

# Interdisciplinarity:

*Enhancing critical thinking in the arts*

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## INTRODUCTION

**i**n January 2019 the Faculty of Arts Doctoral College (FADC) at Umeå University arranged a conference for our more senior doctoral researchers to present their projects in progress. The 15 participants were all in the last years of their PhD research – starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As they gave their ten-minute presentations the room came alive with curiosity, critical questions and discussion. The atmosphere was open and convivial and it reverberated with both the importance of humanities research, as well as the great diversity represented within our faculty. Above all it showed the vitality of interdisciplinary discussion and how branching out and embracing ideas across the disciplines enriches our own ideas. This is also one of the main ideas behind the FADC. We gather all doctoral researchers within the Faculty of Arts, regardless of academic discipline, in order to spark interdisciplinary discussion.

## DOCTORAL COLLEGES IN SWEDISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Discussions that led to the establishment of doctoral colleges began as early as the 1960s in Sweden, and formal doctoral colleges have existed in Swedish higher education institutions since the 1980s (Högskoleverket 2001). The- matically organising research education into broad inter- disciplinary areas of scientific enquiry, rather than simply by traditional subjects, was believed to enhance PhD re- search. Although there were some inconsistencies sur-

rounding the use of the concept "doctoral college", the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education - Högskoleverket (discontinued in 2012 and replaced by the Swedish Council for Higher Education) listed a number of factors that characterized a doctoral college in its report from 2001: a clear organization for doctoral education; enhanced supervision; collaboration between academic disciplines and/or higher education institutions around courses and seminars; interdisciplinarity; and networking.

An evaluation of research colleges in Sweden demonstrated positive outcomes such as stronger collaborative and interdisciplinary research environments for doctoral researchers. The FADC at Umeå University was established in 2008 with the aim of gathering all doctoral researchers within the arts, regardless of research subject. In the FADC we believe that interdisciplinarity is a necessary component of doctoral education and something that will enhance our doctoral researchers' critical thinking and their skill sets, giving them greater opportunities within and beyond academia.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCOURSE

Condee (2016:13) suggests that the arts and humanities are experiencing an "interdisciplinary turn." He argues that while disciplines create a foundation for knowledge and exploration, interdisciplinarity creates great opportunities for student learning and advancing scholarship through enhanced critical inquiry (Condee 2016).

While interdisciplinarity might be on the rise in the arts and humanities, there are certain prerequisites for successful in-

teractions. As Choi and Richards (2017:105) state in *Interdisciplinary Discourse*:

Knowledge is the lifeblood of disciplinary, implicated at all levels in all aspects of disciplinary work. [...] For interdisciplinary projects to be successful, participants must come to understand sufficiently well the fields of knowledge involved to make collaboration possible, and for this to happen knowledge has to be shared.

The aspects of collaboration and interdisciplinarity are seen as intrinsic to research colleges in Sweden. But as pointed out in the quote above, successful interdisciplinary discourse does not happen on its own. A forum for knowledge sharing must be provided and managed, with the participants encouraged to both contribute their own expertise and receive the expertise of others. Kelly et al. (2019) claim that to successfully and comfortably participate in such forums there is a need for learning new "disciplinary languages". They argue that while the nuance and rigour of discipline-specific discourse is important, it can also be excluding and confusing. Learning new disciplinary languages can "best be achieved by listening, questioning and more listening" (Kelly et al. 2019). The act of sharing disciplinary definitions and key concepts in environments conducive to open discussion should also promote this, two examples being the annual FADC conferences and this special edition.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY DISCOURSE AT THE FACULTY OF ARTS DOCTORAL COLLEGE

As the doctoral researchers in the Faculty of Arts at Umeå University represent some 15 different fields, the education we provide is designed to give them generic skills

useful in academia and beyond. Our current course package consists of a first-year course called Developing as a Doctoral Researcher, which includes information retrieval, academic presentation, academic writing, and a conference. In the second year, doctoral researchers take Advanced Academic Writing where they work in writing groups to give and receive feedback on each other's work in progress. In the fourth year, we offer Leadership and Career Planning, which includes project management, media relations, career planning, writing a CV and collecting academic merits, and seeking grants and funding. In addition to the course package, FADC offers optional seminars, workshops and events on other aspects of research, academic life and career opportunities beyond the academy, as well as social events.

However, the most potentially rewarding aspect of FADC is not articulated in any of the learning outcomes for the courses we offer. Through the four years of their degree, doctoral researchers develop a cohort and network of peers in different fields. They not only sit side by side in courses, but intellectually engage with their peers through presentations, writing groups and informal settings. They are exposed to other disciplinary languages, methods and concepts, as well as potential future research partners, colleagues and ideas.

Our most recent initiative is this special issue. Doctoral researchers not only contributed articles but participated in the peer review process, along with more senior academics. The aim was both to demystify academic publication by taking them through the entire process – e.g., abstract submission, first drafts, peer review, revisions, proofs – and to provide a

forum to demonstrate the breadth of research engaged in by doctoral researchers at the Faculty of Arts Doctoral College.

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FACULTY OF ARTS DOCTORAL COLLEGE  
SPECIAL EDITION

In this first FADC Special Edition we focus on *Keywords*, interpreted as broadly as possible. We asked our doctoral researchers to take one critical concept from their research and reflect on how they either develop the understanding of the concept in their research; how they apply the concept to new sources or contexts; or how they redefine or problematize the concept from past scholarship. As a result, we are proud to include seven authors who are doctoral researchers at different stages of their PhD projects.

*Charlotte Engman* is a doctoral researcher in Ethnology. She writes about how the application of *Dialogue* in ethnographic museums can be understood.

*Julia Falk* is a doctoral researcher in History of Science and Ideas. In her article Julia explores how the concept *Science* was used in the spiritualistic community in Sweden at the end of the nineteenth century.

*Elena Glotova* is a doctoral researcher in English literature. Her article addresses the concept of *Soundscape* and explores the keyword in relation to nineteenth-century Gothic literature.

*Nuno Marques* is a doctoral researcher in English literature. In his article Nuno explores the concept *Ecopoetry* and asks how it can overcome the mourning for lost ecosystems and contribute to action instead.

*Juanita Vélez Olivera* is a doctoral researcher in Spanish literature. Juanita reflects on the elusiveness of her keyword

*Translation*, specifically within the field of poetry translation.

*Harini Vembar* is a doctoral researcher in English literature. Her article investigates *Street-Arab Literature* as a way of understanding the socio-political climate that favored the eugenics movement at the start of the twentieth century.

*Spoke Wintersparv* is a doctoral researcher in Pedagogical work. His article explores how literature studies are perceived by teachers and researchers and discusses the key concept of *Teaching literature*.

Rounding off the contributions of the doctoral researchers, *Virginia Langum* and *Kirk Sullivan*, director and former co-director of the FADC, share their insights on *Academic Writing* and the advantages, challenges, myths and legends surrounding writing in English as an additional language.

This Special Issue of *Kulturella Perspektiv – Svensk etnologisk tidskrift* showcases some of the many keywords and key concepts found within the Faculty of Arts Doctoral College. We hope that it will spark your interest in interdisciplinarity in the arts!

## REFERENCES

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