

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Author Meets Critics: Learning through scholarly conversation

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship as a conversation is a particularly useful metaphor for encouraging active learning among university students. This article suggests one way to move beyond the metaphor, by enabling conversation between students and established scholars. After contextualizing the idea of scholarship as a conversation within broader learning metaphors, I introduce an exercise called Author Meets Critics. I explain the exercise procedure and analyze more than 100 questions asked by students in six iterations conducted in universities in both North America and Southeast Asia. I analyze five categories of student questions that emerged from the exercise and discuss each category with respect to the idea of scholarship as conversation. I conclude that the exercise provides a unique opportunity to not only interrogate the work in question, but also recognize authors as socially embedded actors with the same joys and challenges as students when it comes to scholarship. Through the exercise, students gain a sense of camaraderie with authors and each other with regard to learning, as they experience the opening of infinite tangents to the conversation. The exercise thus fosters deeper learning, self-reflection, and improved communication skills, both with classmates and scholars.

INTRODUCTION

The late Robin Williams portrayed many memorable teaching and learning moments on screen. However, a moment from *Good Will Hunting* stands out for its relevance to long-standing discussions in higher education. In it, Williams, playing a psychology professor named Sean, challenges the titular character Will, a rough-edged genius he is mentoring. He asks if Will has “someone you can relate to [...] someone who opens things up for you.” Will replies, “Sure, I got plenty.”

Sean: Well, name them.

Will: Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Frost, O’Connor, Kant, Pope, Locke...

Sean: Well that’s great. They’re all dead.

Will: Not to me, they’re not.

Sean: You can’t give back to them. You can’t have a lot of dialogue with them.

(Van Sant, 1997)

In pushing Will to open up emotionally and intellectually with the living, Sean suggests that an essential component of learning (and life) is conversation. Will must engage in give-and-take with others (students, teachers, friends) in order to learn and mature. The metaphor of learning—and scholarship in general—as a conversation has been a useful way to conceptualize the practices and products of knowledge creation and dissemination since at least Kenneth Burke’s (1941) famous vision of scholarship as a parlour hosting an unending conversation that participants enter, join, and exit. However, the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation can be difficult to put into practice, particularly for undergraduates.

In this article, I examine the idea of scholarship as a conversation by contextualizing it within other metaphors of learning. Then I introduce an exercise that makes this metaphor concrete by connecting students with leading scholars. I call this exercise Author Meets Critics. I explain the exercise, then share results and feedback from six iterations conducted at universities in both North America and Southeast Asia. I analyze five broad categories of questions that emerged, and I conclude with remarks about the broader applicability and limitations of both this exercise and the metaphor of scholarship as conversation in general. I argue that this exercise begins with the metaphor of scholarship

as conversation, but improves upon it by providing a unique opportunity to not only interrogate the work in question, but also recognize authors as socially embedded actors who share the same joys and challenges as students when it comes to scholarship. I note that through the exercise, students gain a valuable sense of camaraderie with authors and each other that may further stimulate students through additional conversations.

METAPHORS OF SCHOLARSHIP

All aspects of higher education can be expressed through metaphors. In particular, Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) has inspired reflection on and analysis of how metaphors provide frameworks for understanding not only the role and practices of learning and teaching by individuals, but also the shaping of entire academic fields. This applies to everyone from incoming students to full professors. Different metaphors of scholarship can influence how research is conducted, findings are disseminated, subjects are taught, curricula are developed, learners are inspired, and students are assessed. For this reason, instructors and learners at all levels—senior faculty (Martínez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001), new faculty members (Foote, 2010), teachers-in-training (Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007; Martínez et al., 2001), and new university students (Fain, 2001; see also ACRL, 2014)—can benefit from learning about and reflecting on metaphors of scholarship. Indeed, as Saban et al. (2007) explain, engaging with these metaphors allows for the examination of one's "values, beliefs, and philosophies about teaching and learning" (p. 135).

The range of metaphors of scholarship is vast. Saban et al. (2007) identify dozens of metaphors used to conceptualize schools (zoo, stage, family, factory, prison), teachers (babysitter, animal keeper, gardener, judge, entertainer, puppeteer, conductor, shopkeeper), students (empty receptacle, sponge, container, clay, trapped bird, slave), and education in general (service, product, cure) (see also Inbar, 1996; Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003). When it comes to metaphors of learning in particular, Sfard (1998) suggests two broad categories prevalent in higher education: one that views learning as a process of acquisition and another that proposes that learning happens through participation. The acquisition metaphor is "the idea of learning as gaining possession over some commodity," while in the participation metaphor, learning is "a process of becoming a member of a certain community" (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). The former is the model among scholars like Piaget and Vygotsky, and emerges whenever one speaks of knowledge as *something* delivered from teacher to learner, accumulated over time, and constructed from various inputs. In the latter, learning is conceived as embedded in social and cultural contexts and produced through the interactions of members in learning communities.

As Sfard (1998) concludes, “In the image of learning that emerges from this linguistic turn, the permanence of *having* gives way to the constant flux of *doing*” (p. 6, emphasis in original).

No single metaphor perfectly encapsulates all of the potential joy, struggle, and camaraderie that can accompany scholarship. No single metaphor can suit the shifting needs of every learner, teacher, researcher, or academic field. And as Sfard (1998) notes, over-reliance on any single metaphor may have negative consequences: “Too great a devotion to one particular metaphor and rejection of all the others can lead to theoretical distortions and to undesirable practical consequences” (p. 5). The best option is shifting metaphors for shifting needs; a constant movement between permanence and flux.

SCHOLARSHIP AS CONVERSATION

Some metaphors are more flexible than others and seem to shuttle back and forth across the conceptual boundary implied by Sfard’s acquisition/participation division. One such metaphor is scholarship as a conversation, the idea that lies at the heart of Robin Williams’ suggestion in *Good Will Hunting*. The metaphor of scholarship as a conversation is well established in higher education. Emerging from the Burkean Parlour mentioned above, it is echoed in claims like that of Elbow (2000): “This is what we academics do: carry on an unending conversation not just with colleagues but with the dead and unborn” (p. 381). Huff (1999) agrees: “Scholarly work is rooted in the lively exchange of ideas—conversation at its best” (p. 3). This is a participatory transfer of commodities; a hybrid of both participation and acquisition.

As Burke points out, participation in any conversation must begin from understanding what has been said up to this point. One enters the parlour “late” and must catch up with the flow and mood of the conversation before joining. This applies not only to learning by individuals, but also the development of entire disciplines. In Sfard’s terms, this means contributions in most fields (participation) rest on a foundation laid by others (acquisition). Indeed, as Huff (1999) adds, the metaphor “suggests an ongoing dialogue that has the potential not only to add to each participant’s store of information but to alter participants’ opinions and priorities” (p. 4). The metaphor of scholarship as a conversation thus contains elements of both acquisition (a “store of information”) and participation (“an ongoing dialogue”).

The metaphor has found its way into the classroom, where many educators encourage students to think of not only the authors they read, but also themselves, as embodied, engaged members of a learning community to which they may contribute. For instance, Emmons and Martin (2002) suggest that

students should regard all authors “as rhetorically situated contributors to the conversation about an issue (i.e., people with an interest and a point of view) rather than as disinterested sources of facts to be reported” (p. 546). Scholarship as conversation is one of five “threshold concepts” that the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) suggests library professionals expose students to. It is defined as “sustained discourse within a community of scholars or thinkers, with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of competing perspectives and interpretations” (ACRL, 2014, p. 5). It continues:

Far from a unified body of uncontested knowledge, the scholarly record is better understood in terms of a conversation in which information users and creators come together to negotiate meaning, with the expert adding his or her voice to the conversation. The expert understands that there may not be a single uncontested answer to a query and, hence, is inclined to seek out the many perspectives in a scholarly conversation, not merely the one with which the expert already agrees.

The challenge, as Northedge (2003) points out, is for students to acquire the knowledge and skills to become “legitimate participants” in the conversation (p. 170).

One method for legitimizing one’s participation is through the literature review, an assignment that has become *de rigeur* for undergraduate research papers (including Honours theses), Master’s theses, PhD dissertations, and review articles in the humanities and social sciences up to the most senior level. In such a work, the author is expected not only to chart the discipline’s foundations and construction of knowledge over time (acquisition), but also to point out “gaps” in the field and add one’s unique voice to the conversation (participation).

However, for some students, this exercise can be daunting. Many struggle to move beyond description of a conversation to which they consider themselves bystanders. Even after gaining command of the key arguments and actors in the conversation, some students consider themselves too inexperienced to critique or add to the conversation (Northedge, 2003). Plus, the conversation often reaches a dead end in the university classroom. Students read, review, synthesize, and analyze the work of others via assessment tasks and share ideas with the instructor and each other. They may even find their voices and offer unique perspectives on a field. However, the ideas are seldom shared outside the class. Plus, students cannot directly challenge authors or ask for clarification of a particularly difficult idea. Instead, they ask instructors or make informed conclusions based on the material. While conceptualizing scholarship as a conversation may help students understand the flow of a

field, they may consider the metaphor inappropriate or incomplete. How can students move beyond the metaphor, and how might a more responsive form of conversation give students a stronger sense of the joys, challenges, and camaraderie associated with scholarship, and thereby a more engaged form of participation?

AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

“Author Meets Critics” is a form of scholarly exchange common at the annual meetings of associations like the American Association of Geographers (AAG) and the American Sociological Association (ASA, 2015). Typically, four or five scholars of various ranks and specializations sit on a panel with the author of a newly published work that has made a contribution to the discipline. The “critics” each give a 10-minute review of the book, after which the author responds. Then the conversation opens to the floor. This simple format combines the academic rigour of a book review with the embodied immediacy of a job interview or informal chat, and although participants are called “critics,” it is seldom hostile. Instead, it is usually a supportive incarnation of the Burkean Parlour and the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation.

One Author Meets Critics session from several years ago inspired me to adopt a version of the practice in class. In it, one of the “critics” was an undergraduate student representing her classmates. The students had read the work in question in a course and had been invited to share their thoughts and questions. This was a rare opportunity to engage directly with an author, and the author received valuable feedback from one of the book’s potential, if often overlooked, audiences. It was obvious that both “author” and “critics” gained immensely from the conversation. Since then, I have tried to recreate that teaching and learning moment by building upon the format and developing it in my courses at large public universities in North America and Southeast Asia.

The procedure

Author Meets Critics begins with an invitation to a scholar whose work appears on our course reading list. It can be a book, a book chapter, a journal article, an opinion piece, a blog post, a podcast, a video (lecture, documentary, etc.), or any other work. In an email, I identify the piece we are analyzing and ask the author to consider responding to student questions. I also include the syllabus, so the scholar understands why we are engaging with this particular work and where it falls into the larger trajectory of the course. Timing is important. The invitation email needs to be sent up to one month in advance of students reading the work in question, since it will take time to receive the author’s reply and prepare the subsequent steps.

Once an author accepts, I introduce the activity in class and ask students to think of questions for the author. I next create an online document in Google Docs that all students can access and edit. Some instructors may not be comfortable using a tool from a private corporation for a class exercise. They may find another option. The benefit of Google Docs is that one need not worry which version is being edited by whom. Once the instructor shares the document with students (by entering their email addresses) and gives them “edit” permission, dozens (or even hundreds) of students can work on the same document simultaneously, with all changes saved immediately. This saves the instructor the trouble of collecting responses via email and copying and pasting them into a single set of questions for the author. Another interesting function is that anyone using the document at the same time can chat in real time, further enhancing the exercise as a conversation constantly in flux.

I set a deadline for student questions one week before the class in which we will discuss the work. Then I share the online document with the author and give her/him “edit” privileges and one week to reply. I always inform the author that they can choose to answer as many (or as few) questions as they wish, and that we will understand if they skip some questions. I also ask if they accept follow-up questions.

The activity brings to life the idea of scholarship as a conversation in several ways. First, students must read carefully and develop questions that directly engage the work or the author. Since conversation is an intensely personal activity and students do not wish to embarrass themselves by asking an uninformed or irrelevant question, they tend to take the exercise seriously and ask questions that genuinely interest them. Once the author answers the questions online, we devote class to unpacking the exercise. I ask each student to repeat their question and read the response, which we then discuss as a class. Although it lacks the immediacy of a face-to-face conversation, each direct response reiterates the metaphor, while also possibly opening new topics for discussion. Indeed, depending on the type of question, some answers inevitably lead to more questions, and more conversations in class. Here, the exercise highlights the fact that many scholarly conversations remain in flux and can proceed in unpredictable ways. Finally, if the author has approved, students can ask follow-up questions directly, which allows them to continue conversations beyond the assignment. At the same time, in the spirit of the metaphor, students are encouraged to remember that like all conversations, there may be no definitive answer to any given question, and instead, that their questions might stimulate further questions that they can explore on their own, either in the same course or elsewhere.

Results: Question categories

I conducted this exercise one time each in six different undergraduate courses, which ranged from an introductory course on the Anthropology of Japan to an Honours course on Japanese political economy. Over the six iterations, 69 students asked a total of 113 questions. Among these, five major categories emerged: 1) research motivation questions 2) methodology questions, 3) conceptual framework questions, 4) expert opinion questions, and 5) future research questions. In the following sections, I explain each category and provide example questions. I also discuss how each category relates to the metaphor of scholarship as a conversation. The participating authors come from the fields of anthropology, geography, history, and political science, and all are Japan specialists. However, the broad categories of questions make it clear that the benefits of this exercise reach beyond these disciplines and the study of Japan.

1. Research motivation questions. Students frequently ask how an author became interested in a topic, discipline, or location. For instance:

Q: I was wondering how you got in to Anthropology of Japan and more specifically how you decided to study women of this particular region?

Q: How did you get started in the research on environmental action in Japan and in particular, on rivers and dams?

Q: Why did you decide to do your study in the Central Kiso area? Was there something that drew you specifically to that region?

Admittedly, research motivation questions do little to acknowledge or develop a *scholarly* conversation. Students need not understand or acknowledge the contributions made up to this point in the author's work (no "acquisition," in Sfard's terms), nor do they add anything original to the discussion (no "participation"). Students do little to engage in the "exchange of ideas," in Huff's terms. Therefore, research motivation questions might seem a lazy alternative to actually struggling with the content of the reading and engaging with the author on a scholarly level. However, as Huff reminds us, scholarship has the potential to do more than simply inform; it may also "alter participants' opinions and priorities." It is natural for students to wonder about authors' priorities, including why they chose their research. Plus, research motivation questions show that students recognize authors as individuals with personal and professional reasons for focusing on particular topics, talking to certain

people, and travelling to certain places. Since they sometimes struggle to find their own research topics, students are curious about what inspires others. This exercise enables students to feel camaraderie with a scholar who shares their own joys and struggles of learning. Another reward of this type of question is that it can lead to lively classroom discussion about what factors (personal, political, or otherwise) inspire scholarly activity in the first place. This allows students to understand the embeddedness of all scholars and scholarship, and to begin to reflect on what factors might drive them to pursue a particular topic or field of study.

2. *Methodology questions.* Students often wonder why an author chose a particular research methodology (interviews, participant observation, archival, comparative, etc.) for the study at hand. This curiosity stimulates questions like the following:

Q: How many years did you spend doing field research in Japan before you had enough material to formulate your book? What type of research method (interviews, statistics, etc.) did you find most useful?

Q: How did your positionality affect how you were able to interact with Filipina hostesses?

Q: Why compare France and Japan? Why not choose France and another European country, or Japan and another Asian country? Does having only two countries as examples lead to a risk of narrowing the opinion of the reader?

Like research motivation questions, methodology questions stem more from general curiosity than deeply embedded knowledge of and participation in a scholarly conversation. As students are exposed to new ways of conducting research throughout their education, they also learn the benefits and pitfalls of different methodologies. However, particularly in the social sciences, a scholar's choice of research methodology is intricately tied not only to her/his research motivations, but also to the conceptual framework(s) guiding the study. Thus, any question about methodology can also be treated as a question about epistemology. Given my frequent inclusion of readings from anthropologists, a common thread of question comes from science and engineering students asking about an author's choice of qualitative methods, subtly questioning the legitimacy of methods they consider too "subjective". For example:

Q: Regarding interviews and house visits, how does a researcher factor in the possibility of the subject “putting on a show” for the researcher? Could the observation then be slightly augmented because of the subject’s behaviour, and would not that have significant impact on a researcher’s findings?

Q: Given the difficulties in making observations which are free from bias and inherent value judgments, how can we ensure that the ethnographic study that we conduct and the phenomenon which we observe reflects an accurate depiction of the situation (with entirely no implications about the integrity of your approach, just curious about how you manage to do it)?

Within the framework of scholarship as a conversation, author responses to methodology questions tend to be the most impassioned, since they are defending the foundations of their claims. An additional benefit of this exercise is that these reactions frequently lead to a second round of conversation in the classroom, in which students are encouraged to rethink their assumptions about what qualifies as research and knowledge. Particularly in the case of a class composed of students from multiple faculties and disciplinary backgrounds, this can present an occasion for all students to share their epistemological stance, thus expanding the conversation beyond the original student question and author response.

3. *Conceptual framework questions.* In addition to methodology questions, these questions can pose the biggest challenge to authors, since students hint that the foundations of the work in question are shaky or unclear. For instance:

Q: I am curious as to why you chose to frame Japanese relationships mostly from a westernized point of view? I may be misinterpreting your writing, if so, I would be much obliged if you would offer some advice in how to better understand your arguments.

Q: You have acknowledged that Minamata’s case is atypical from most other cases of *furusato-zukuri* [hometown-making; a form of regional economic and social development]. However, the financial and tourism/outside angles are absent from your discussion centred on the reconciliation of differences between existing residents of the city. Is it then accurate to label it *furusato-zukuri*?

Q: Your anthropological field work [...] has exposed the dark side of Japanese *konbinis* [convenience stores]. What is the significance of this with regards to late modern Japanese capitalist logic? Is it not inevitable that capitalism will result in a “waste” society?

As opposed to research motivation and methodology questions, conceptual framework questions require familiarity with the theoretical background of the study, as well as an ability to draw alternate conclusions from the findings. Therefore, these students are making a more direct contribution to a scholarly conversation. Of course, asking for clarification may also reveal that students are also working with quite vague conceptions. For instance, the student above questions the author’s “westernized point of view” without providing a clear explanation (or any supporting evidence from the study or previous scholarship) of what the term “westernized” means. Luckily, an instructor can follow-up with this student in class and push for a clearer explanation of what the question meant. Again, the exercise accounts for the flux of scholarly conversations by acknowledging that keywords used in one discipline do not mean the same thing in another, while simultaneously providing an impetus and opportunity for students to clarify their own conceptual frameworks. Conceptual framework questions are one of the rarest forms, and they clearly fit the model of scholarship as conversation. For the most part, these questions suggest students have developed critical thinking skills sufficient to recognize “gaps” in a scholarly field and push a scholarly conversation to more sophisticated levels.

4. *Expert opinion questions.* In some cases, students press authors to take a stand on an issue or speculate beyond the case in question based on their expertise. For instance:

Q: What is your stand towards all the “losses” of the *konbini* [convenience store]? Do you view the *konbini* system in Japan as a horrible one? Because what I feel from the draft is that, although you identified “dark sides” of *konbini*, you do not have a strong opposition against it.

Q: If your house would be submerged by the dam siting, which side would you take, the civil society or the central government? Why?

Q: Do you think that the opposition and protest made by civil society will ever be successful in halting government dam projects in years to come?

These questions recognize the embedded nature of all participants in a scholarly conversation. Authors not only join the conversation, but also are professionally and personally shaped by it. As Huff puts it, scholarship can “alter participants’ opinions and priorities.” Students understand this and want to know how authors have been altered by their research. In other words, while the Burkean Parlour may appear as a room whose conversation occurs behind closed doors, students want to know the repercussions of the conversation to the world outside. This desire by students suggests a stretching of the metaphor of scholarship as conversation in recognition of the deep impacts made by one’s participation.

Sometimes expert questions are personal, as in the second example above, in which the student asks the author to imagine himself in the position of someone evicted due to dam construction. The author is in a unique position to answer such a question, due to his extensive knowledge of the interactions between dam siting and civil society responses. Expert opinion questions demonstrate an advanced level of critical thinking, in which students are not afraid to ask “what if?” or “so what?” In turn, when students propose their own research in the future, memories of this exercise emphasize the need for them to make explicit the practical implications of their study and remind them that they will be shaped in some way by participating in the scholarly conversation they choose. Finally, returning to the classroom itself, expert opinion questions can stimulate lively discussion on such topics as the generalizability of case study research and researcher objectivity, thus emphasizing the flux of the metaphor of scholarship as conversation as it moves beyond the topic itself.

5. *Future research questions.* Finally, some questions demonstrate student curiosity beyond the specifics of the case at hand and point toward potential follow-up research. Here, students may ask about missing details and unanswered questions, or about related research that either they are unfamiliar with or has not yet been conducted. For instance:

Q: How did the locals fare after relocation [because of dam construction], especially for those who do agriculture/farming for a living? Did they have any regrets after moving?

Q: Is there any semblance of Filipino males going abroad and performing similar actions to those portrayed by the Filipinas of the book?

Q: If you were to shift your ethnography from relations of Filipina women in Japan to relations of American women in Japan, what do you think the primary differences would be?

Such questions demonstrate not only student desire to know the latest about a topic (e.g. the condition of farmers disrupted by the dam), but also how one might draw connections to other subjects (e.g. Filipino men, American women in Japan). Such questions suggest new avenues of research for the authors or point out gaps in knowledge that students might be inspired to fill. Here, the metaphor of scholarship as conversation is particularly apt as a piece of scholarship engages readers, provokes new questions, and inspires new research.

Participant feedback

Response to the exercise by both authors and students has been overwhelmingly positive. Each author I approached agreed to participate, despite the fact that I had no previous acquaintance with four of them. All six authors expressed excitement that I had assigned their work to undergraduates, and they were curious to see what students might ask of them and their work. Students also seem to enjoy the exercise. In the first iteration, at a large public university in North America, it was an ungraded, optional exercise in a second-year Introduction to the Anthropology of Japan course. 33 of 80 students (41%) voluntarily asked questions of the author, a low number that may be attributed to poor planning and explanation by me, since I devised the exercise and requested student participation in the same week. With more time and a clearer explanation of the rationale, more students may have joined. However, the students who participated asked highly relevant and thought-provoking questions, and many of them later expressed satisfaction with the exercise.

Building on this first experience, I improved the organization in later versions, which occurred at a large university in Southeast Asia. In the latter cases, although each course had a smaller enrolment (2 to 24 students), the exercise was a required assignment in which 100% of students participated. The quality and type of questions seem to show genuine student interest in communicating with the authors on both a scholarly and personal level. Some students focus on the work's findings and how it speaks to related fields. However, for others, the activity provides a rare opportunity to ask questions about the challenges, inspirations, and joys of scholarship. In this way, the exercise improves on the experience found in Author Meets Critics sessions at academic conferences, which inspired this exercise. As students struggle with their own choice of research topic, methodology, theoretical framework, and more, the exercise taps into their desire for the camaraderie of others facing the same challenges.

Anonymous student feedback on the exercise has been overwhelmingly positive. In particular, students have praised the exercise's ability to create unique exchanges between the student and author that go beyond the content of the work. For instance, following one Author Meets Critics (April 2015,

8 responses from a class of 8), students were asked about their expectations and experience with the exercise, as well as what was useful about it. Several students suggested that the exercise pushed them to engage more with the text in question than they might otherwise have done. One wrote, “Definitely had to take more effort to read in order to ask good questions to the author!” Another commented, “It is a good exercise and allows us to engage more with readings and think critically about it, especially since we will be talking about it with the author himself!” The exercise motivated these students to read the work carefully so that they could ask a sufficiently engaging question.

Other students built upon this heightened level of engagement by suggesting that humanizing the author was the greatest value of the exercise. One wrote, “Normally we just critique and poke at texts (maybe even tear them apart!), forgetting that they’re the product of an actual person, so it was interesting to get to talk to the person behind the text, and understand a bit more about him and the things he writes about.” Here, the student emphasizes that the exercise is less about being a critic, and more about establishing a connection with the author. Two other students agreed that it was valuable to recognize the author as an “ordinary person”:

I thought the responses the author gave was [*sic*] enlightening and the whole experience for me was insightful. Not only did it help us put the things we read into greater perspective, the author also told us some of the projects he was currently working on which we could keep a lookout for. It was also interesting to know that these people whose [works] we read about are... ordinary people who go out to explore, experience and analyse before they can produce a paper.

I think it is [an] insightful experience that not only motivates students to think more critically about what they have read but also realise that these authors aren’t perfect in their writing as well. It is a chance for us to learn more about writing a paper and the things that the author had hoped to include in the paper but couldn’t do so.

For these students, the exercise not only encourages critical thinking regarding the work in question, but also emphasizes the author as an embedded individual with unique motivations, restrictions, and even flaws. Importantly, this awareness stimulates students to reflect on their own positionality with respect to research, which we discussed as a group in class, and it may even reduce some of the pressure they place on themselves in their own research and writing. This would provide yet another unintended benefit of the exercise.

CONCLUSIONS: LEARNING BEYOND CRITIQUE

Introducing metaphors of scholarship to undergraduates can be a valuable exercise. As scholars have shown, certain metaphors can either create burdensome expectations or encourage productive collaborations. Sharing these metaphors with students early in their educations can help them be more self-aware of how they learn. One metaphor of learning that has been suggested as particularly useful is scholarship as a conversation. It has long been considered apt for the ongoing nature of scholarship that attracts participants, creates a sense of shared purpose, and builds relationships between people and ideas over time. While the metaphor can be explained to students, this study has demonstrated the value of learning through actual conversation between scholars and students.

Author Meets Critics provides one way for students to enact the metaphor of scholarship as conversation. The five categories of student questions that I identify here—1) research motivation, 2) methodology, 3) conceptual framework, 4) expert opinion, and 5) future research—demonstrate how students can become engaged participants in a conversation. Through the exercise students can discover gaps and new potential directions in the research of others and demonstrate their understanding of a field by interrogating its broader implications. Moreover, they can make real connections with experts that help them understand that all research emerges from a messy reality, by recognizing that authors are individuals with unique motivations and opinions based on their relationships to ongoing scholarly conversations.

While I call this exercise Author Meets Critics, the findings suggest that students do not neatly fit the category of “critics.” Indeed, the original Author Meets Critics requires all participants to have a strong command of the subject in order to critique the work in question. The modified version I present here requires less established student knowledge of the subject. Instead, its foundation lies in the flux of a conversation that may go in any direction, depending on a student’s interest and an author’s willingness to reply. This version recognizes the social embeddedness of all participants and provides experts and budding scholars with the opportunity to acknowledge and share the joys and challenges of scholarship. The exercise enables all levels of learners to contribute something and to gain from what one student called its “two-way process.” Thus, the exercise improves on the original by enabling students to steer the conversation in the direction that interests them, thereby giving them a legitimate stake in the resulting conversation.

The conversation could be made more immediate and embodied, for instance, by having the author video conference the class. However, increased technology may increase opportunities for things to go wrong. Plus, with scholars living

potentially anywhere in the world (in my case Japan, the UK, and both coasts of the U.S., while I and my students are in Southeast Asia), matching schedules and time zones can be a burden. The shared online document is sophisticated and nimble enough to enable a thoughtful, if asynchronous, back-and-forth exchange in which all participants have time to carefully reflect on their contribution before joining the conversation. Plus, the living document that results from this exercise provides opportunities for additional face-to-face conversations in class, as the author's answers stimulate further reflection on critical topics like research methodologies and ethics, theoretical frameworks, researcher objectivity, the extrapolation of case study findings, future potential research based on the gaps that inevitably emerge in all fields, and even a researcher's underlying epistemologies. Clearly, student questions and authors' subsequent answers can open multiple avenues for exploring student beliefs and practices, thus enabling one to circle back to the original point that different metaphors of learning can shape one's encounters with the world in powerful ways.

Good Will Hunting suggests that learning depends on conversation—a willing exchange of ideas that can involve any number of participants. Author Meets Critics presents a clear way to “open things up” for budding scholars, as they navigate their connection to scholarly fields through the works, and feedback, of experienced authors.

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