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Dr. Woden Teachout

ISU after K.Tynystanov

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH' AND 'SCHOLARSHIP AS A CONVERSATION
Understanding Scholarly Models in the Interests of International Collaboration

One of the great pleasures of my Fulbright year at Issyk Kul State University after K.Tynystanov has been the opportunity to collaborate on research with my Kyrgyz colleagues. I've worked closely with two colleagues from the History Department on an oral history project on bride-kidnapping, and I've consulted with a number of other faculty members on their humanities and social science work. We share many commonalities – the value placed on research, a deep interest in methodology, and a desire to share our findings. In the course of these conversations, it has struck me that there is a difference in the way we think about and approach scholarship.

In Kyrgyzstan, I've found the ruling language of academic inquiry to be that of scientific inquiry. Across departments, my Kyrgyz colleagues who are scholars and researchers describe their work as 'scientific research' and themselves as 'scientists'. For an American, this was a surprise: these terms are usually reserved for those in physics, chemistry, biology, and similar fields. We do talk about 'social scientists': those in fields such as sociology, politics and economics. But historians, literary scholars, and cultural critics never use those terms to describe themselves: we think of ourselves as 'researchers' and 'scholars' but not 'scientists.' And we will have 'working ideas', but we rarely talk about having a 'hypothesis.' Instead we use a different framework: the idea of a "scholarly conversation."

The influential scholar and literary critic Kenneth Burke presented the idea of scholarship as a conversation in this famous passage:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress [1].

In Burke's model, scholarship is not the activity of uncovering existing truths. Rather, it is the process of participating in a conversation about a given topic: a conversation which is ongoing and which inevitably changes over time, as different participants come and go. Each of those participants has something slightly different to contribute, and in the process of discussion – arguing, defending, aligning, refining – they come to different understandings. In this model, the work is never done. The conversation continues. No one person can say everything there is to say on a subject. Rather, they think of their work as a conversation: one in which knowledge accumulates over time, as more and more people research and think and talk about the topic.

The foundations of this idea were developed in the classic work*The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann [2]. They argue that knowledge doesn't just exist somewhere, waiting to be discovered. Rather, it is *constructed*: the product of a collaborative process between many scholars, universities, libraries, funding agencies and others. All of those actors make decisions that influence which topics get studied and which don't. And they are susceptible to historical forces. In history, for example, there was a great

deal of scholarship done on social class during the 1970s, and many important insights emerged on class during that time. Nowadays, class is a much less popular lens: historians are much more likely to study questions of race, gender, and sexuality. As a result, our knowledge base is heavily tilted toward those topics. And in another twenty years, it will probably be another question, perhaps having to do with the environment.

This model shapes the expectations that scholars have of themselves and of each other. As a working scholar, you are expected to know not only the *facts* of your field, but the major *interpretations* of those facts: what other scholars have said about them. You need to include a 'literature review' as part of your work, in which you show how the conversation has progressed to the present time, and what your work can add to that conversation.

How does this construction of knowledge take place in practice? In the Western model, the stages of the scholarly process look like this:

1) Initial research: The scholar takes initial idea and does research to test it and to prove or disprove her working hypothesis. Often, she doesn't know exactly what she is looking for: just that something is intriguing. Over the course of her research, she may radically redirect her interests, depending on what she finds.

2) Conference presentation: The scholar has made some findings and is ready to do a conference presentation. She writes up a one page abstract and submits it as a conference proposal, in response to a "Call for Papers." When her proposal is accepted, she writes a conference paper of roughly 12 pages. At the conference, she presents this paper to the audience (other scholars) who offer suggestions for improvement and further research.

3) Continued research: The scholar follows up on the suggestions she received and continues her research in the direction that seems most productive.

4) Article: When she is ready, the scholar submits an article to a journal in her field. If the editor likes the article, he sends it to two or more other scholars for a blind peer review. Those reviewers will either reject the article or make suggestions for improving it, which the scholar then integrates before publishing the article.

5) Book: The scholar will take continue her research and conference presentations until there is enough material to develop into a book. When she has a book manuscript ready, she will send it to a university press for consideration. The university press engages the same process as the scholarly journal: sending the manuscript out to reviewers, who either reject or make suggestions, and asking the scholar to incorporate those suggestions.

6) Reviews of the book: When the book is finally published, it goes out to a number of scholarly journals for review. These journals will send the book to yet other scholars to be reviewed, and will publish those reviews. (These reviews are available in online databases and can be extremely helpful if you are deciding whether or not to read a particular book.)

So, in the Western model – as in the Kyrgyz model -- any scholarly project goes through multiple stages of development: research, conference presentation, article publication, book publication. At each stage, fellow scholars comment on the project and give suggestions in a process known as "peer review". Thus, any piece of scholarship you are reading in a peer reviewed journal has already benefited from the insights of a number of people.

You will remember that Kenneth Burke's passage discussed the argumentative aspects of the conversation. Mark Gaipa provides concrete strategies for scholarly argument in his very useful article "Breaking Into the Conversation." [3]. It is important to realize that a scholarly presentation, in the Western model, is not an exploration. Instead it is an argument: a sustained argument in which all the points and all the evidence serves to support one main idea. That doesn't mean that a paper shouldn't take into account competing claims, or acknowledge complexities or holes in one's theory. It will be much stronger if one does. But it does mean that scholars make sure that everything works together to support one main idea that the reader can take away.

When I describe the paradigm of the scholarly conversation to my students, most of it makes sense to them. But they struggle hardest with the question of objectivity. Western scholars believe that scholarship is not objective. Instead, it reflects our interests and our ideologies and our perspectives as human beings, which we carry over into our scholarly lives. How do Western scholars deal with this challenge? How can you do research if you believe that your findings will inevitably be biased? Some disciplines – and history is one -- largely avoid the question. Others – notably anthropology and literature -- deal with it directly. Scholars have developed the idea of "subject position": the way one sees the world through certain key defining characteristics, often race, gender, and class. In this strategy, scholars directly acknowledge their own "subject position" – their experience – as part of their scholarship. So in the case of our project on bride kidnapping, I might say that my "subject position" is as a woman, an American, a mother, and a breadwinner. These parts of my identity shape the way that I approach the topic and the questions I ask: I am interested in how young women understand and make sense of *ala kachuu*.One's subject position also can lead to blindness. I have not worked with victims of domestic violence, so it did not occur to me initially to include 'violence' as an analytic category. But when my colleagues suggested it, I could see immediately that it was important. Part of why our project is so rich is that each of the researchers comes to the table with a different subject position.

My work at Issyk Kul State University, and especially on this joint research project, has been a remarkable experience: one that has broadened my perspectives. One of the most intriguing aspects has been exploring, through our work together, the ways that our different cultures think about scholarship. Understanding scholarly culture – like understanding any other part of culture – can help us work across international boundaries and forge lasting partnerships. I look forward to translating our ideas across language, across culture, and across scholarly models, in future collaborations between American and Kyrgyz researchers.

References:

1. Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), p. 109-110.
2. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966).
3. Mark Gaipa, "Breaking Into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority For Their Writing", Pedagogy Fall 2004 4(3):419-437.