

Humanities and Higher Education: Thinking about Humanities and the Arts⁺

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Connections among people and institutions are formed in many ways, but we should not underestimate the value of face-to-face contact and conversation as ways for making connections.

Today I am speaking on the connections between arts and humanities in humanities institutes and institutes for advanced study. I will talk about the problems I see, the possibilities I see, and make some suggestions as to ways I think we might be able to take better advantage of the possibilities. I will begin by saying I am speaking very much out of my own experience as director of the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota, and about our experiences in running a two-year symposium on the topic of "Body & Knowing." The last time I spoke to this group, I talked about our last symposium, which was on the topic of "Time." I

suggested during that talk that one of the most successful modes of interaction between scientists and humanists around the question of time might well be through the medium of the arts. I talked a bit about a dance project entitled "Wreck" The dance was choreographed by Carl Flink, a member of our dance faculty. We held a series of seven open rehearsals in which people who were participating in the "Time" symposium responded to a work in project focusing on the ways in which they saw time as a theme in the dance. I'll show you a brief clip which will give you some sense of what the dance was about.¹ The clip demonstrates something of the contrast between stillness and motion that is central to the way the piece thinks about time. I am happy to talk about that project in the question and answer session.

Let me backtrack a little and tell you about

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¹ <http://www.startribune.com/video/13715197.html>.

my institute itself. It is new: we are in our fourth year of operation. I am the first director. We offer residential fellowships for faculty and graduate students from the University of Minnesota—the faculty fellowships are a semester long. The graduate fellowships are year-long. We also have funding from the Mellon foundation to bring in scholars who are working on projects which are of interest to the University of Minnesota Press—some for short periods of time, some for as long as a semester. We are genuinely interdisciplinary, and our mission is to serve faculty at all of the University of Minnesota campuses. This is the breakdown of fellows over the past three and a half years:

arts	9
humanities	24
social science	26
science	1
education	3
law	1
business	1
design	1
total	66

Our program of fellows is residential—that is to say, they move their offices into our space and are expected to spend a substantial amount of time in the offices. In order to facilitate community building, all fellows (a cohort of about a dozen people each semester) come to lunch on Tuesday—one fellow makes a presentation each week on his or her project. The lunchtime discussions of work in progress are really critical to the formation of community and to produce a sense of intellectual community which crosses disciplinary boundaries.

I would like to suggest that some of the issues which face institutes like mine in incorporating artists into the community are

similar to those which make it difficult to integrate lab scientists. The humanities institute model is in some senses designed for people whose work involves reading and writing—we provide desks and bookshelves and chairs and computers. We do not provide labs or studios. If someone has a well equipped video studio or biology lab, we do not duplicate that. (We did provide a painter with studio space—our building is an old dorm, and there are sinks in many of the rooms—indeed some of them have bathrooms attached with antiquated bathtubs and toilets. The painter came from one of the coordinate campuses. He asked if we could provide him with a studio, and when I asked him what he needed, he said running water and natural light. We found a corner office for him, and it worked beautifully. We had other visual artists who continued to work in the studios provided by their home departments—some of whom became well integrated into the life of the institute, and others less so. But I would suggest that while the problem of physical proximity is a real problem, it can be solved. An artist or a scientist who is based in another building can make a commitment to show up for lunches and events and be a member of the community.

I think though that there is another kind of problem which is more significant when we think about the relationship between the arts and humanities more particularly, and that is an epistemological problem—a problem in how we view knowledge as being constituted. I do not mean to suggest that people in the humanities do not appreciate the arts—indeed, one of the key subjects which humanists study is the arts. Many people in the humanities not only study the arts, they attend arts events for pleasure. Others are benefactors of the arts. So why am I talking as if there is a problem? If I am to worry about fissures in the academic world in my institute, why do I

not talk about fissures between the arts and humanities on one side and the social scientists on the other — or, even more starkly, the arts, humanities and social scientists and the physical scientists, or even between the arts, humanities and sciences on the one hand and the professional schools on the other. All of those are fissures that are worth talking about, but I only have 30 minutes today. And I think the fissure between the arts and the humanities is particularly interesting, at least in part because it is rather surprising. What do I mean when I say there is a fissure between, for example, people who study theater and people who teach acting? I don't want to exaggerate the problem, but it does seem to me that both in the organization of American universities at least, as well as in our intellectual practices, there is a division between historians, critics, and theorists of the arts on the one hand (though placing all of those people on one hand brings its own share of analytical problems) and practitioners of the arts on the other. I would say that this particular fissure has deep roots in questions of how meaning is constructed and very particular views about the nature of knowledge and the nature of performance, and in how scholars communicate with one another.

Let me illustrate with an anecdote—earlier this fall, the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs met at St. Olaf and Carleton colleges, not very far from Minneapolis. While the conference is primarily concerned with the study of Asia, there are also scholars study Asian-Americans. An important Japanese-American dance group, called Eiko and Koma, was performing in Minneapolis during the conference. We arranged special group rates, organized a bus to take conferees from the conference venue to the performance and back, and organized a talk-back after the show which would take into account that some members of the audience were academics who studied Asia. A few days before the conference, the organizer let me

know that no one had signed up for the bus, so he cancelled the bus. No one from the conference but me showed up. (The performance hall was full of members of the general public.) There are probably several reasons that people chose not to come—it would have been a 40 minute bus ride, people like to go out to dinner with their friends at conferences, and so on, but I think the chief reason was that people did not see that there might be a connection between what Eiko and Koma were doing in their dance and their own scholarship. They did not think that watching a dance performance (and listening to a discussion of it afterwards with the performers) might make them better scholars—they were not open to the possibilities that they might gain insights from a performance in a non-verbal medium that were of a qualitatively different sort than insights conveyed in words. They did not see the possibility that dance might produce knowledge, and that attention to the dance might indeed be a part of the work of the conference. This is what I mean when I talk about a fissure between the arts and the humanities.

There are other ways we can see this—for example, why don't we ask (on a regular basis) people like lighting designers to come to literature classes to come and talk about how they see meaning in performance. We know, when we stop and think about it, that lighting directors generate meaning, not in the same way as actors and directors generate meaning, but they generate it nonetheless. The way light and dark play upon a scene quite literally affect the way we see the scene—those choices may be made by the director, or they may be made by the lighting designer, but they are implemented by the person manipulating the switches (or computer panels) which control the lights. That person is creating meaning and interpretation of the scene, a different kind of meaning and interpretation than that which is

made by those of us who work with words.

We could ask lighting designers and dancers to come to literature classes and talk to students (or come to symposia and talk to scholars) about what they do and how they see it; indeed, as you shall see shortly, that is one of the things that we are trying to do at the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. But as soon as we do that, one of the contradictions becomes clear—when we ask the lighting designer or the dancer to come and talk about their work, we are going asking that person to use words to describe their work and creative activity which is based in a non-verbal medium. This sounds commonsensical, and obvious, and maybe even unproblematic. But I submit that it is problematic. (Just as an aside here—the digital revolution has gone a long way toward de-centering the importance of the word, though perhaps in a way that makes thinking more disembodied. At any rate, digital embodiment is different from the old fashioned kind, and is something that our "Body & Knowing" group is interested in exploring.) Indulge me in another anecdote, also featuring Eiko. One of the ways I generate ideas for events for the symposium (which is, as I indicated earlier, on the topic of "Body & Knowing") is to send out broad invitations to lunches—anyone in the University or broader community who sees a flyer or who is on our listserv is invited to come to a lunch to talk about how their work relates to the topic of "Body & Knowing." Those lunches are a great deal of fun—they promote discussion across disciplinary lines, which is one of our key missions. People who come to the lunches (myself included) always end up meeting new people who share interests. At the end of one of these lunches, Eiko said that the conversation had been extremely interesting, but we had been talking about embodiment in a rather disembodied way and that it would very interesting thing to have a

movement workshop as part of a planning session. She looked around the room and said "I could do a movement workshop in this room." So we scheduled a movement workshop for the very next week, and about 20 people from the planning workshop came. IMAGE We have since had several other workshops with movement artists in which people from all over the university were invited to participate. These are small steps; the English word remains the major medium of the American academy, at least in the humanities, and those who work in other media often feel as if they are on the fringes of the academy, as if they are there for pleasure or entertainment, but that what they do is not essential. Psychology and brain science are beginning to show us in very clear ways how knowledge is embodied; yet our everyday practices of scholarship do not always reflect this.

I'd like to take a couple of moments now to show you another result of the Time symposium--some clips from a video made by a video artist named Lynn Lukkas. Lukkas is an artist who works in the medium of video—she conducted a series of interviews with scholars and artists on the subject of time. At the IAS we now document almost everything that we do—we have an undergraduate with a camera who records things and puts them up on our website (our video page is at <http://www.ias.umn.edu/media/Media.php>). But what Lukkas has done is to take the interviews and edit them together to make an artistic statement about time. I'll show you some clips to suggest what some of the payoffs for this kind of work are.

Both of these clips—the Wreck clip and the Lukkas clip—suggest, I think—a subtle yet logical movement in the progression of the symposium topic. Contemplations about the nature of time led to contemplations about the nature of embodiment, and in fact Lukkas and

Flink were two of the board members who were central to the conceptualization of the University Symposium topic of "Body & Knowing." These two examples have suggested that exploring more fully connections between the intellectual questions we as humanities institutes are asking and the artistic work some of our colleagues are doing would be productive.

What are we doing to further these explorations? We are at a fortunate confluence of events. At the University of Minnesota, we are in the process of designing a renovation of a large building which holds the Northrop Auditorium (IMAGE). It is the iconic building which stands in the middle of the campus; it is where graduations are held; it is where Bob Dylan played on election night this year. The auditorium is large and cavernous—it seats 4800 people, which means that only graduation ceremonies and Bob Dylan concerts can fill it. The renovation will make the size of the auditorium smaller—a smaller hall has better acoustics. There will be 35,000 square feet of non-auditorium space in the building, and the Institute for Advanced Study and the undergraduate honors program will move into the building. Thus, what we imagine is a site, at the center of campus, where the premier research institute of the university, the iconic performing space, and lively undergraduates in one central space. We are still in the preliminary stages of working with architects about the details of the design (and it is of course possible that the financial crisis will slow down the project). But we imagine that the synergies possible from this will be important in helping us reimagine what it is we do and how we talk about what we mean by research, which is, it seems to me, a critical issue of this moment. It irritates me when people say crises are opportunities but it does seem to me that one of the messages of the financial crisis is that business as usual is no longer a supportable mode of operation for American universities (and

globalization may mean that that is true world wide, though I suspect that our North American modes of operation are the least supportable of all). If we do not reimagine ourselves, people whose aims differ from ours may well do it—and they may well narrowly focus on the bottom line of costs to the detriment of expanding our collective creative potential.

In the renovated building we will have shared public spaces; we will be in proximity to one another. We will have a shared café. We are beginning to plan programming which will integrate the performers who come into the large spaces with the Institute for Advanced Study's programming, and with honors programming—longer term residencies, master classes, and so on. We will design spaces to be collaborative, and some of those spaces will be collaborative in ways that are friendly to movement artists (sprung floors, high ceilings). We want to render the processes of art-making visible—including the messy parts, perhaps even especially the messy parts. We are confident that there will be synergies—we are not sure what kinds of synergies—to paraphrase a comment I heard at a conference last week, if we knew what we were going to find we would not call it research. The synergies will be among the performing arts, the honors students, and the Institute for Advanced Study. I'd like to quote from a grant proposal we submitted which explains (in what is perhaps grant-proposal hyperbolic language) one of the ways we see synergies between performance and research operating.

Fostering partnerships between research centers and arts programs, this project embraces several goals. We intend for the process to foster experimentation with a wide range of formats for connecting creative and scholarly research:

lectures, symposia, workshops in which the "audience" moves / writes / draws / sings / stands on its head, and participates in new formats not yet conceived. Last year's work by the IAS demonstrates one means by which this can happen. By making artists' methodologies more transparent to the scholarly community and engaging artists and scholars in focused dialogue related to the creative research process, the IAS has demonstrated its commitment to actively promoting artists' methodologies as essential to the knowledge production mission of the University of Minnesota. It has also provided an effective means of doing so. [.....]

[.....] The most important benefit of this model for the evolving field of twenty-first-century dance practice, however, centers on its capacity to elevate movement artists as investigators to an equal level with others in the academy and to foster conversations about processes of research and creativity. Our method of foregrounding creative movement research within the agendas of interdisciplinary research centers provides a unique opportunity for academic peers to witness and participate in the research component of the creative process. We hope you feel as we do, that the "Circulating Creative Research" project has enormous potential for expanding the academy's conceptualization of research.

We did not in fact receive the grant that we applied for, but we remain committed to the project and will continue our explorations.

I do not believe that the building will solve all of the issues for this; but the building will help. Buildings do not make things happen, but they

create spaces where things can happen. A building which is friendly to collaboration and casual conversation, which has pleasant common rooms and good food service will serve as a magnet to a diverse group of people. And the common explorations of that diverse group of people will perhaps work to expand a bit the boundaries of what we mean when we talk about research and knowledge at the University of Minnesota. We hope that these explorations will help us chart our way through what promises to be an uncertain future, using methods and materials that we have only begun to imagine, to a new and different kind of relationship between the arts and the research mission of the university.