

CTRL – O CONFRONTING BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION IN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECTS

Linda Duvall

Artist Linda Duvall was invited by the University of Saskatchewan to curate an exhibition of student research addressing digital media. The curatorial process revealed much about the gaps between disciplines. From the beginning, Duvall noticed that each area had its own specialized and idiosyncratic language. Even more instructive were the conventions utilized by the various areas for communicating information.



Fig 1. Demonstration of the FreeForm 3D Computer Modelling System by Art and Art History undergraduate student Cory Schewaga at the opening of exhibition CTRL – O. Copyright Linda Duvall





Fig 2 and 3. Viewer in front of painting and video installation by Art and Art History graduate student Michael Farnan in CTRL – O exhibition. Copyright Linda Duvall & Michael Farnan.

Introduction

'Interdisciplinarity' is a term that had a wave of popularity in the 70s in selected academic institutions around the world. Today, it is enjoying a revival – as evidenced by this conference – but there are major problems with inserting interdisciplinary programs into discipline-based institutions. I am proposing a working model, based both on my own art practice and an exhibition that I recently curated. The model that I am proposing both values and utilizes the expertise of specialists; and allows for people outside specialized disciplines to access specialized information. I tentatively call it 'snatch and grab.'

As a Visual Artist and Academic Fellow at University of Saskatchewan, I was invited by the university's Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity to curate an exhibition that highlighted the range of research being undertaken by undergraduate and graduate students across the Arts and Sciences programs. The intent was to show some of the research and art projects that have looked critically at the role of digital media in culture, as well as to initiate a dialog among these students and the faculty that support them.

Project *Tea and Gossip*

Before I talk directly about this exhibition, and the implications for the students, the university, and the community, I will first position myself and the structures I have developed in my own art practice.

Although I define myself primarily as a visual artist, I have always considered that I work across a few disciplines. I have degrees in English and Sociology, Education, and two Visual Art degrees. As a Visual Artist, I have worked collaboratively with people from other disciplines and much of my visual practice embodies significant aspects of sociological research. This blurring of boundaries is a crucial part of my practice. I will show one example of a project that incorporates such research into my art practice.

My starting point for the project *Tea and Gossip* [1] was a personal story of misattributed paternity. In the short narrative video that I developed, the main character did not reveal the identity of the biological father of her daughter to her husband, her daughter or the biological father, until her daughter met and started dating her half brother.

I began by showing this video to friends and neighbours; and taping their responses. I purposely began by asking a diverse combination of people, from mediaevalists to street involved youth. As I continued, I noticed that many comments took an ethical direction; so I worked with theologians from evangelical Baptists to the other extreme. I also involved people who might offer legal, psychological, or medical expertise.

In the presentation of this work, I incorporated these diverse opinions and enabled visitors to further contribute their views, both verbally during the 'gossip' sessions and on small cards. In this instance, some people's contributions evidenced their disciplinary expertise, while others approached the questions from a more personal perspective.

So, when I was invited to curate a show that crossed many disciplines, I was delighted.

Exhibition *CTRL – O*

Now about the exhibition *CTRL – O*, the title referencing the keyboard shortcut for "open file." This show presented students who were paying attention to the possibilities of new global networks and innovative intersections of the fine arts, humanities, sciences and computer sciences. These projects included analyses of social networking sites, use of new media in community building or teaching, computer modeling and simulations, and technically complicated digital manipulations such as 3D and digital collages.

From the beginning, I noticed that each area had its own specialized and idiosyncratic language. Even more instructive were the conventions utilized by the various areas for communicating information.

In areas such as Sociology and English the students included as much textual information as possible under titles such as goals, objectives, and checklists. The visual elements were clearly secondary and proposed learning was through reading the compiled information.

The Computer Science and Science students presented projects that included participatory elements such as buttons or models. Here, the learning emerged through interacting with the material presented.

The Visual Art students presented material that contained no clear conclusions, but embedded elusive personal questions. Their viewers were left to draw their own conclusions.

Context for *CTRL - O*

Now about the context for this project: the exhibition was presented in a student art gallery as part of a university wide Technology Week and was widely advertised by the institution. The opening was held on an afternoon during Technology Week, during which each student made a brief presentation about his

or her work. Then there was time for visitors to meet with the students, and for the students to meet each other. The exhibition remained up for a week.

The University of Saskatchewan has recently introduced a new Interdisciplinary Program, called the Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity, which initiated *CTRL-O*. However, since it is a recent development, there were only two students from that Centre who were part of the exhibition. The rest were all from defined disciplines within Arts and Science. One of the main aims was to initiate dialog across disciplines.

Assessment of *CTRL - O*

It is difficult to assess whether any of the defined aims of this project were met. The students remained firmly in their own disciplines, with their means of communication clearly modeled by the departments within which they studied. However, I did a follow-up survey in which I asked the students involved about any consequences of their participation in *CTRL-O*. Several reported that other disciplines had invited them to speak.

For example one art student wrote:

After the show, Prof M. asked me to talk to his class for a bit, then I invited some of his students back to the DRC to further look at the 3D modeling [...] The show really drove home that there are more cross applications of technology out there than we know.

None had begun to work directly with other students or other disciplines and none reported that there was a mutual exchange of ideas. Rather, any interchange had taken the form of an interested person with an already developed area of research wanting to get information from the student. This is what I call the 'snatch and grab' model.

As another example, I received this email recently from a community artist:

The show you curated at the Snelgrove has directly inspired my latest sculptural work. I contacted a few of the students in the show and met with them to discuss *my idea*. Cory S. worked on a prototype drawing for me which was used as the starting point for a CAD drawing and small maquette *produced for me* by the Engineering Workshop at the U of S. [Author's emphasis.]

This is a clear example of a community artist who engaged the expertise of the students in the exhibition for her personal project.

What was also interesting about this email was that it demonstrates the fact that this exhibition provided an opportunity for members of the Saskatoon community to see what was happening at the university. It seems that community members not involved in the university – as well as faculty and students in other disciplines – have difficulty finding out about academic research. This show provided a window into the area of digital media at the University of Saskatchewan.

Further Thoughts on *Tea and Gossip*

Looking at my own project *Tea and Gossip*, I realize that I also used the 'snatch and grab' model. I began with a defined structure in place. Each participant contributed their opinions and ideas based on their personal frameworks and expertise, and inserted these into my project. They each changed the content of a project a bit, but I maintained the framework through which visitors would access the material.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to make the following comments and recommendations:

1. The model of 'snatch and grab' should not be seen as a failure of an interdisciplinary program, but rather an appropriate way to transfer information. One is ensured that the person initiating the contact is receptive, since they can already see an application in their own research.
2. There is a need for a full exploration of alternative models for the transmission of research material and interesting ideas. For example the Perimeter Institute in Waterloo, Canada has wide corridors with blackboards and coffee alcoves and lounges that are conducive to making visible one's current thoughts.
3. In order to have a 'snatch and grab' model work well in a community or an institution, one needs a context in which a range of researchers/faculty/students/independent scholars/children/elders show their work/ideas outside their defined disciplines.
4. Within the academic system, one needs a way to value the 'consultants' – those who find time within their own research to contribute to the understanding of others from other areas.

In conclusion, the current institutional structures are not conducive to a total blurring of boundaries, but there are ways to open up the discourse a bit, and to nibble away at the tightness of the disciplinary framework. The exhibition *CTRL-O* is one example of an approach; and the strategy utilized to develop *Tea and Gossip* is another implementation of that model.

References and Notes:

1. For more information about *Tea and Gossip*, visit <http://www.lindaduvall.com/bigprojects/Visual%20Art%20Projects/gossip.html> (accessed September 2011).