



2011

Bridging Diversity Through Problem-Based Collaboration

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Recommended Citation

Cappella, J. N. (2011). Bridging Diversity Through Problem-Based Collaboration. *International Journal of Communication*, 5 (2011), 1476-1478. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/678

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Bridging Diversity Through Problem-Based Collaboration

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Bridging Diversity Through Problem-Based Collaboration

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Professor Calhoun has offered a very stimulating and thoughtful set of ideas. These are issues with which we must deal as a field and that we encounter every day in our departments and in the classroom. So it has been useful for me and, I believe, for all of us to read Professor Calhoun's admonitions, suggestions, and directives.

First of all, I want to make a point of agreeing with Professor Calhoun about the heterogeneity that exists in many fields. Although the field of communication is certainly heterogeneous, many other fields exhibit a large degree of heterogeneity as well. The question about how one defines any field—whether it's physics or history or communication—will, of necessity, yield great variance in response from the field's scholars. So I am glad to see that we're going to spend less time worrying about our differences in the practices of communication scholarship and research, or about how to define ourselves, and instead, do what we do and let our work define the field of communication studies. Heterogeneity, per se, is not unique to communication, nor is it an inherent problem in the nature or definition of the field.

Nevertheless, heterogeneity within the field of communication does raise important questions about how we might knit ourselves together to take advantage of our diversity of knowledge and epistemologies, rather than apologize for them to one another or to our respective deans. A second question raised by the field's heterogeneity concerns the training of students within this diversity. How do we train students so as to take advantage of intellectual diversity, while giving them the skills necessary to advance in their own careers and to contribute knowledge that is deep, informed, and specialized?

My answer to the question of how we knit diversity together is based on a conversation that goes back a few years. Just before ICA's conference in Jerusalem in 1998, I was visiting with a colleague at a preconference being sponsored by the University of Haifa. She lamented the absence of dialogue about our intellectual diversity and wondered why we were not talking about how to bridge these kinds of differences at the preconference and the conference panels scheduled for Jerusalem. She said, as I recollect, "Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if we spent some time debating one another, talking through our differences and respective assumptions in the hope of reaching some rapprochement across our intellectual divisions?" My response took her aback. I said, "No, this is a waste of time." The reason it's a waste of time, I elaborated, is because it's a conversation without end. The dialogue might be a very

interesting one and one we would likely all enjoy, but in the end I am afraid that we would return all too easily to our respective points of view and practices, all the while congratulating ourselves for our openness.

I offered her an alternative and one that I would offer to Professor Calhoun's call for dialogue across boundaries. I suggested that together we decide on a problem that we think is of social consequence and amenable to solution and intervention from the point of view of communication research broadly construed. Let's try to get some funding to solve that problem, whether it involves only communication scholars or those from other disciplines as well. Further, let's bring them all together and work on solving the problem that we have agreed is worth our efforts and energy.

My reasoning for a problem-focused and task-oriented approach is simple. The attempt to solve a problem that is identified as being of mutual interest and broad significance will actually bridge more of the differences and lead to a greater appreciation of each other's points of view precisely because we are trying to solve a problem beyond our own narrow intellectual boundaries. Self-interest would be reduced. Consequences for failure would be significant beyond the mere "agreeing to disagree" of most intellectual dialogues. The focus on finding solutions to practical problems, using theories that would assist in advancing the issues, would focus our thoughts and actions on the compromises necessary to make progress. In the place of conversation and dialogue about an intellectual difference would be conversation, dialogue, and cooperation, with all eyes cleared fixed on solutions to issues that matter to the researchers, to the funders, and to the society at large.

So not only would we have a self-interested motivation to think hard about what we were doing, together and separately, but also to entertain a willingness to compromise about our respective points of view. This has come to be called—in the big science that's funded by groups like the National Science Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health—transdisciplinary thinking and research. The term *transdisciplinary* means that people from very different points of view cannot themselves answer the important problems that we face alone from their limited disciplinary perspectives. Rather, the answers to consequential social and behavioral problems will arise only out of the combined research and intellectual contributions of many different subfields working collaboratively. They aren't the problems of communication, nor psychology, nor medicine, nor cultural studies alone. They are the problems of society at large, writ large. They are not the unique specialized problems identified by researchers as occupying their own special purview, staked out by them and them alone; they are the problems that transcend individual researchers and perspectives.

They include problems, for example, of how we can increase the likelihood that someone will get a colonoscopy, even if they have insurance. How we can continue to persuade adult smokers to stop and young people not to start. How we can increase awareness of health disparities without stigmatizing at-risk groups. These are social and behavioral problems that must be solved. They involve communication, but also involve people who understand brain science and the psychophysiology of smoking addiction; journalistic expertise must be present, along with health economics and epidemiology. Solutions will require researchers to pool their disciplinary expertise across the table to solve a problem that the society cares about.

So that's issue number one. If we're going to be inclusive across the diversity and heterogeneity that we have as a field and take advantage of that variance in ways to advance knowledge and problem solving, we must take a problem focus. Only then can we bring to bear the variety of perspectives that we have—humanistic, scientific, qualitative, and quantitative—and the full range of tools that we have to solve those problems as social problems. It requires us to agree on what those problems are in the first place, but I think that's something we can do.

My second point concerns how we train graduate students to participate in boundary-spanning research activities that involve participants from a diversity of perspectives? My view is that we should not bother to train graduate students about thinking about how to be collaborative, nor give them a course about how to collaborate, but rather we should train them with highly specialized knowledge. Of course, general knowledge in the field of communication is a necessity to be a good citizen in the field at large and to share the vocabulary necessary to communicate within our diversity. But highly specialized knowledge outside the field of communication is a necessity as well—whether that knowledge derives from comparative literature or computerized text processing, economics or epidemiology, law or psychophysiology. Each of these domains offers the opportunity to develop highly specialized kinds of knowledge and the tools necessary to solve problems. Such training brings to bear a variety of tools to solve the problems, while creating linkages to the knowledge and epistemologies of other fields, as well as to our own scholarly enterprise in communication.

Students immersed in such tool-oriented expertise, when combined with their general knowledge about communication, have the capacity to bring unique competencies to the table when there's problem solving to be done. They will be inherently disciplinary because of their general training within communication and transdisciplinary because they have successfully mastered tools from some other discipline as well. They are then ready to deal with the kinds of problems that are broad-based, and in many senses, intractable from the point of view of any one approach, requiring instead the collective intelligence of many experts attacking the problem from their complementary disciplinary perspectives.

So my view of the interdisciplinarity of the field is that it's something to be extolled and celebrated, but we have to act in ways that harness that interdisciplinarity for the purposes of solving problems. When we agree as to what those problems are and to work together to solve them, we have a much better chance of appreciating one another and our respective epistemologies and skills in the problem solving process. Ultimately, I agree with Professor Calhoun's call to bridge the heterogeneity inherent in communication studies—and all fields, really—but I see the bridging process to be more effective when we work on common problems and train our students to have specialized tools to complement the knowledge that they bring to the intellectual bridge building.