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Park, Chung, "There is Power Inherent in Working with Colleagues from Different Disciplines" (2020). *UCF Forum*. 387.

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There is Power Inherent in Working with Colleagues from Different Disciplines

By Chung Park
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, January 8, 2020

(Photo by Christina Morillo at Pexels)

When I was an early career academic, I started to hear and read the words “interdisciplinary research” everywhere.

As human beings are wont to do, I immediately thought of myself, and wondered how it applied to me and what I was doing. The connections seemed so tenuous and often a

little far out (such as coordinating a sound installation with a colleague from architecture), or perhaps too close to home (like partnering with someone in theater or dance).

Was this push for interdisciplinary research an edict from out-of-touch administrators telling us what to do? Or was it a sincere push to break out of our silos?

What I understand now is that there is power inherent in working with colleagues from different disciplines. It's up to our imaginations to figure out how to harness it.

How do we save ourselves from our blind spots and gain diverse viewpoints in academia?

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It's not difficult to imagine a university as a land of silos, each filled with people hammering away at their work, oblivious to what their colleagues are doing in the silo next door. The cobbler doesn't know the candle maker, who never talks to the butcher, who forbids his daughter from marrying the child of the baker.

I have a short story that illustrates how having a broad range of viewpoints informs and enlivens our work.

I recently ran into a student I met two years ago at Timber Creek High School during a music clinic. He was the timpanist in his school's wind ensemble and has since matriculated at UCF. As I walked on the sidewalk past the campus Rehearsal Hall, he flagged me down and asked me if I remembered him. I did, for the simple reason that he was the only person in the room who couldn't walk around during an ensemble-building exercise because of his drums — non-musicians would call it a team-building exercise.

He wanted to know if I had any thoughts about language diversity and how it relates to music. I was dumbstruck. I've been thinking about how we translate the dots and slashes on a page of music into a language.

I have always thought that there are parallels between music and written languages that just haven't been explored and I was deep in thought about this very thing as I was walking back to my office.

I have also been worried about whether we are losing the true language of music as the inflections and cultural flavor that give it life grow ever more distant.

Just the week before I had sent the students in the UCF orchestra an article about the last person in his Amazonian tribe who speaks Taushiro. It's poignant and frightening

and shows us that something that has taken countless hundreds or thousands of years to build can be lost in one generation.

The student interviewed me and went on to write an extensive paper about the loss of language diversity. In the last sentence of his paper he quoted me saying: “If we don’t have diversity, we will forever be lost to our blind spots.” I honestly don’t remember saying something so sensible, but delving a little further, I think our blind spots mostly consist of misunderstandings about how we connect to everything else in our world.

It’s this sense of connecting to the whole that I’m looking for as both a teacher and a researcher. Which leads me to this quote by naturalist and philosopher John Muir: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” I admit his quote is much better than mine. I’d even put it on a T-shirt. But the spirit is the same.

From my vantage point, the biggest issue is simply breaking the ice. So I’m using this article as a way to find people who are curious about the same questions I ask every day. Maybe we can fill each other’s blind spots?

I’m already working on research to prevent and treat repetitive motion and performance injury in musicians with a colleague in physical therapy, and an animation project with colleagues and graduate students in UCF’s animation program. I hope the knowledge gained from these projects will help to heal people and hook a whole new generation of listeners on Beethoven.

It’s made me hungry for even more collaborations with colleagues. For instance, I’m curious to see how the sounds we hear in our brains guide physical actions on musical instruments. What about figuring out ways to use research on decision theory in the music classroom?

I hope to run into you on the sidewalk sometime soon to begin the conversation to find answers to these and many other questions.

Chung Park is the director of the UCF Symphony and Chamber Orchestras, head of string music education, and an assistant professor in the Department of Music. He can be reached at Chung.Park@ucf.edu.