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Listening to Students: Building Bridges

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BUILDING BRIDGES

BY SHIRA KLEIN, MAGALÍ ARMILLAS-TISEYRA, AND ALEXIS KUERBIS

“Cross-disciplinary” has become a buzzword in academia. Here we offer a student-based perspective on the benefits of cross-disciplinary discussion, based on our experience in New York University’s Graduate Forum. Founded ten years ago by Catharine Stimpson, then dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Science (GSAS), the forum brings together graduate students across the university to present their research to each other. This cross-disciplinary discussion has taught us to build bridges between fields and people. By describing how this experience has enriched our work, we hope to inspire other institutions to initiate similar programs.

Once a month, ten doctoral students from throughout NYU convene for dinner and a discussion that is facilitated by a student moderator, with assistance from the dean of GSAS and the assistant dean for academic and student life. In preparation for each meeting, a preselected member of the forum circulates background readings. At the meeting, that member then makes an hour-long presentation; this is followed by discussion of both the presentation and the readings, with the goal of examining the connections between disciplines and considering how our various approaches differ.

In what follows, we three alumnae of the forum show how cross-disciplinary exchange has shaped our research, teaching, and communication with colleagues. We attended the forum in different years, and we specialize in different fields: history, literature, and social work.

SHIRA KLEIN: HISTORY AND JUDAIC STUDIES

The Graduate Forum helped me articulate the significance of my research. When I came up with my dissertation topic, modern Italian Jewish migration, I had to lay out convincing reasons why this subject deserved attention. But as I delved into the research, that larger purpose receded.

I spent day after day in the archives. I read family letters, personal diaries, and official reports. I crafted arguments about the experiences and identity of Italian Jewish refugees in the mid-twentieth century. In this intensive research phase, I put aside the question of why the topic mattered.

Shira Klein, Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, and Alexis Kuerbis were all participants in New York University’s cross-disciplinary Graduate Forum—Klein in 2009-2010; Armillas-Tiseyra in 2008-2009 (and the forum’s moderator in 2009-2011); and Kuerbis, who has since earned a PhD in clinical social work, in 2005-2006. They are very grateful to Anna Antoniak and Catharine Stimpson for their critical readings of the paper and valuable input.

But when it was my turn to talk in the forum, I needed to find a way to interest the musician, philosopher, economist, and the others who made up the group. These colleagues might not understand or care about my precious yellowing documents. So in my presentation, I stressed the overarching question that drove the research. I quoted evocative letters and diaries but made sure that they always served my larger point. And I showed how this study illuminated more general issues regarding migration, ethnic identity, and philanthropy aimed at refugees.

It worked! In the discussion that followed my presentation, some colleagues drew connections between my discoveries and their own work in law and in neural science. Others tied my work to current concerns regarding migration, and one participant considered my findings in relation to her family’s own migration experience. The members’ comments illustrated that they understood not only my research but also why it mattered.

We historians have to engage in meticulous inquiry in order to create and support an argument. To work efficiently with archival data, we must put the broader questions on the back burner and focus on the analysis of the materials before us.

But we always need to remember the big picture. This can be difficult if all our colleagues are in our field, since they might not question the significance of our work. Cross-disciplinary exchange forces us to keep focused on what is at stake, and, if necessary, to reshape our projects so that they become more relevant.

The effort I put into the Graduate Forum has rewarded me in additional ways. I have improved my dissertation, conference papers, and grant proposals by clarifying why my work matters. I have also become a better teacher. By asking the “so what?” question when I prepare lessons, I inspire students to care about what they learn.

Best of all, the forum members’ enthusiasm about my work had the effect of renewing my own excitement. In the Graduate Forum, I put aside anxieties about deadlines and the dissertation and remembered why I was studying history in the first place.

MAGALÍ ARMILLAS-TISEYRA: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Being a member of the Graduate Forum forced me to rethink the bases of my discipline; as a result, it has made me a better scholar and teacher. I joined the forum in my third year of graduate study. At the time, I was confident in my disciplinary flexibility. Literature—and literary studies—touches on so many realms of experience that I presumed I would have a certain currency with the subject matter of other disciplines (if not with their methods). I also assumed my colleagues would have a general familiarity with literature. But I quickly learned

that general interest is not a substitute for the hard work necessary to communicate effectively across disciplinary boundaries.

In the Graduate Forum, I became responsible for explaining my work to an audience that was “uninitiated.” To do so, I had to understand, even question, the concerns and goals of my discipline. It was an unsettling experience, and one which would not have been possible within my department.

Graduate training necessarily requires that we narrow our focus and direct our attention to answering very specific questions. The assumptions that underlie our work often remain unexamined. In speaking to my colleagues in the forum, I couldn’t, for example, simply engage in a critique of the canon. I had to explain the concept of the “canon,” how it was constituted and why it is important to literary scholars, without resorting to theoretical shorthand or pure abstraction. And there were follow-up questions. The process was both more difficult and more rewarding than I could have imagined. Moments like these helped me realize the specificity of my position within a network of disciplines.

Learning to ask and answer these fundamental questions has made me better at what I do: it has given me a fuller sense of the value of the particular questions that I am asking. Over the years, I have come to appreciate the forum not as a replacement for the training I am receiving in my department but as an invaluable counterpoint—in the musical sense of an accompaniment that provides contrast.

My experiences in the forum have made me sharper, more rigorous, and more generous. This is the case not just in my research or relations with colleagues but perhaps most notably in my work as a teacher. The challenges we face in the forum inevitably influence our practice in the classroom, where we deal with another group of non-experts. Learning to ask and answer difficult disciplinary questions in the forum, an intellectual community of equals, taught me to be ready for and respect these challenges when they come from students and to turn them into productive teaching moments.

The disciplinary richness of the forum allowed me to learn about and respect the differences among disciplines. This is the point from which truly interdisciplinary work must depart.

ALEXIS KUERBIS: CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

Almost five years after my tenure in the Graduate Forum, the experience continues to infuse, even revolutionize, my thinking, research questions, and interactions with clients. The communication skills I honed there provided me with a solid foundation for the next step in my career: collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines to create integrated theories, research, and practice.

This foundation is particularly fortuitous, as the major funders of my work on addiction and its treatment have recently called for research and technological development produced by collaborations between varied disciplines. Because of my experience in the Graduate Forum, I am uniquely suited to undertake such work.

Communication between disciplines is the beginning of a magnificent undoing of academic acculturation. As Magali and

Shira describe, effective communication among scholars from different disciplines entails a reexamination of one’s own in order to convey its ideas, assumptions, tenets, and terms to others. In the forum, such communication was challenging but a continual joy—an opportunity to explain, teach, reflect, and learn in an unpressured environment.

This experience pushed me to move beyond allegiance to discipline-specific paradigms and to relinquish the specialized language I had spent a decade mastering. To surrender these hard-earned habits was both frightening and liberating—requiring a leap of faith that rewards would be reaped.

Outside a setting like the forum, stakes are raised substantially both for understanding others’ work and merging it with one’s own to build something new. This process can be painstakingly slow and far more demanding than presenting one’s work to encouraging colleagues, because it requires more than a cursory understanding of all the disciplines involved. Collaborators have to meet the challenge of understanding others’ disciplinary languages, each of which may have distinct terminologies for similar—even identical—concepts or identical terms for different constructs. From this process, we must establish an Esperanto—a common, sustainable language that provides a foundation for doing innovative, integrated work.

Collaborators also still need to produce something that garners support from a culture that reinforces academic silos. This further requires us to communicate the value and necessity of what we are doing to our disciplinary peers who may have yet to understand its worth.

But there are rewards—both personal and professional. Collaboration with scholars from other disciplines keeps me excited about my work and helps me look at old problems in fresh ways. As a social worker, I now incorporate social and cognitive psychological theories, neuroscience, American political history, mathematics, and economic theories in my work on addiction.

While others in my field also apply knowledge from other disciplines to their work, the Graduate Forum primed me for this much earlier in my career than would have otherwise been the case. With funders now supporting, even requiring, cross-disciplinary research, participation in the forum has already proven to have been vital to my professional as well as my disciplinary development.

As Shira shows, participating in a cross-disciplinary forum forces us to examine and articulate what is at stake in our projects. Magali demonstrates that such a group makes us understand more thoroughly the goals and terms of our respective disciplines. Alexis illustrates that such forms of exchange prepare us for workplaces beyond academia, which increasingly require collaboration between fields. In each case, the experience of the Graduate Forum has made us broader thinkers, more articulate speakers, and more effective listeners. It has enriched us as researchers, teachers, and professionals and has prepared us for future interdisciplinary work. Indeed, we three students of history, literature, and social work would never have collaborated on this article if it hadn’t been for the Graduate Forum. ☐