations into targets, a failure to reach that will directly impact Irish universities’ state funding (Hazelkorn 2014).

Thus, national interventions seeking to promote the standardization of education and qualifications in support of the European-wide mobility of workers have meant that higher education institutions are incrementally “shifting the curricular discourse away from the traditional discipline-based, career-focused approach towards one that is more student-centered and focused on societal needs and the role of lifelong learning as a dynamic process” (Harvey et al. 2013:44–45). This article asserts that the implications of this movement for the value and production of the disciplinary specialist require discussion, particularly within a disciplinary community that finds itself on the wrong side of market interests.

ACHIEVING DISCIPLINARITY

In the following section, I detail a number of ways in which teachers of sociology working in multidisciplinary undergraduate contexts can nonetheless enhance disciplinarity. In many senses, the suggestions that follow could be applied to any discipline. However, I also argue throughout that
the character of our discipline presents particular challenges and advantages in such undertakings.

**Clarify Disciplinary Distinctiveness**

Sociology programs may have an identifiable core (McLean et al. 2015), but the discipline lacks clear boundaries (Cooper 2012). Sayer (2003), critiquing a certain disciplinary expansionism, argues that the perception of sociology as limitless and universal is erroneous hubris. All disciplines, he argues, view themselves as omnirelevant—geographers might argue that every subject has a spatial component, historians might argue that everything is better understood through its past. Nonetheless, our wide-ranging interests, and indeed our interdisciplinary projects, have largely eradicated any possibility for object-defined disciplinary parameters.

Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean’s (2014) study of the manner in which sociology students describe their discipline is indicative of the need to attend to defining our disciplinary distinctiveness for students. Based on interviews with 86 students across four institutions, they found that the majority understood sociology only as a collection of issues or modules. Interviewed over the course of their degree programs, only a minority ever reached a more complex conceptual understanding of sociology as a discipline. Given the apparently increasing permeability of disciplinary boundaries within the social sciences, it is necessary that we attend to transitioning students’ understanding of the distinctiveness of their discipline from a simple one based on the (impossible) demarcation of specifically sociological areas of interest to an appreciation of what McLennan (2003) refers to as the conditions under which work is sociological. Given the apparently increasing permeability of disciplinary boundaries within the social sciences, it is necessary that we attend to transitioning students’ understanding of the distinctiveness of their discipline from a simple one based on the (impossible) demarcation of specifically sociological areas of interest to an appreciation of what McLennan (2003) refers to as the conditions under which work is sociological.

Particularly in modular contexts, a clear understanding of the character of the discipline will enhance students’ appreciation of the coherency and purpose of the elements of the curriculum with which they are required to engage. It provides a lens through which they may come to see the successful completion of units of learning in terms of professional development rather than just the completion of isolated modules.

**Acknowledge Conflict**

Ballantine et al. (2016) provide an insightful survey of three ways in which sociologists approach the designation of a disciplinary core. In addition to providing a useful resource for those of us attempting to communicate our disciplinary distinctiveness to students, the article also underscores that consensus is not one of our defining features. Sociology is a discipline that values and is valued for its critical reflexivity. This strength is however also our weakness; Stephen Crook (2003) notes that sociology has been in an extended period of self-defined crisis since the 1960s, with the past decade or so having been characterized by particularly moribund pronouncements on the state of the discipline.

Introductory courses and textbooks tend to present our incoming students with the full range of our disciplinary complexity in year one of their studies. To be introduced to sociology is to be immediately introduced to its internal divisions. When we lay out before students our fractured history and present, we might also emphasize the value of the passions and processes that underpin this tendency toward conflict and contextualize them with an appreciation of the partiality of knowledge. As McLennan (2003:551) says, “This infernal indeterminateness has long been something of an embarrassment, but, surprisingly perhaps, now it appears a signal advantage in a flexible, fuzzy-logic intellectual culture, that is to say, the culture of ‘complexity.’” There is a story to be told to our students. One of a grown-up discipline—not sociology, but sociologies—better for its recognition of partiality and its accommodation of diversity.

**Protect Progression**

Stories will not substitute for structure. Muller (2009) explicates the importance of sequence to a conceptually coherent learning experience and exemplifies the problems of segmentation through emphasizing the gaps in knowledge that problem-based learning approaches to medicine have produced. The development of a strong scholarly and professional identity requires not just breadth of exposure but also depth of understanding and skill (McKinney and Naseri 2011), but McKinney et al. (2004) assert that sociology programs appear less likely to sequence modules than other disciplines. Cappell and Kamens (2002) highlight that the development of competent sociology graduates depends not just on access to a core curriculum but also on the quality of the connections between units within that curriculum. Deep learning is dependent on a curricular structure that builds in progression and cannot be replaced by “cumulative exposure to more and more subject matter” (McKinney et al. 2004:2). This article has asserted that coherency is threatened by modularization, but there are multiple structural forces in play that work against progression:
Institutional emphases on achieving teaching efficiencies, reducing payroll (McKinney et al. 2004), and capitalizing on lucrative student exchanges also increases pressures to open up sociology modules to student groups that are multidisciplinary, traverse different years, and include significant number of students taking the course as a standalone elective.

Foster Community

I am conscious that any suggestion that academics might increase their engagement in extracurricular activities will be viewed with skepticism given increasing pressure to deliver that which is curricular with ever fewer resources and rewards. I am very cognizant of Harley and Natalier’s (2013) warning that the demands of the student experience must be balanced against work justice for faculty. Nonetheless, the extracurricular represents a valuable avenue for the development of disciplinary community and thus identity. Activities might include faculty participation in a student-led sociological society, seminar series, or journal. Neville et al. (2012) discuss the example of a university-based student journal of sociology for which faculty volunteered their time as editors and editorial board members. The journal provided students with the opportunity to actively participate in the disciplinary community, engaging in cooperative decision making with members of faculty. The launch of each issue provided an opportunity to communally recognize the student authors’ induction into the disciplinary community. McKinney and Naseri (2011) note that extracurricular activities that bring together students, and importantly faculty and students, are a means of engaging the initiate in their discipline through developing their connection to a disciplinary community.

Provide Opportunities to Perform Sociology

It is well established that learning is most effective where students are given the opportunity to participate actively. Active learning involves students talking and writing about the material with which they are engaging, preferably in concert with their peers (Prince 2004). As educators of sociologists, I would argue that we have the opportunity to go a step beyond active learning to offer students the opportunity for experiential learning (Kolb 1984).

Increased litigation consciousness on the part of academic institutions combined with resource-related restrictions on the closeness with which faculty can supervise original empirical research make undergraduate fieldwork increasingly challenging to organize. There remain, however, institutional pockets of leniency, for example in relation to capstone projects and methods courses. Outside of such contexts, we have available to us a myriad of public data sources that might be mined for the purposes of facilitating discrete analytical exercises. Higher education institutions provide access to searchable databases of newspaper articles; broadcast media are podcasted and available online; twitter feeds can be searched and captured. Offline, city plans are available for critical examination, new configurations of street furniture invite analysis, and graffiti and street art await the uncovering of their declaratory purpose. Students themselves embody a wealth of experience waiting to be illuminated through connection to their learning via the sociological imagination. Data are everywhere.

The opportunity to acquire skills in fieldwork is a key point of distinction between sociology and other social sciences. As such, our students have particular opportunities to perform their discipline—not just by debating the knowledge that others have generated but through they themselves engaging in and reflecting on (Moon 2004) the act of knowledge creation.

CONCLUSION

All subjects have learning outcomes because they all contain implicit packages of knowledge and skills. . . . However, a discipline is a more complex structure: to be engaged in a discipline is to shape, and by shaped by, the subject, to be part of a scholarly community, to engage with fellow students—to become “disciplined.” (Parker 2002:374)

For Parker (2002:375), the added value of a higher education, that which makes it more than the sum of its modularized, measured, and commodified parts, is the “transformational process” that results from becoming part of a disciplinary community. This article has argued, however, that the polices that direct the development of higher education, at least in the European Higher Education Area, increasingly devalue a disciplinary undergraduate education and favor interdisciplinarity. I have sought to argue for disciplinarity on its own merits but also heed the warnings of critics such as Dart (2015:43) that postdisciplinary structures have not in fact provided for an interdisciplinary education but rather a multidisciplinary bazaar delivered by disciplinary
faculty contending for market share. “[T]he increasing emphasis . . . on accountability and efficiency, which inevitably provokes competition for resources between disciplinary communities.”

Wainwright et al. (2014) assert that academics have been relatively silent on the effects of neoliberalism in higher education on disciplinary identity. Defending a disciplinary education requires us to confront such questions and reveal the value orientations that underlie official incursions against disciplinarity. It is important to critique the assumption that interdisciplinarity is inherently progressive and to ask whose interests in which it is manifested serves. Moreover, like Dart (2015), it is necessary to question whether that which is branded as interdisciplinarity really bears its characteristics. In facing the challenges arising from the marketization of higher education, our discipline itself—its critical sophistication, cognitive toolkit, and community—may be our best resource.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Meghan Burke, Sara O’Sullivan, and John Zipp.

NOTES

1. University College Cork offers students who enter their bachelor of arts programs the option of taking a single honors in sociology from second year.

2. The academic units in which sociology is housed remain disciplinary departments in the majority, although they may include non-sociology faculty. Only two of the seven universities do not have unique departments or schools of sociology.

3. See also the comprehensive recommendations of McKinney et al.’s (2004) report, which details strategies and techniques to advance disciplinarity where sociology is taught outside of a single honors program.

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Amanda Haynes is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Limerick. Amanda’s research interests focus on the analysis of physical, discursive, and classificatory violations motivated by prejudice. She is a co-director of both the Hate and Hostility Research Group and the Power, Discourse and Society Research Group at the University of Limerick. Her teaching centers on introductory sociology and research methods. She is a two-time winner of her institution’s teaching excellence award.