

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 8 / NUMBER 1 • SEPTEMBER 2003



The Great Poster Controversy and Interdisciplinary Teaching

Prof. Rhett Jones
Africana Studies

Joyce Foster, an Associate Dean of the College, e-mailed me materials on a discussion among colleagues over the invitation of a faculty member for professors to submit posters to be presented at a national conference.¹ The session was cancelled because few colleagues were willing to participate. Some thought a poster session was aimed at their students (and generously offered to put the organizing chair for the poster session in touch with their undergraduates), while others just candidly said as posters---unlike paper presentations and publications - did not count toward tenure in their discipline, they were not interested.

In response and perhaps in defense, the organizers of the (now defunct) poster session noted that all the "hard sciences" use posters at their major conferences and, moreover, a refusal to use posters discriminates against "non-English native speakers" who - via posters - can effectively present their ideas despite language barriers. I think I know what is meant by a "hard" scientist and while some of my best friends (OK, just two of them) are part of the "hard sciences," I do not think the rest of us need to use posters just because they do. Nor do I think disciplines, or groups of disciplines, that do not use posters are guilty of discrimination. So much real gender and racial discrimination continues in higher education that we shouldn't waste energy attributing bigotry to colleagues among whom it does not exist.

Some disciplines may be able to effectively present research by means of posters, others probably cannot. I can't, for example, imagine how a meaningful exploration of the subtle differences and similarities in Native American and Afro-American protest theatre, since say 1970, could be placed on a poster, which is probably why most Theatre. departments don't credit posters toward tenure.

The Great Poster Controversy is merely a symptom of the kind of discussions that ought to be taking place among those of us involved in interdisciplinary teaching and research, but (alas) seldom does. Whether or not posters can be effectively used to communicate research, ultimately rests on how scholars *prove* what they have found to their peers. Part of being a psychologist is having an understanding of whether or not another psychologist has met the standards of the discipline by providing *proof* of her conclusions. But while the psychologists might convince one another, according to the accepted and prevailing standards of their field, would their proof persuade an anthropologist? After all, he uses very different methods, standards, and guidelines to *prove* his case.

For years I have been arguing that the best way to distinguish between those who, for fashionable, financial, foolish, or other reasons claim to be doing interdisciplinary work, from those who are doing interdisciplinary work is that the latter are always tussling with methodology. The former seldom mention it. And they never explore how the use of certain methods, standard in one discipline might be related to very different research methods, standard in another. Of course, as Africana Studies is by history, definition, and orientation an interdisciplinary enterprise, all my colleagues over here in Churchill House cope with the thorny disciplinary-based issue of proof as a matter of routine. (Whether Africana Studies is an interdisciplinary endeavor or a new and distinct field of its own has been debated - sometimes in a down and dirty manner - by Black Studies scholars for a generation. These debates obviously have implications for methodological strategies, but I do not have the space to explore them here.)

If we are going to invite students into our interdisciplinary courses then we owe it to them not to blur the lines between disciplines, but rather to force our undergraduates to face up to the real differences among fields. I have found convincing undergraduates of this easiest, though never easy, in my undergraduate seminars as students arrive prepared to discuss ideas. Usually, early in the seminar, I devote a set of readings to methodology with assignments written by persons trained in different disciplines. So, for example, in my "Indian/Black Individuals and Communities in the Americas" seminar, I have readings in the methodology session by an anthropologist, a Black Studies scholar, a journalist, and two historians. Sorry about that History tilt, but it is a History course. As I've discovered students are not much interested in methodology---some doze off when the word is mentioned I misleadingly title the week's readings, "The Politics of Afro-Indian Studies," as politics is a much more

glamorous, glitzy term than methodology. We wind up, though, talking methodology, so that I can then confess and explain (justify?) my choice of title.

But I have yet to work out a way to smoothly incorporate issues of proof, methodology, disciplinary lines, and interdisciplinary work into my lecture courses. All my courses are interdisciplinary, but students are in usually lecture courses to learn something specific. In my course " Afro-American History before 1800," they want to know what happened to black people before the 19th century, the period in which our nation was formed. But they need to be given some idea of how this history has been examined by historians and non-historians alike. For example, the contributions of historical archaeologists over the last decade have truly transformed and vastly improved understanding of day-to-day 18th century black American life. But how much time should I devote to the different methodological strategies (and their consequences) of archaeologists and historians, how much to 18th century Afro-Americans, and how do I integrate the two when I have a limited number of lectures?

As the Great Poster Controversy demonstrates issues of tenure, teaching, and research, to say nothing of the theoretical orientations so closely tied to methodologies, are all related. Instead of arguing over the use of posters, we should be working together to help undergraduates in our courses to understand how and under what circumstances the disciplines work together, and how and under what circumstances they do not. Of course, we can just pretend to our students that methodological issues and debates do not exist—though they have grave and great impact on our research—but I for one would be unwilling to adopt that strategy. I can use all the help I can get with this and so welcome suggestions and comments from colleagues, even those in the "hard sciences".

¹ *Ed. note. A "poster session" is common practice at conferences in the sciences. Research is presented on posters to share with colleagues, rather than presented as a read paper—the usual form amongst scholars in the humanities and social sciences.*