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The Ethics of Collaborative Interdisciplinary Research

One of the difficulties in fomenting truly interdisciplinary technological research and design is that the logic of institutionalization actually works against multidisciplinary collaboration. (Here I use the term multidisciplinary to name the constitution of collaborative research teams. The term interdisciplinary names the kind of research produced by multidisciplinary teams.) Consider the definition of ³institution² formulated by political scientist, Robert Keohane: a ³persistent and connected set of rules (formal and informal) that, along with norms and beliefs, prescribe behavioral roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations² (1989). When participants come from different disciplines, different cultural contexts, and indeed, different geographical locations, creating ³shared rules, norms, and beliefs² is difficult. This is especially the case when the project is to establish a creative, peer-based, and novel environment for technological innovation and the production of new knowledge. Scholars trained in different disciplines have different rule-sets. Academic disciplines provide the cultural contexts that instill professional norms and beliefs about the practice of scholarship, research methodologies, and paradigm conditions. When people come from different disciplines and domains (even when they share a common language, such as English) it is not surprising that their underlying beliefs and norms differ greatly.

Successful interdisciplinary research projects must involve creating the conditions whereby participants explicitly understand and commit to the goal of creating ³shared rules, beliefs and norms.² This process must not evacuate the most valuable part of having multiple disciplines represented. People with distinctive perspectives must be enabled to contribute insights that come from their individual perspectives. For this reason, the project of building new institutional structures that support multidisciplinary collaborative teams must explicitly include attention to how the teams are going to develop shared understandings based on a deep respect and valuation of disciplinary (or cultural) differences and distinctions. The social coordination required to create these teams and support their collaborative work is a crucial element in producing successful research outcomes. Not only must each participant embrace collaborative work, they must actively work against the facile division of labor that would have the humanists doing the ³critique,² the technologists doing the building, and the artists offering art direction. While there is a special role to be played by each participant, they must all be willing (indeed, eager) to learn new skills, new analytical frameworks, new methods, and new practices. A personal commitment to life-long learning is the foundation for these collaborations. Moreover each participant must be willing to uphold the ethical foundation of multidisciplinary work. When people with different disciplinary or even interdisciplinary backgrounds come together, it is important that they acknowledge that everyone has something to contribute to the collaborative effort, and that there is something important for each to learn from the other.

This essay will elaborate the foundational ethical principles that guide successful interdisciplinary research: 1) Intellectual generosity; 2) Intellectual confidence; 3) Intellectual humility; 4) Intellectual flexibility; 5) Intellectual Integrity; and, 6) Intellectual curiosity.