A View From the Neutral Zone

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Date : September 1, 2010

In the Library with the Lead Pipe is pleased to welcome another guest author, Markus Wust! Markus is the Digital Collections and Preservation Librarian at North Carolina State University Libraries and works on exciting projects such as WolfWalk (mobile app for exploring NC State using special collections images and geolocation data) and NC Architects (database covering 300 years of North Carolina architects and builders).

Courtesy of Flickr User The Dangler

As a librarian working in a large academic library who once considered a career as an academic researcher and whose friends are mostly academics, I always find dinner conversations between my wife and my father-in-law particularly interesting, even—or rather, especially—when the topic is work. Over the course of several years of graduate school, I became familiar with the academic environment in several disciplines and still have a particular fondness for the humanities.

Now, however, I consider myself more of a neutral observer of academia and try to use these observations to figure out how best to help the researchers and teachers that we are working with. The conversations provide ample inspiration for my work: both my wife and her father are academics,

although they seem in many ways to be positioned at opposite ends of a spectrum. She is working in the United States an Assistant Professor, teaching and researching in French Applied Linguistics and Teacher Education, and currently working towards tenure. Her father is an established researcher in Organic Chemistry who recently retired as a Full Professor at a Canadian university.

So when they discuss their professional activities, I am sometimes reminded of communications between people from different countries who are speaking a common language: they can communicate with each other, but there are enough semantic and cultural differences to occasionally cause misunderstandings or communication breakdowns. In their case, they are familiar with academic vocabulary but sometimes a term might have a different meaning or carry certain nuances depending on whether he uses it in the Canadian context or she talks about it from an American perspective. He has taken the last major step in an academic's career—retirement—whereas she still has to take one of the first—getting tenure.

Finally, there is the main problem: the divide between him, the scientist, and her, the social scientist/humanist. I am not talking about problems caused by the subject matter each of them is working on; since neither one of them can discuss variations in protein structures with the same ease as differences between theories of second language acquisition, a conversation of that sort between them is not possible. However, even the differences in research and publishing traditions between their respective disciplines are large enough to cause a lack of understanding of each other's situation, such as during discussions about scholarly productivity. For example, while my father-in-law can rely on the collaboration within his research team and on the quick review and publishing cycle of his discipline's research outlets to ensure a high research output, my wife is still publishing primarily as a single author and has to contend with long waiting times during the peer review process. So, while he can publish many more papers in any given period, this does not mean that she is any less productive in her research; it just takes much longer to gather and analyze the necessary data before disseminating her findings.

Such divergent viewpoints and evaluations of scholarly productivity and rigor can arise even among practitioners of disciplines that are drawing on similar research methodologies and publishing practices. A friend, who is a Sociolinguist, once told us about a conversation she had with her father, a prominent Political Scientist. When she mentioned that, for her current study, she was collecting interview data from twenty participants, he offered little more than a weak smile and pointed out that in his field, he would routinely draw on data from over 50,000 respondents, not taking into account the qualitative differences between his short telephone surveys and the in-depth interviews necessary in her field of work.

Let us return to the previously mentioned dinner conversations. The occasional professional communication problems between my wife and her father bring to mind a phrase coined by British chemist and writer C.P. Snow. In his 1959 Rede lecture at Cambridge University titled "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," Snow described a growing chasm between the humanities and the sciences, which would make it increasingly difficult for the two groups to work together to address the social, political, and cultural problems of the time:

> Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can't find much common ground. […] The non-scientists have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man's condition. On the other hand, the scientists believe that the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with

> their brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential movement. And so on. Anyone with a mild talent for invective could produce plenty of this kind of subterranean back-chat. On each side there is some of it which is not entirely baseless. It is all destructive. Much of it rests on misinterpretations which are dangerous. (Snow, 4-5)

According to Stefan Collini's introduction to the 1993 edition of *The Two Cultures*, Snow was far from being the first to express concern about the split between the two streams of scholarly inquiry. He describes an 1880 lecture by T.H. Huxley at Mason College in Birmingham, England, during which Huxley called into doubt the value of a traditional classical education and promoted a greater focus on the sciences in the British educational system:

> Science, [Huxley] affirmed, formed part of culture and offered a rigorous mental training, as well as making an indispensable contribution to national well-being. In tones that were to become familiar in the subsequent century, he denounced the resistance to the claims of scientific education by the defenders of the traditional classical curriculum as, therefore, both unjustified and short-sighted. (XIV)

Matthew Arnold—poet, cultural critic and Professor of Poetry at Oxford University—responded to Huxley during his 1882 Rede lecture with a defense of a humanities-based education:

> Above all, [Arnold] insisted that a training in the natural sciences might produce a practically valuable specialist, but it could not turn out an 'educated' man: for this, literature, especially the literatures of antiquity, remained indispensable. (XV)

While the exchange between Huxley and Arnold was described as amicable, Snow would face fierce criticism, the most ferocious of which came from literary critic F. R. Leavis during a lecture in 1962. Mooney describes the public impression of Leavis'—partially personal—attacks on Snow as follows:

> As one ringside observer put it, Leavis "threw Sir Charles Snow over his shoulder several times and then jumped on him…the whole thing left one with a sense of comradely sympathy for Sir Charles, as it might be for a man who had been involved in a serious motor accident." The eminent critic Lionel Trilling added that while he had problems with Snow's argument, there could be "no two opinions" about Leavis's breach of decorum: "It is a bad tone, an impermissible tone."

By reacting in this manner, Leavis might have actually given further support to Snow's argument, at least as far as the lack of mutual understanding between scientists and humanists was concerned.

As Collini explains, Snow's point of view was in part determined by the particular circumstances of the academic and educational environment of Great Britain in the post-World War II period. Besides associating a humanistic education with a higher social status, the British educational system of that time was designed with an emphasis on specialization by pushing "academically gifted children to start concentrating wholly upon science subjects or humanities subjects from as early as fourteen years old, to study only three of these subjects between sixteen and eighteen, and then to concentrate exclusively upon one while at university" (XVI).

Of course, specialization is a necessary factor in the development of every discipline. Given the growth of knowledge, no single individual can hope to keep up-to-date with every discussion or discovery in his or her broader area of study; the Renaissance generalists who could make groundbreaking contributions in a multitude of fields seem to be a thing of the past. This need for specialization also means that the aforementioned communication problems do not exist only between the sciences and humanities, but can also affect sub-disciplines within each of these broader categories:

> But all these fields or sub-fields have increasingly developed their own concerns, methods, and vocabularies to the point where no one division is obviously more significant than all others. The theoretical economist and the critic of French poetry are as mutually incomprehensible in their professional work as ever 'scientists' and 'humanists' were supposed to be. (Collini, LV)

Now, what can be done to help reduce these communication barriers between the various fields? One important step for members of the academic and research community would be to view their work not only as contributions to their respective disciplines, but as an integral part of the larger academic enterprise:

> Rather, we need to encourage the growth of the intellectual equivalent of bilingualism, a capacity not only to exercise the language of our respective specialisms, but also to attend to, learn from, and eventually contribute to, wider cultural conversations. Obviously, it may help if one's education, has not been too specialized too early, and Snow's warning remains pertinent here. But more important still will be the nurturing *within* the ethos of the various academic specialisms not only of some understanding of how their activities fit into a larger cultural whole, but also of a recognition that attending to these larger questions is not some kind of off-duty voluntary work, but is an integral and properly rewarded part of professional achievement in the given field. (Collini, LVII-LVIII)

One interesting example of what can happen when researchers from different parts of the academic spectrum decide to collaborate and find innovative approaches to furthering each other's disciplines is study by Timothy Stinson, an English professor at my institution, North Carolina State University, and his brother Michael, a biologist at Southside Virginia Community College. In order to be able to more precisely date early medieval manuscripts, they decided to extract DNA from the parchment of manuscripts of known dates and add the genetic information to a reference database. This would then allow future researchers to not only date texts more easily, but even determine which herd served as the source for a specific piece of parchment.

So why am I writing about this on a blog dedicated to libraries and librarians? I think that there are two areas in which this topic affects us as librarians and the way we interact with our patrons. The bilingualism that Collini refers to in his quote requires an openness and curiosity towards other academic and professional traditions. As Hilary Davis discussed in a post on *In The Library With A Lead Pipe* ("Déformation Professionnelle," March 17, 2010), this is something that we as librarians should keep in mind. She points out the value of leaving your professional comfort zone—e.g., by attending professional events outside of your field of specialization—in order to get a different view on problems you are dealing with or finding out about problems of which you have not been aware.

Even more importantly, libraries have the potential to improve both collaboration and communication between the various academic disciplines and help overcome at least some of the chasm that Snow and others have described. Librarians are well positioned to serve as people connectors on campus.

Through their work as collection managers or library instructors, many librarians have, over the years, formed close relationships with faculty members in many different departments and colleges and are usually more or less familiar with each individual's work. They are therefore in a better position than many faculty members to see similarities in research and teaching interests across departmental boundaries and could therefore connect possible future collaborators and, in the process, point out the benefits of involving the library in their projects.

This broader involvement in the intellectual campus life is one of many things I enjoy about working in a large academic library: in general, we are not dedicated to any single part of the institution, but the library exists to serve the entire campus community: faculty, students and staff representing every unit of the university. Although we have several branch libraries that specialize for more narrowly-defined user populations, the library as a whole is seen as a place that provides help and resources to every person on campus. In a sense, the library seems like a neutral zone where everybody can come together and get equal access to work and collaboration spaces, collections, and recreational services. It is in our best interest to expand on this aspect of our role within the campus community, even (perhaps especially) in the face of the frozen or reduced budgets many of us are facing. By establishing ourselves not just as a resource and service provider, but a collaborator in the production and dissemination of research, we can justify our existence in an age where an abundance of seemingly free external electronic resources might cause some to question the continued financial investment in our collections and services.

Libraries (of course again depending on the availability of funds) could establish collaborative workspaces that are not governed by specific departments or colleges and thus make it easier for faculty with diverse disciplinary affiliations to work together on an equal footing. Instead of assuming that "if you build it, they will come," we should, from early on, engage our target audience in the planning of these spaces in order to make them as relevant and, at the same time, as flexible as possible. The facilities and infrastructure should be combined with qualified staff to provide the project management and technical development support necessary to support the collaborative projects, similar to what is already being done at the University of Virginia Library's Scholars' Lab, which was initially established to promote innovative work in the humanities and social sciences.

Librarians seem to be well suited for this task. When I was a student in the Humanities Computing program at the University of Alberta, a professor mentioned that he envisioned the program's graduates as mediators, or translators, in digital humanities projects between academic researchers—the subject specialists—and the technical support who would be responsible for the implementation of a project's technical aspects. Given the diverse professional and academic experience as well as technical and management skills many librarians have accumulated even before entering the library world, it seems that they would be well-suited to play a similar role when it comes to connecting faculty from different parts of the academic community and encouraging them to exchange ideas.

Besides being connectors and mediators, they could also provide vital support during the final stage of a collaborative research project, i.e., its dissemination. The more diverse the academic disciplines are that are represented in any given project, chances are that the participants' ideas with regards to the most appropriate publishing strategies are equally as disparate. Again, librarians might be able to provide valuable support and advice on the best course of action.

Although it is illusionary to claim that we can really overcome the increasing compartmentalization of academic disciplines and the resulting communication barriers between many fields, I think that as librarians, we do not just have the opportunity, but also the obligation to encourage and enable more collaboration between different academic disciplines and cultures, such as the sciences and humanities. Not only will it make for better understanding between a father and a daughter, but it will also provide our

libraries with a stronger foundation for the future and our society with a better understanding of itself.

I would like to thank Hilary Davis (IntheLibrarywiththe LeadPipe) and Babi Hammond (NCSU Libraries) for their valuable feedback on the first draft and my wife Valerie for her help in editing this article.

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