Reflections on Interdisciplinarity

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Sarah Banet-Weiser, Editor of the interdisciplinary journal American Quarterly and Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the Department of American Studies at the University of Southern California, headlined the Humanities Institute held its annual Interdisciplinary Faculty Seminars Symposium on Friday, April 27, 2012.
The event began with two pre-symposium workshops: “Publishing in Interdisciplinary Journals,” led by Banet-Weiser and “Applying for Humanities Institute Funding,” led by the Humanities Institute Faculty Executive Committee.
After an introduction by moderator and HI faculty executive committee member, Dean Franco, faculty participants representing 16 departments and schools presented and described the work they engaged in throughout the 2011-2012 academic year during their seminars (click here for the list of faculty participants). Groups presenting were “Film Genre as Industrial, Consumer, and Critical Construction,” “Politics of Location, Transnational Feminisms and Diaspora Studies,” “Cultural Encounters in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean,” “Historical and Cultural Approaches to the Modern Atlantic World,” and “Science and the Arts in the 18th Century.” In their remarks, faculty celebrated the diverse results of their collaborations which included courses, papers, conferences, digital projects, and student-faculty collaborative research.
The event culminated in a talk given by Banet-Weiser, “Reflections on Interdisciplinarity.” Banet-Weiser tackled the dangers of interdisciplinarity as “crisis and brand,” followed by an
examination of interdisciplinarity as “inspiration and necessity.” She said, “Interdisciplinarity enables us to speculate, to think, with inspiration and unpredictability.”

Banet-Weiser continued, “The seminars that we just heard about are doing this. They approach a common idea from a variety of different disciplines and approaches. These seminars allow us to see how many knowledges can be produced from the same site. They are not about privileging one over the other, but rather emphasize diversity of thought.” She praised WFU faculty for the vitality of their collaborations and the significance of interdisciplinary scholarship as a form of continued learning that “re-imagines, re-locates, re-defines, and re-routes” critical disciplinary knowledge for new generations.

In her conclusion, Banet-Weiser emphasized the importance of imparting those knowledges to students. “For me, teaching from an interdisciplinary perspective is the thing to focus on in a moment of crisis. It is important to continue teaching from interdisciplinarity, and to continue engaging with the issues of power, intersection, and social justice that formed its basis in the first place. In the contemporary moment, it may be true that we need new institutional models for the practice of interdisciplinarity, but just as urgently, we continue to need what it offers us as scholars and teachers.”