

From This Day Forward: An Engaged Intellectual

Rebecca P. Follman

University of Maryland – College Park

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As a developing researcher and engaged intellectual, I hope to be a member of a lively, productive, interdisciplinary community, not an isolated individual working alone in a library carrel. There was a time when I imagined that research meant solitary thinking in the library, or working late and alone over a lab bench, waiting for the eureka moment. But these days, romantic images of isolated intellectual endeavor have little basis in fact. Greene, a professor at the University of Puget Sound, says, “collaboration in multidisciplinary research is now universal as well as essential” (2013). Bush (1945), who coordinated the work of thousands of scientists during World War II, said, “[i]t has been exhilarating to work in effective partnership.” Research is more likely to be productive when it is a collaborative endeavor.

Thinking, understanding, solving problems: all are easier when others around you are doing similar work, as I have found from working in study groups, from collaborative class projects, and from participation in two research teams. A community of researchers offers even greater benefits than simple advice and support, however. The problems confronting us today, and thus the questions researchers are asking, are often addressed more effectively by a combination of methodologies drawn from different disciplines. For example, study of the causes and effects of the national childhood obesity epidemic might involve scholars of medicine, public health, education, communication, and information science. No single discipline can address all aspects of this complex social problem. Greater progress can be made in solving such problems if interdisciplinary teams are created that can create collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Interdisciplinary research also contributes to engagement. An engaged intellectual, as I define the term, feels a commitment to the research team, to the institution, and to the

community. The engaged intellectual recognizes that her work is a part of some larger undertaking. Because of her commitment, she does not want to let the group down (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). The engaged intellectual, involved in interdisciplinary research, understands that each member of the research team brings attitudes and beliefs that affect the progress of the research (Lemke, 2001). She feels committed to more than just the paradigms of her own discipline. Because of commitment to the group or the community, and because of interaction with others, the work of an engaged intellectual is more satisfying to me than that of an intellectual who works alone.

Information Studies and Interdisciplinarity

Information studies, my chosen field, was originally conceived as being interdisciplinary (Dillon, 2012). As a discipline, information studies draws from computer science, library science, education, the humanities, from engineering, and more. The interdisciplinarity of information studies suggests to me as a scholar that there are no limits to the kinds of questions we may ask and try to answer. No one will say to me, ‘that’s not the kind of research we do here.’ It is also exciting to consider how information studies may help solve some of the persistent problems confronting us today. Organized information that is readily available and accessible to all has already been shown to have a powerful impact on social problems, as with the Arab spring revolutions, or earlier with the work of human rights organizations (Brophy & Halpin, 1999). When we have access to information, as well as the ability to produce it, we increase in self-efficacy (Davidson, 1989; Livingstone, 2004); we are confident of our ability to complete tasks and achieve goals. Information science researchers study ways to improve this important access to information, access that leads to increased self-efficacy. Of course, the increased production of information brought about by the Internet and other new technologies

creates its own set of challenges, particularly in organization and retrieval. As a scholar in information studies, I hope to work on projects that make information easier to retrieve and more accessible to those who seek it. Information access and information seeking are central to virtually every human endeavor, and the way that information affects those human endeavors intrigues me. I am fascinated by the search “for the red thread of information in the social texture of people’s lives” (Bates, 1999, p. 1048).

Epistemology

As an engaged intellectual who recognizes the force of community and the value of collaboration, my epistemological stance is constructionist. Our understanding of information, and the way that we transform that information into knowledge, is contextual (Buckland, 1991; Crotty, 1998) and culturally inflected. Therefore, in my research I will be asking questions that consider both context and culture.

My experience as a teacher confirms my constructionist attitude. Watching my students learn about the Civil War, about the conjugation of French verbs, or about the possible interpretation of metaphor in the writing of Emily Dickinson was an object lesson in the contextual nature of meaning. As Crotty notes, “meaning does not inhere in the object” (1998, p. 42), even (or perhaps especially) when the object is a poem. The meaning, rather, is constructed individually by each reader in encountering the poem. This construction of meaning is not subjectivist interpretation, defined by Crotty as “created out of whole cloth and imposed” (1998, p. 48) upon the reality of the poem. Instead, it is a meaning that must be ‘produced’ by an individual reader, as Stanley Fish described the process (in Crotty, p. 47), and then articulated by that reader.

I would argue that each individual reader encounters the text within a different cultural context. My students were generally the children of southerners; I was a transplanted Yankee. My students only read poetry if forced; I enjoy reading poetry and have even written some. These examples are a long way of saying that I had a different culture and a different set of experiences than my students, and I therefore had a different understanding of the things we read and talked about. According to constructionism, we're born into a world of meaning, but we will always see that world through the lens of our culture (Crotty, 1998, p. 54). As an engaged intellectual, my own meaning-making, shared with that of my collaborators, will develop a richer understanding of the question, the text, or the topic for the whole group. Thus, engagement and constructionism work together and reinforce each other.

Research Interests

My research interests at the moment are focused on finding the 'red thread of information' as it stitches together the mentoring relationship. I hope to identify and measure the information behavior aspects of the mentoring relationship, construct comparisons and perhaps generalize about what contributes to success or failure in mentoring relationships. Using these generalizations, we may be able to develop mentoring programs that are more successful, for both K-12 teachers and faculty at the university level. Additionally, it's likely that what we learn about traditional forms of mentoring may be usefully extended to other contexts, such as mentoring in online communities. One of the challenges of building online communities is in socializing new members (Farzan, Kraut, Pal, & Konstan, 2012), so they can learn the culture of the community without being driven away by more experienced community members who are impatient with their faux pas. What we learn about mentoring in a face-to-face context may be useful in developing some sort of mentoring for online communities.

I am also interested in the information behaviors of K-12 teachers. How and where do they seek information, and what are the barriers to their information seeking? What kinds of information do they seek? How does the information that they obtain affect their performance as teachers? How do they interact with librarians; how are the librarians able to help them? Not enough is known about the ways that K-12 teachers seek information to use in their work. By learning more, we may be able to facilitate the information seeking of these teachers, with the goal of improving their work environment and the quality of the work they do.

In the future, I hope to find myself in an intellectual community—such as a university—where I can participate in interdisciplinary research and be engaged in my community. I dream of helping to make discoveries that have a positive impact on the world outside the academy, and I think those discoveries are more likely to be achieved through intellectual collaboration. It is difficult to imagine what an intellectual community—or the world outside it—will look like in ten years, or even by the time I finish my dissertation. If I were writing this paragraph 30 years ago, could I have predicted the rapid social and technological changes now taking place? Probably not. That's what makes information science such an exciting place to be. No matter how much the world changes, we will always be seeking and accessing information, and specifically, we will always need forms of mentoring as we move from one community to the next. So, there will always be questions for me to ask, and hopefully, answers to find.

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