

Suggested Readings on Disciplines & Disciplinarity

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Below you will find an annotated list of essays and texts that directly address the nature of disciplines and disciplinarity. Most are at a level appropriate for assigning directly to incoming students.

Becher, T. and Trowler, P. (2001). “Academic Disciplines.” In *Academic Tribes & Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines*. (pp. 41-57). Open University Press.

This text is an ethnography of disciplinary knowledge-production based on interviews and observations of 221 academics “whose livelihood it is to work with ideas” (1). This chapter, in particular, illuminates the relationship between disciplinary knowledge forms (theories, concepts, methods) and the social relations of the communities that produce them. In other chapters, Becher and Trowler provide richer analysis of the *cultural styles* and *cognitive styles* of disciplines in Biglan’s (below) classification scheme.

Biglan, A. (1973). The characteristics of subject matter in different academic areas. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57(3), 195-203.

Biglan, A. (1973). Relationships between subject matter characteristics and the structure and output of university departments. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57(3), 204-213.

In this two-part study, Biglan surveyed scholars to evaluate the perceived similarities and differences that exist between various disciplines (subject-matter areas) in universities and colleges. The first article presents a multi-dimensional analysis of disciplinary similarities. The second builds on his analysis to examine the relationships between subject-matter characteristics and the organization of departments. Biglan’s work has been remarkably enduring, as he established some of the most widely used distinctions between the disciplines (e.g. “hard” and “soft” fields of research; “pure” and “applied” disciplines). His work has been addressed or reinterpreted in many of the readings recommended on this list.

Donald, J. G. (2002). *Learning to Think: Disciplinary Perspectives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This text identifies and describes distinct patterns of thinking that occur across various academic disciplines, as well as explores the relationship between knowledge creation and critical thinking processes. The majority of the text (Chs 2-8) examines nine major disciplines in terms of (a) how professors want students to think, (b) how students actually think, (c) the difficulties students encounter in thinking, and (d) the approaches likely to promote student learning.

Krishnan, A. (2009), “What are Academic Disciplines? Some Observations on the Disciplinarity vs. Interdisciplinary Debate,” Southampton, University of Southampton, *ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Working paper*.

This paper examines the various ways in which academic disciplines (philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, management and education) each characterize the idea of disciplinarity according to their own paradigm of thinking. For example, while philosophers tend to view disciplines as epistemological groups, anthropologists tend to conceptualize disciplines as cultures.

Frodeman, R. (2014). “Disciplinarity” In *Sustainable Knowledge: A Theory of Interdisciplinarity*. (pp. 9-33). Palgrave MacMillan.

This text rethinks interdisciplinary research and the place of the humanities in society more broadly, offering a new account of what is at stake in discussions of “interdisciplinarity.” In this chapter, Frodeman offers an account of the nature disciplinarity, including its origins, conceptual assumptions, and

current crises. This analysis emphasizes a point that is generally neglected in interdisciplinary studies discourse: the crucial role played by the concept of peer review, which has functioned as the principle of governance of the disciplinary academy.

Lamont, M. (2009). "On Disciplinary Cultures" In *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (pp. 53-106). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Through the window of cross-disciplinary deliberations for fellowships and research grants, Lamont's text illuminates the secretive, powerful, and peculiar world of academic judgment. The third chapter ("On Disciplinary Cultures") lays bare the gulf in evaluative practices that exist between anthropologists, political scientists, literary scholars, economists, historians, and philosophers. She finds, for example, that economists prefer mathematical models, historians favor different kinds of evidence, and philosophers don't care much if only other philosophers understand them.

Mallard, G., Lamont, M., & Guetzkow, J. (2009). Fairness as appropriateness: Negotiating epistemological differences in peer review. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 34(5), 573-606.

In this article, researchers conducted interviews with faculty panelists who served on multidisciplinary fellowship competitions. Their goal was to understand how disciplinary frameworks affected conceptions of fairness in decision-making. Their results show that (1) evaluators generally draw on four primarily cognitive styles to make arguments in favor of and against proposals (constructivist, comprehensive, positivist, and utilitarian); and (2) peer reviewers define a fair decision-making process as one in which panelists engage in "cognitive contextualization," that is, use the styles most appropriate to the field or discipline of the proposal.

Muller, J. (2009). Forms of knowledge and curriculum coherence. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22(3), 205-226.

In this article, Muller examines the nature of disciplines and the curriculum in the context of historical academic struggles and the diversification of academic labor. He begins by inquiring into the historical roots of disciplinary difference, moves on to describe how disciplines are discussed in academic literature, and considers the relationship between knowledge forms and curricular architectures.

Trowler, P. (2012). "Disciplines and Interdisciplinarity: Conceptual Groundwork." In *Tribes & Territories in the 21st Century: Rethinking the Significance of Disciplines in Higher Education* (pp. 5-29). New York: Routledge.

This text is an update of Becher and Trowler's highly influential text *Academic Tribes and Territories* (1989/2001), with specific attention to providing a re-examination of the significance and influence of the disciplines on higher education practice today. This chapter addresses the meaning of the disciplines and suggests that in the increasingly integrated and cross-departmental structure of today's universities, *interdisciplinarity* may be a more appropriate term to characterize academic work today.

Turner, S. (2017). "Knowledge Formations: An Analytic Framework," in Frodean, R.(ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*. (pp. 9-20). Oxford University Press.

This volume provides an overview of the current state of interdisciplinary research, education, administration, and management that spans the disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. In this highly accessible chapter, Turner gives an overview of the nature of disciplinarity in both its historical and contemporary contexts.