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*Book review:*

## Performing interdisciplinary knowledge

### Information work in emerging interdisciplinary research

*Eystein Gullbekk (2021). Performing interdisciplinary knowledge: Information work in emerging interdisciplinary research. OsloMet Avhandling 2021 nr 9. Oslo Metropolitan University*

Interdisciplinary research work is often encouraged by policymakers and research funders since it can offer possible solutions to an increasingly complex world facing more and more complicated problems that need to be addressed from a range of different perspectives. However, to do interdisciplinary research involves a number of challenges concerning, for example, working together with people who do not necessarily share ones theoretical and methodological assumptions. In contrast to research conducted within established and relatively unified disciplines, interdisciplinary researchers thus face a variety of conceptual repertoires and need to span, and make themselves acquainted with, more than one area of literature. This can be described in terms of their literature being scattered over a large area of different topics rather than being concentrated to a core of journals. In other words, the information work required by interdisciplinary researchers is likely to be more complex and heterogeneous than that which takes place within the single disciplines. The notion of information work is central to Eystein Gullbekk's doctoral dissertation. With reference to Palmer and Cragin (2008) it is explained as "the labor of locating, gathering, sorting, interpreting, assimilating, and producing information" (p. 13).

The empirical setting of this thesis is a Norwegian university department where interdisciplinary research is conducted. As the title of the thesis indicates, interdisciplinary research can be more or less interdisciplinary in character. In this study, the research conducted by the participants is described as *emerging* interdisciplinary research, which means that the people involved clearly lack a fixed common disciplinary abode.

The study is driven by two overall aims, which are operationalised through two different but interconnected examinations. The first of these aims is empirical in character and concerns “the researchers’ efforts of making their unique interdisciplinary work recognisable to various audiences” (p. 17). The second aim, as I read the thesis, is mainly theoretical (but also methodological) in character. With a clear grounding in practice theoretical reasoning, where for this thesis the notion of performativity is in focus, Gullbekk addresses the question how a focus on performativity in research practices can enrich our understanding of information work in emerging interdisciplinary research.

The thesis is article based and consists of three previously published papers, which are unified and discussed in an introduction that presents in detail key concepts, previous literature, theoretical framework, and methods. The introduction ends by a discussion of the results from the three papers and by a set of conclusions.

Not least from the literature review, it stands clear that the study is a contribution to the area of library and information science (LIS) commonly termed information behaviour research. However, Gullbekk is clearly connecting his work to a specific strand of this area, which he terms the programme of information practice research. In a careful manner, he describes the outline of this programme including a development from information practices being conceptualized as collective accomplishments to an understanding grounded in post-humanism. The post-humanistic stance means that we also need to take into consideration the notion of agency being dispersed over both human and non-human actors when investigating information work. This observation, concerning distributed agency, is of great importance for the analyses presented in the thesis and leads us into what I consider being one of the particular strengths of this work, namely the sophisticatedly elaborated theoretical framework and how this is connected to the reasoning around the methods employed.

For the production of empirical data, the study gathered altogether 14 participants: nine PhD students and five senior researchers. These took part in what Gullbekk refers to as a series of hybrid interviews. He met his participants 2-3 times and mixed semi-structured, interview-guide based conversations with talk-aloud search sessions and walk-throughs of the references in the participants’ drafted or published articles. The data thus produced were then analysed through a frame of practice theory including a combination of two different practice theoretical lenses, which are referred to as *practice-as-enacted* and *practice-as-performed*.

According to the practice-as-enacted perspective, a practice is conceptualised as a generally recognised enduring entity, which in the words of Andreas Reckwitz can be described as “a pattern that can be filled out” (2002, p. 250). Gullbekk posits that practices conceptualised in this way “operate as templates for the carrying out of everyday tasks and projects” (p. 33). However, practices viewed this way are also subject to changes since these templates for action can be enacted in different ways over time. By drawing on Elizabeth Shove and colleagues (2012) who describe practices as constituted of constellations of elements – that is material, competencies, and meaning – Gullbekk exemplifies how, for example, the practice of systematic reviewing, which is well-established within the health sciences, can change over time. The meaning-element in this practice is the shared idea that it generates valid and reliable knowledge. The material-element consists of, for example, the reviewed journals and the bibliographic databases used for finding the reviewed articles, whereas the competence-element comprises the knowledge and skills required for conducting the review. The point is, though, that in other scholarly fields, and indeed, within emerging interdisciplinary research, these practice elements may, as Gullbekk emphasises, “look different, or stem from practices that

infuse elements with other meanings; literature may not be organized through databases having the same functionality as they have in the health sciences, and notions of validity in research output may be different” (p. 34). In addition to this notion of change in practices, Gullbekk points out that according to the practice-as-enacted perspective, practitioners are conceived as capable human agents that are assumed to demonstrate knowledgeability and certain competencies, which in extension also implies that there is a normative dimension to practices – that is practices are collectively expected to be carried out in a more or less specific way.

The other theoretical lens, the practice-as-performed perspective, is grounded in a different ontology compared to the lens described above and stems from previous work by authors that I would locate to the area of science and technology studies (e.g. Latour, Callon, Mol and Barad). For this lens, the notion of *event* is central. People engaging in practices come together in events, which are unpredictable since they are comprised of both human and non-human actors over which agency is distributed. This is a perspective that highlights the contingency of practice or, as Gullbekk puts it, the “unique moments of practicing” (p. 39), which we never fully can foresee in detail. This is where we get close to what is actually going on in practice. I particularly like how Gullbekk employs this lens, for example, when he is accounting for his observations during the talk-aloud search sessions. In the subsequent quotation, the reader is presented with a vivid account of how not only the searcher, the computer screen and the search interface are part of the practice of searching but also a range of other actors (e.g. notebooks, rediscovered folders, friends and a bag):

For instance, the interest in the use of a particular concept across various disciplines could lead to discovery of familiar names, perhaps a colleague across the hall, resulting in readdressed searches. Rediscovered clues in personal folders become reminders of past engagements with field-specific conferences, or prompt the recovering of notebooks from these conferences from the bottom shelves of bookcases. Finds in the bookshelves may remind the researcher of friends or relatives who are trained in a particular discipline within which the researcher himself/herself may lack the profound insight that is desirable. A bag hanging by the door may contain a dissertation discovered while visiting a colleague or while attending a meeting at another university (p. 69).

The theoretical framing together with close-ups such as the one above offers a thick description of the information work that the study participants engage in.

The practice-as-enacted perspective can be recognised from quite a number of previous practice theoretical contributions whereas the practice-as-performed perspective is less common, at least in LIS. It is even more unusual to combine the two. Gullbekk refers to his combination of these two theoretical perspectives as “*mixed theory*”. I think the two components work really well together and it is clearly visible to me how this mix serves the purpose of bringing forth “tensions and inconsistencies in the practices of emerging interdisciplinary research” (p. 41). The main function of the practice-as-enacted perspective is to elucidate “a conflicting dynamic between the participants’ information work as part of actualizing their particular research as recognizable” (p. 41) whereas the practice-as-performed perspective serves as a way to highlight “the chaotic and unexpected effects that [the participants’] information work forms part of through unique events” (p. 41). This kind of theorising is in itself an important contribution to the area of information practices research. (As a side note, I must mention that this is probably the first time I come across within LIS a study that seems to make full sense of and make good use of the sophisticated but complex conceptual apparatus of Karen Barad).

At the beginning of this review, I pointed out that interdisciplinary researchers generally encounter challenges in connection to the wide variety of theories, methodologies, and discourses that

interdisciplinary research can comprise. This is also the case for the participants in Gullbekk's study. He ends his thesis with a set of recommendations. Interdisciplinary researchers need, he suggests, "venues where [they] can openly discuss and prepare for disciplinary differences in concepts, methods, procedures and theories" (p. 80). The study also shows that the participants have to deal with conflicting accountabilities and competing regimes of competence, which can be stressful, not least for early career researchers. He therefore puts forth that there should be forums where experiences of insufficiency and insecurity can be discussed openly, for example in doctoral training and research project meetings. Libraries catering for researchers and research students should also consider these findings. One potential step would be to reconsider their organisation, which is often structured in accordance with the single disciplines, and instead aim for the kind of support services that Gullbekk terms "laboratories for interdisciplinary research" (p. 81).

As can be gathered from the conclusions, this thesis contains several concrete suggestions for how to improve the sometimes-difficult situation that interdisciplinary researchers find themselves in, not least regarding navigating a number of different literatures. However, the thesis is also a welcome and inspiring contribution to the LIS research field, especially to the area of information practices studies. In particular, the sophisticated theoretical framework ought to be picked up by other researchers who strive for accomplishing a nuanced description and analysis of information practices.

#### References

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