



media and the senses

Seventh Annual Summer Institute in the Arts & Humanities: Media & the Senses Closing Remarks, Jentery Sayers (Department of English)

Over the past eight weeks, as part of the seventh annual Summer Institute in the Arts and Humanities, I had the privilege of working with a group of faculty and undergraduates from across the disciplines, and the awesome variety of work presented today should give you, if nothing else, a taste of what that work looked like, how it came to be, and where it's going. To sum up that work in my closing remarks would be neither sufficient nor fair enough to anyone in the room. Still, what I can do today is briefly address what I have learned from each of these students and faculty and articulate the ways in which that learning altered how I understand undergraduate research in the arts and humanities.

One thing I learned is that, in highly interdisciplinary contexts, both students and faculty can easily fall back on foundations—on what they are experts in. Obviously, we are most comfortable conversing about what we know, and this knowledge base often gives academics a feeling of control, a sense of place, and a steering wheel for knowledge-making. In this sense, expertise is framed around the individual, who is a person with a specialized set of skills and an authority on a particular subject. Yet what is striking to me about the very word “expert” is that, at least in the English language, it was a verb before it was a noun. While, starting in the 15th century, “expert” was a verb meaning “to experience” or “to know by experience,” it was not until the 19th century that it became a noun implying a person who is an authority or a specialist. That former definition—“expert” as an action—is now recognized as obsolete. However, from what I witnessed during the Institute, it is anything but. This summer, the most productive learning and novel creations occurred when “expert” shifted from a noun to a verb or from a person to an experience.

Premised on this shift, undergraduate research during the Institute attended not to effects or products, but to process and revision. Specifically, it emerged from collaborations among students—collaborations which did not assume agreement as a necessary ingredient, yet never

failed to generate new and exciting lines of inquiry. It also emerged from an openness to and emphasis on change and flexibility. During the Institute, I saw students undo a day's worth of their own labor, learn software that was new to them in a short span of time, rethink assumptions that subtended their previous work, drastically alter how they were imagining their projects, and, perhaps most importantly, take some serious risks, be they institutional, artistic, or even personal. That said, research was not only experiential; it was experimental. Last week, during their "In Process" exhibition, students turned the Jacob Lawrence Gallery into a laboratory for the arts and humanities, with many of them literally soliciting feedback from their audience, others presenting in a gallery space for the first time, and all of them realizing ways for others to inhabit and participate in their ideas. I could stand here and commend each of them for all of these things and validate their work; but I don't have to. They already know they have succeeded, because they experienced success and know how to recognize it. As experts of a new sort, they developed competencies and proficiencies—and not just skills—that will allow them, in the very near future, to mobilize their experiences during the Institute for new conversations, here on campus and elsewhere.

For the kind of interdisciplinary, undergraduate research I have witnessed this summer, thanks both to the students and the faculty, is about listening, not just talking; it's about unpacking what motivates a question, not simply posing one. And, of course, it does not do away with expertise; it displaces it and refigures it. These are the marks of creativity. And, this summer, I was fortunate enough to see and hear such creativity in action, and I learned so much from everyone involved. For this opportunity and on behalf of the students and faculty involved in the seventh annual Summer Institute in the Arts and Humanities, I would like to thank the Undergraduate Research Program, the Simpson Center for the Humanities, Undergraduate Academic Affairs, the Office of Research, UW Educational Outreach, and the Mary Gates Endowment for Students. Because of support from programs and offices such as these at the University Washington, the expert in undergraduate research is well on the way to becoming a verb again.