

Conference on the Relation between English and Foreign Languages in the Academy: Constructing Dialogue, Imagining Change

Introduction

WHEN THE IDEA FOR THIS CONFERENCE AROSE, IN AN MLA convention meeting of chairs of foreign languages and literature departments, it was received with cautious though undeniable enthusiasm.

That enthusiasm grew and took shape during the meetings of the conference planning committee, a committee whose members should be thanked here: John Guillory, Douglas Hesse, Larry Mitchell, Adalaide Morris, Geraldine Nichols, Haun Saussy, Rosemarie Scullion, Frank Trommler, and Michael Wood. As the committee discussed possible issues, it became clear to us that the mission of this conference was not only to assess the relation and changing dynamics between English and foreign languages and literatures but to conceive modes of possible collaboration and, more generally, to encourage reflection on cultural and linguistic diversity, stimulating true disciplinary crossings and intellectual exchange. Thus the pointed call to action reflected in the subtitle: "Constructing Dialogue, Imagining Change." There were so many issues we thought should be addressed: How had this relation been marked by changes in the perception of the humanities within higher education? How had shifting institutional trends and even budgetary considerations affected it? Why was it that languages were increasingly seen, by the general public, as mere communicative instruments, dissociated from literatures and cultures? Why, in an academy ever eager to explore diversity, was the institutional survival of certain languages imperiled and multiculturalism taught monolingually? And, finally, why was it that we tended to think in binary terms, English and other, and what could we learn from comparative literature, from performance and media studies, from translation studies, all of them inspiring, intellectually provocative Mr. In-Betweens?

Not all these questions were addressed, of course, in the conference on the relation of English and the foreign languages, held on 12, 13, and 14 April 2002 at New York University. But a good many of them were, in position papers, in small discussion groups, and in very lively general debate. The choice of venue seemed particularly auspicious: New York, a city of linguistic crossings and unexpected cultural alliances, seemed the ideal site for our reflection. Most remarkable, however, was the eagerness with which scholars from very different institutions and locations engaged in discussion, asked questions, proposed topics for discussion, and thoughtfully considered new proposals. True intellectual inquiry, not disciplin-

ary defensiveness, characterized the debate—one that, all participants agreed, was long past due. By the end of the third day it was clear to us all that this conference was only a beginning, that other exchanges must follow if we were to keep the dialogue going in challenging new ways. The publication of the papers from the conference is part of that effort, a call to sustained, action-oriented reflection for all members of the MLA, and an invitation to devise strategies that, while respecting differences, will allow us to explore possible new structures and create new sites of collaboration across the humanities.

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Collaborating across Disciplines: "It's a Small World After All"

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MY TITLE CAME TO ME AS A WAY OF SUGGESTING immediately both the exciting and the troublesome potentials of collaborations between foreign language and English departments. No one can take Disney's banal lyrics at all seriously, and the tune is both insidious and annoying. So why invoke it in a serious discussion?

Because in some ways we know that it is a small world, after all. A global economy aspires to shrink the world into a one-size-fits-all capitalism. And, at the same time, nation-states are fragmenting into smaller and smaller factions so that the kind of wholeness the song invokes in speaking of smallness is, ironically, receding into the distance. Yet no disagreement is so small that it cannot threaten to rend the fabric of civilization.

My mission—and I chose to undertake it—is to discuss issues, currently on deans' minds, that might encourage or constrain cooperative efforts and to present my view of the advantages and disadvantages of cooperation between English and foreign language departments.

Although I have been asked to provide a perspective on how deans think, I naturally hesitate to generalize from my own particular practice and distinctive situation. But here goes. We deans are, I hope, all invested in the success of the humanities disciplines on our campuses. That is, we all want the enterprises we shepherd to thrive and to be seen to be thriving. It's quite simple. If the departments and programs for which I have responsibility flourish with engaged and active faculties and interested and enthusiastic students, then I can secure more resources in the forms of dollars and faculty lines on which to build for the future. Even those deans who don't share my passion for what is, after all, my own disciplinary home think in similar ways about the resources of dollars and faculty lines. We are