

The Call of the Categorical, or Where Did IPE Go?

September 7, 2005

Several years ago, a cluster of foundation grants and a good deal of university faculty time and effort were devoted to something called interprofessional education. The basic idea, in a sentence, was that preparing professionals to work with kids and families and in communities ought to prepare them to work with other professionals in other fields who are doing the same work—nurses, teachers, recreation leaders, social workers working together, and trained to do so.

The other day, a friend asked me what happened to all that, and why?

I said I thought that some of it continued in a few universities, and that it would be re-discovered in time, like all good ideas that run into obstacles. But another part of the answer is that the lure of the categorical world is much more powerful than the integrative world—which is a much smaller terrain.

Categorical funding is bigger. It comes with a built-in spotlight from the powerful guilds that support programmatic thinking and action. It has journals—we could never sustain a journal that worked across systems, because you get promoted in academic life within a discipline, not for work you do at its edge or outside it.

Foundations tend to work in categorical arenas, they do early childhood, or health, or housing, and the boundaries across these broad fields are usually less important than building up credibility within them. New deans come into universities, and set up new categories of their own, and discard integrative efforts because they require working with other schools, sharing resources at times, and acknowledging that one's own discipline is not self-sufficient.

The call of the categorical also includes federal funding; the feds do little outside of the categories set up by congressional subcommittees that jealously guard their own fiefdoms and achieve glory by building up treasure inside their walls, not by lowering them. There are interagency committees, and even some joint funding, but there is far less interagency grant making and contracting than there are vertical, categorical funding streams.

So what, asks a skeptic? That is how humans work since Aristotle—we categorize, and make sense of things by doing so.

But some of the categories are *wrong*. The racial ones, for example, and many of the religious ones, have done far more harm than good. And in work with kids and their families, the problems don't come in categories as neat as what we organize and pretend to be reality.

The mental health problems and the child abuse problems and the brain development problems and the nutrition and drug abuse and educational problems are all mixed up—and if we mis-label or try to work within only one system when the family needs help from several agencies—we risk getting it wrong again. The categories hurt people, sometimes, even though they make it easier for professionals to work within well-established, though irrelevant, boundaries.

Someone accused the media the other day, in their coverage of Katrina and its aftermath, of being “reality-based.” As if describing reality were a defect. But the reality of the fragmenting categories is that they do not describe reality; they only help capture a piece of the puzzle that cannot be seen clearly until you have more of the pieces—or an overall picture of the whole.

This is an ancient topic—or perhaps just a topic carried on by ancient people. But we have integrative moments in the social policy history of the last century, and then we have dis-integrative moments when the disciplines are in the saddle and ride fast and far. Yet the return of the integrative instinct is unmistakable, there persists a powerful, recurring attempt to put the pieces together, to make sense of a whole, dating as far back as John Dewey discovering the whole child and settlement houses serving whole families in whole neighborhoods on the lower East Side and in Chicago over a century ago.

So ancient people should not silently go away, because this ancient topic will rise again. And we can learn from past attempts at the integrative moment, and the call of the categorical will not always win. Funders, professionals, and families should not bet on the fragmenting instinct to divide people and their problems into categories that are neat, well-defined, and wrong. The logic of the idea will prevail, or at least survive to challenge the call of the categorical again and again, and some of the best people will choose to work at the edges of their professions and fields, because they realize that is where we can help the most.