

In Support of Interdisciplinary: artists, LIS, museums, and archives

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abstract

This paper is written with the purpose to examine an area within my professional practice that I believe to be an enduring and contemporary issue of locating and defining interdisciplinary work and finding spaces that embrace the work of interdisciplinarians – rather than exploit their unique practices. I will discuss the definitions and identities of interdisciplinary work at present, consider the invisibility of interdisciplinarians and how the concept of collaboration is critical to understand in making their work more visible, and ask for education to better practice interdiscipline in a way that might be applicable to professional success (particularly in the LIS field).

introduction

At present, information and museum professions alike seek to employ individuals who are often asked to perform a myriad of tasks interdepartmentally. This work calls for a diverse set of experiences unique to the individual and to their hiring institution. It is not usual to read job descriptions that frame these skill as someone who is especially prepared to work “collaboratively across departments” (MoMA Media Conservation fellow) or “collaborate with... a variety of departments” (almost every LACMA position, but especially Sr. Analyst Data & Reporting and Assistant Registrar) or to “work effectively...and collaboratively in diverse...settings” (CSU Special Collections and Archives Librarian - Senior Assistant). Within the field of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM), learning from art workers and

information studies professionals should be promoted as they are more and more frequently asked to work together. Students of LIS are typically exposed to museum practice by way of cataloging and registration protocols, a practice closely related to or even employing the same procedures as library cataloging and archival arrangement. However, the opposite is not common, as explained best in Jeonghyun Kim's survey of the academic landscape in *Building Rapport Between LIS and Museum Studies*, written for the Journal of Education for Library and Information Science in 2012. If interdisciplinary work is so valued, providing expansive pedagogy that promotes practical skills across these disciplines could aid in strengthening their bonds. A shared belief in the preservation of institutional memory can begin as a point of interest. The ways in which collecting bodies retain record of the work done within them varies from place to place. Looking at documents created by GLAM workers (annual reports, workflows, user guides, and other notations like README documents) will provide insight when developing new strategies for the future of GLAM workers. These materials deserve a place of their own within institutional record and should be discoverable for those interested in entering the unique professions bridging both museum and information work. This should be implemented to provide visibility for those who are already doing this kind of work and, furthermore, to be used as a way to strengthen education in fields like LIS, studio arts, and museology. In this paper I will discuss interdisciplinary's definitions and

identity, consider the invisibility of interdisciplinarians and how the concept of collaboration is critical to understand in making work more visible, and ask for education to better practice interdisciplinary in a way that might be applicable to professional success (particularly in the LIS field).

defining and identifying practice as interdisciplinary

Michael Buckland does the heavy lifting, pulling together a plethora of support, to attempt a definition of interdisciplinary practice. In his own words, "To become interdisciplinary means to become radically reciprocal."(p79 Buckland) But the reciprocity being asked for is often lost when specialization is still so prized. The roots of interdisciplinary work, beginning to be recognized nearly 100 years ago, places it in obscurity; undervalued and misunderstood. Given and McTavish recall the disposition of ALA president Judson Jennings, a man who frowned upon museological materials within libraries, and reflect upon the unique qualities of the work of William Hunter who practiced nearly every position required in keeping a museum operational (p16 Given McTavish 2010). It seems that, now, contemporary

institutions are in search of unicorns¹ to fill positions that demand further specialized knowledge bridging together practices amongst almost every humanistic and social science field. Kiersten F. Latham goes as far as to describe the role of LIS as a meta-discipline using support from Marcia Bates' foundational texts. (p131 Latham 2015) Latham states, as a fact, that LIS is a meta-discipline can be seen in the recent uptake of the "goal of convergence". She continues to support her argument by acknowledging her own *multidisciplinary* background studying human evolution. this work provides her with language² from a field outside of LIS that can be useful to generate new ways of thinking within it. (p132) Thinking interdisciplinarily requires not necessarily boundless experience but perhaps something more like the application of *extra-experience*. Demonstrating thoughtful convergence, like Latham's ability to apply her extra-experience in paleontology, gives birth to interdisciplinary practice. Who better to ask than those whose work already attempts the application of extra-experience within their practice? By creating an organization of professionals and students across disciplines who are enacting interdisciplinary practice, the

¹ yosuke muroya "Unicorns, Foxes, Hedgehogs, the UX Design Bestiary" accessed March 16th, 2019, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/unicorns-foxes-hedgehogs-the-ux-design-bestiary> The term "unicorn" was first overheard when I began my work in museums and later explained to me as a common way to describe the nearly impossible candidate solicited for UX (user experience) job descriptions - someone who might be able to do user research and information architecture and graphic design all for one project.

² Kiersten F. Latham "Lumping, Splitting and the Integration of Museum Studies with LIS" Accessed March 18, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90015178> The language being used by Latham are colloquial terms within human paleontology - "lumpers" and "splitters"

parameters for their unique practices can be both examined and expanded. This calls for professionals and students who might consider their knowledge “armchair” understanding and for those who have already visible application of their extra-experience to come together as experts of a new kind. In doing so, these persons can find validation for mixed methods and strengthen new strategies in which they can implement their expertise.

visibility & collaboration

The better defined interdiscipline becomes, and the more examples we have to support its benefits for a variety of practices, will promote effective fieldwork that better recognizes it. Making labor visible is an ongoing issue within the LIS field. Liz Settoducato equates library work to haunting in that it is “not being seen, or being seen only to be replaced or forgotten” (Settoducato 2019). It is true that, at present, LIS professionals are often asked to find an update, to migrate, or to innovate upon the preexisting and unseen labor of their peers. In performing updates, does recognition of foundational development get lost? In archival description and access, iterative³ practice is taught as way to return to materials in order to improve access to and develop better understanding of them. Using practical examples from the field

³ to better explain archival practice see Elizabeth Yakel’s “Archival Representation”, *Archival Science* issue 3, 1-15, 2003. Accessed January 12, 2019. And Jennifer Meehan’s chapter “Arrangement and Description: Between Theory and Practice” in *Archives and Recordkeeping: Theory into Practice*, Facet Publishing, UK, 2013.

can point not only to the splintering off of practitioners from their centralized fields, but also begin to highlight the work done by interdisciplinarians. In developing CANVAS (Corcoran Archival Network for the Visual Arts) both of these points are mentioned by Jacqueline L. Protka. Initially, a title was given as “visual resources curator”, a job we can imagine requiring understanding of digital humanities, art history, and archival studies. Later, due to high turnover and demands in workflow, the position was reframed as a “digital assets librarian” (p266 Protka 2012). This is fine enough, and certainly appropriate for the work that was required of the position to contribute to CANVAS, but it does leave space to wonder how a job title dictates many persons’ perceptions of themselves in relationship to the work they do and *how* they will go about doing it.

There is something to be said in regards to not just the title of a practitioner but also in recognizing their name alongside the work they publicly produce - especially when their work has contributed to something outside of the field to which their title might be more closely affiliated with. Sidath Gunawardena, Rosina Weber and Denise E. Agosto bring quantified representation into their account of interdisciplinary collaboration between the LIS and larger sciences field:

On the opposite end of this spectrum, quantitative studies, such as those that use citation data to analyze collaborative behavior, use a very narrow definition of collaboration. Based on contribution to the output of the

collaborative process, frequently the benchmark for what is considered collaboration is co-authorship. While this type of definition focuses on the end result of the collaboration, it ignores the process that brought it about.⁴

This is indicative of the invisibility that many fields of scholarship have been attempting to eradicate as of late⁵. By paying it forward via citation, scholars either risk doing double the harm towards more integrative practices or lift the curtain for readers to look behind what might be the veil of a parent publication's title, authors' titles, or other taxonomy involved in the production of the sources cited. Speaking from my own experience in professional pathway and areas of expertise, it is not uncommon to see the same French philosophers cited in both the areas of creative writing, museum practice, and information studies. But this is certainly not enough to claim regular integration of the field of philosophy within any of the three. Nor enough instantiation, or instantiation at all, to call myself an interdisciplinary practitioner with focus on philosophy. Without more active practice between the profession and philosophical thinking and/or writing, the sources are merely a

⁴ Sidath Gunawardena, Rosina Weber and Denise E. Agosto "Finding That Special Someone: Interdisciplinary Collaboration in an Academic Context" *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, Vol. 51, No. 4 ((Fall) October 2010), p. 213

⁵ Whitehead, Jessie L. "Invisibility of Blackness: Visual Responses of Kerry James Marshall." *Art Education* 62, no. 2 (2009): 33-39. doi:10.2307/27696328. Accessed March 18, 2019, "Intersubjectivity and Ghostly Library Labor - In the Library with the Lead Pipe. www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/intersubjectivity-and-ghostly-library-labor/ Accessed March 10, 2019, Philip Mirowski "Re-engineering scientific credit in the era of the globalized information economy" *First Monday* Volume 6, Number 12 - 3 December 2001 , Taemin Kim Park "The visibility of Wikipedia in scholarly publications" *First Monday* Volume 16, Number 8 - 1 August 2011)

referent, not a direct collaboration. I'd like to attempt at broadening the definition of collaboration by expanding upon what criteria are required for calling it such. The OED defines collaboration as, " **1.** United labour, co-operation; esp. in literary, artistic, or scientific work."⁶ This seems agreeable but, as is the nature of OED, not necessarily wholly descriptive. Wikipedia hosts a much longer entry on collaboration, citing over 40 references, and seven images. In my opinion, the most interesting being the first⁷: an image of a tower of people, standing on each other's shoulders, with a very small person at the top and a crowd at the bottom, in the foreground are hands and arms, cropped by the end of the frame, before the elbow - especially notable - everyone in the image wears the same clothing, white pants, a turquoise shirt, and a broad black belt. What can be inferred about the decision making for including this image on Wiki's page for "collaboration"? Well, for one interpretation, I like to imagine the hands at the bottom being like some of the citations for this very paper; something like a citation count that drives data with the potential to influence the definition for interdisciplinary work, or against it. Authorship from a citation, alone, does not denote collaboration. Even co-authorship may be said to be the same. What might bolster

⁶ "Collaboration, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 18, 2019. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/36197>.

⁷ "Collaboration." *Wikipedia*, March 3, 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Collaboration&oldid=885970206> and García, Eric Sala & Tània. *Català: 3 de 10 Amb Folre i Manilles Carregat Pels Castellans de Vilafranca a La Diada de Sant Fèlix Del 2006*. August 5, 2006. <https://web.archive.org/web/20070529054035/http://www.nooficial.com/index.php>. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3d10_fm_de_vilafranca.jpg.

interdisciplinary work is defining collaboration as just that, supportive action and practice amongst many (or perhaps, few) to benefit *all* who have contributed. That could include referencing editors, researchers involved in collecting data for review, and mentors who cultivated idea generation. Of course this begins to open a discussion of intellectual property, but the idea is to *thoughtfully* acknowledge presence where and when it shows up as collaborative effort.

strengthening interdiscipline in education

What often lacks in education is the humanistic approaches to learning, including (but not limited to) visual & studio arts, music, and creative writing⁸. In searching for the development of interdisciplinarianism, and achieving a stronger understanding of it, I discovered many examples of LIS crossing boundaries into science, legal and museum studies. But more specific to my own interests are not only the technomuseological crosswalks built with LIS knowledge⁹ but increasingly fascinating are the bridges built between visual & studio arts and LIS¹⁰. Focusing on these two intersections, what becomes most clear is the profound lack of acknowledgment to

⁸ Menezes, Zahira Torres, Ryan. "Only 35 L.A. Public Schools Get an A in Supporting the Arts." *latimes.com*. Accessed April 12, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-laUSD-arts-20151102-story.html>

⁹ J. Gordon Daines III & Cory L. Nimer "Re-Imagining Archival Display: Creating User-Friendly Finding Aids, *Journal of Archival Organization*, 9:1, 4-31, DOI: 10.1080/15332748.2011.574019, 2011

¹⁰ Jenny Sjöholm "The art studio as archive: tracing the geography of artistic potentiality, progress and production" *Cultural geographies* Vol. 21(3) 505-514, 2014.

where the literacy, or when the literacy, or who taught the literacy of LIS to musicological professionals and creative artists becomes visible and engaged with. If professional success as an interdisciplinarian is found, it should be taught as a way to navigate through the challenging paths of education. But simply injecting the idea of interdiscipline by merging classroom environments, enrollment in more extracurriculars, or offering a course *on* interdiscipline will likely not support its practice any better than the passing of laws to include more arts in education as has been done, at present.

“Creating and modifying a course *is an act of design*, and the evolution of a course syllabus is a matter of acknowledging and *dealing with trade-offs*, where deciding what to remove is just as important as deciding what to include.”¹¹

In yet another issue of Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, Paul F. Marty and Michael B. Twidale paraphrase how transcending disciplinary boundaries must be carefully considered by education. The authors were thoughtful enough to reference design in this statement; whether it was intentional to draw the readers’ attention to an instance of a discipline outside of education (writing, design, psychology, business) that would influence the transcendence they call for or if it was an eloquent word choice simply cannot be known to me. Design is a field too frequently drawn into others as a way to visualize problem solving and incite

¹¹ Paul F. Marty and Michael B. Twidale, "Museum Informatics Across the Curriculum: Ten Years of Preparing LIS Students for Careers Transcending Libraries, Archives, and Museums" in Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, Vol. 52, No. 1 ((Winter) January 2011). p. 21

creativity. But an important aspect from design not nearly as referenced when design is written into syllabus development, strategic planning, and other information studies learning initiatives is the inclusion of a studio practice¹².

conclusion

To be sure, the importance of having knowledge that is both local and specialized to one's practice with which one is professionally aligned is not to be ignored. Being given a single title for the work one does in a single place or institution is inevitable for the reality of hiring committees and payroll management. But there *is* advantage to having diverse experience that needn't be overlooked nor exploited. It will remain challenging to explore who identifies as interdisciplinarians and what the expectations for work are even from themselves. Whether it be two, three, or more disciplines from which practice is blended, linked, or bridged will make meaningful contribution to the fields in which the work is accepted. Imagining a space specific to interdiscipline for educators might be an excellent point to begin for positive reception of these individuals and teams.

¹² Arguably, studio practice is ignored even within the study of design, as design becomes more consumer-centric and prioritizes product branding.

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