The Neuroscientific Turn

Classroom Discussion Questions from Melissa Littlefield and Jenell M. Johnson

In the decade following the Decade of the Brain, neuroscience has become one of the hottest topics of study—not only for scientists but also, increasingly, for scholars from the humanities and social sciences. In recent years, a range of scholars from economists to historians have applied the neuro- prefix to their home disciplines, and neuroscientists have begun to turn their gazes to everything from art appreciation to religious experience. While some have hyped this development as evidence of a coming “neurorevolution,” others have decried it as yet another form of biological reductionism or as a symptom of a larger struggle for institutional legitimacy in a difficult economic climate.   
  
What are the characteristics of this “neuroscientific turn”? What are the pitfalls, the challenges, and the promise of these new hybrid forms of inquiry?   
  
*The Neuroscientific Turn* provides a forum on this most recent of turns in the academy and brings together essays by scholars from a number of fields in the humanities, social sciences, and neurosciences to reflect critically on this moment in recent academic history. Chapters seek to historicize and contextualize the intersections between neuroscience and other modes of inquiry; some investigate practical applications of neuroscience in new neuro-disciplines like neurohistory, neuroethics, and neuroeconomics, and a number offer words of caution and critique for would-be neuro-scholars. Many of the chapters can be taught independently or in tandem with one another, and the book as a whole would be appropriate as a central text in a semester’s-long investigation of the topic – ideally as a complement to readings from specific neuro- fields easily found through journal databases. *The Neuroscientific Turn* would find an ideal place on syllabi for advanced undergraduate or graduate courses that focus on questions of language, communication, and epistemology in science; in courses that investigate practical questions regarding interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity; and it would be an ideal companion to courses that investigate the “two cultures” debate in theory and practice.  
  
1. In what ways does a transdisciplinary perspective differ from an interdisciplinary perspective?   
2. How might this turn to neuroscience complicate the “two cultures” debate inaugurated by C.P. Snow?   
3. Is it possible to engage in neuroscience research that does not exhibit “neuro-essentialism”?   
4. What are the limits of neuroscience as a method or hermeneutic in non-scientific fields?  
5. What practical difficulties might be encountered in collaborations between neuroscientists and scholars from other fields? Can you imagine ways to address these difficulties?