

Reorganizing Humanities Departments: A View from the Office of the Chair of the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages

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AS MODERN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE FACULTY, we are very aware of the paradoxes that arise when one considers the value of big things versus little things. Most educated Americans agree that it would be a good thing if our students were more globally literate, if they all knew foreign languages and other cultures well and were able to work profitably in a globally interconnected economic system. But that does not necessarily mean that everyone agrees that our students should spend the hours and years it takes to master any given language and culture. Even if we agree on the big thing—the value of the global, if you will—we get stuck on the little thing—the value of the local, the actual time spent with Russian verb endings or Chinese characters or *Don Quixote*.

When our small modern language and literature departments are relocated inside larger multilanguage departments, we shift from being people defined by something little to people

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defined by something big. The “Restructuring the Humanities” conference held at Stanford in 2011 put on display the many possible reactions to such a move. For some faculty in some universities, the big thing is possibility: restructuring is experienced as liberation, emergence from within the high walls of the French department (say) to the broad world of collaborative projects that reach across languages and disciplines. For other faculty in other departments, the big thing is poverty: reorganization, which is so often triggered by diminished budgets, is experienced as proletarianization, a diminishing of resources and an increase in teaching loads, which produces anger and nostalgia. And in universities where modern language faculty have successfully fought off consolidation attempts, the big thing is the power of collective resistance (perversely, unification in opposition to consolidation).

At Stanford, the reorganization of the modern language and literature faculties has been a long process—and unlike at some other institutions, it has not been motivated primarily by the urge to cut costs. The Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages (the DLCL) was created in the mid-1990s. It brought together the Departments of Asian Languages and Civilizations (which left the unit a few years later), Comparative Literature, French and Italian, German Studies, Iberian and Latin American Cultures (then called Spanish and Portuguese), my own home department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and the Language Center, in which all introductory language classes (a huge number of little things) were relocated. Since 2003, under the leadership of Roland Greene, the DLCL has developed a set of professionalization workshops for graduate students, cotaught classes across departments, and created a reading group for junior faculty to share their research and other meeting places where students and professors in the different departments could begin to work together.

In the 2009/10 academic year, the dean’s office proposed that the five departments still inside the DLCL, along with the Language Center, be merged into a single large department. We made a counterproposal: that we would accept the merger, provided that the current nomenclature be retained and the change be postponed for a year, during which a group of faculty from the five departments would work out the details. Thus, the DLCL is still called a division, whatever that means, and the departments are still called departments. Our plan included the funding of five Focal Groups, thematic, cross-departmental reconfigurations of faculty and graduate students that offer opportunities to discuss new work written here or elsewhere. At present, our five Focal Groups are the Workshop in Poetics; Philosophy and Literature; Humanities Education; Renaissances; and Digital Humanities (replacing one in Performance). Once the new structure was accepted, we agreed to the terms of the dean’s request: that we shift to a system whereby we would vote collectively on all hires and promotions, and that we accept that the head of the DLCL (now called the chair) would represent the departments (each led by a person now called the director) in negotiations with the university administration. The world would look at our website and see a conglomeration of little things—departments, focal groups, publications, and *Arcade*, a digital salon—but the deans would interact with one big thing.

I agreed to chair the DLCL because I had some ideas about how this transition could benefit us in modern languages and literatures, along with some concerns about how it could hurt us. I had three goals: to create or reinforce the sense of a community among the faculty and students in the DLCL; to preserve our resources (especially funding); and to promote the growth of Near Eastern languages and literatures, inside the Department of Comparative Literature, in a way that would be open to conversation with specialists in the other languages. More broadly, I wanted

to maintain the independence of the departments inside the DLCL. And I wanted to be a voice for the idea that advanced foreign language skills are real and important and that our graduate and undergraduate students need (and want) to increase their proficiency in specific languages even while they explore bigger issues in literary and cultural studies—or, for that matter, in the social sciences or preprofessional study.

While we hope that our Focal Groups may lead to majors, minors, or other cross-language undergraduate or graduate programs, none of us want that to mean relinquishing our commitment to language learning at a high level. I was concerned that consolidation could result in a shift toward classes taught in English rather than other world languages, out of the pressure we might feel to become transparent to each other and to the administration. Although teaching courses in English that draw big enrollments is a great thing for our departments to do strategically, I wanted to make sure that the change would not discourage our faculty from the intensive real-time labor of teaching people to read carefully in a foreign language, or our graduate and undergraduate students from the hard work of research with original sources. I did not want us to become a second English department, one where some professors have foreign accents but everything is read in translation. And I wanted to resist homogenization. I felt willing to say, as often as necessary, that US and world history, differential precollege preparation, and the different processes that happen in the brains of English speakers when they learn cognate versus noncognate languages all mean that, for example, our program in Spanish and Spanish literature needs to look different, and to be treated differently, from our program in Hebrew and Hebrew literature. I knew that administrators can grow impatient with things as small as our Hebrew program, and I wanted to make sure that this impatience would not jeopardize what we do.

At the same time, I approached this new position with some trepidation. I was concerned that the DLCL faculty might see me as uncritically enforcing the new system or as working to advantage the Slavic department unfairly over the others. I was worried about negotiating with the deans, something I had never done before. And I was nervous about the future. It is not uncommon for experiments in consolidating language departments to fail; I did not want to invest my limited time and energy in what would prove to be a doomed effort. Having moved to the DLCL from directing the Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (CREEES), where I spent my time arranging talks on the comparative international politics of HIV treatment and taking people who study oil pipelines out for coffee, it was hard for me to avoid thinking in social science terms about the relationship between big things and little things. Was the consolidation of the DLCL like the formation of the European Union? Were we committing to a colorful new currency, decorated with bridges, whose value would depend on the continuing solvency of each of our units? Was it my job to head off the kind of economically devastating dissolution that the Soviet Union went through, or the bloodier one of the former Yugoslavia? A political science professor told me enthusiastically that I should notice the analogy between my situation and that of the US founding fathers, who worked to balance states' rights with national security needs. I feared, though, that a better comparison would be that of a centralized empire. Unlike Madison and Jefferson, who were elected, I had been appointed by Stanford's central administration, like some Roman prefect sent to maintain order in a distant province.

Moving from an area studies position to a languages-and-literatures position also made me strongly aware of the ways in which administrative categorization creates and reinforces intellectual alliances and divisions, practices, and even beliefs. Running an area studies center, I had

been impatient with disciplinary boundaries, opportunistic about methodology, and respectful of positivistic knowledge: eyewitness reports from the field or the archive and evidence of the skills it took to gather them. I had organized events displaying new information that people from literature, history, or political science could work together to analyze, and I had reminded students writing grant applications that they needed to make their work transparent to area experts in various disciplines. I had looked for continuities across time in a given space, always arguing that knowledge of a specific past would make us better at understanding an urgent present. It made sense to me to set up a panel on the scandal around the band Pussy Riot, bringing together scholars of literature and sociology and even a young stringer from the *New York Times* Moscow bureau to talk about why their “punk prayer” in an Orthodox cathedral appealed to Western viewers but Russians had little opposition to their arrest. Running CREEES, I had spoken to journalists; I had explained to visiting faculty and administrators from Ukraine and Armenia how US universities function; I had recruited for the university’s Moscow campus; I had taught groups of MA students that often included foreign area officers in the US Army. I had been confident that the world knew it needed the knowledge my faculty and I had to offer. I had found intellectual connections with scholars who studied areas of the world contiguous with or strategically important for the places my faculty study: China, Japan, Germany, Cuba.

Running the DLCL, I see the world differently. Now I am fascinated by questions of methodology, form and function, how artists use the possibilities available in different genres to engage audiences, and how scholars in turn use the intellectual tools at their disposal to define themselves in relation to their objects of inquiry and their own audiences. Now I organize events around issues that cross linguistic boundaries, such as the politics of translation or the use of digital methods. I remind grad students writing grant applications that they need to make their work comprehensible to scholars who work on literature in other languages. It makes sense to me to set up a multilingual poetry reading, bringing together poets, translators, and scholars. Now I speak not to journalists, army officers, or department chairs from Kiev but to our own deans, chairs, and heads of various programs inside the university. I find intellectual connections with people whose methodologies are adjacent to those of my faculty: people from the fields of linguistics, philosophy, English, classics. Whereas running an area studies program made me feel that I could affect the world beyond Stanford, running the DLCL makes me feel that I can affect my own university. As I run the DLCL, my own research interests have shifted. While I ran CREEES, I was working in a notoriously multidisciplinary genre, writing a biography (of the Russian and Yiddish writer, ethnographer, and revolutionary S. An-sky). Now that I am running DLCL and my biography is out, I am writing about the ways in which literary texts can reflect historical shifts in listening practices among various social groups, still focusing on late imperial Russia but asking questions that let me engage with scholars of other parts of the world. And my teaching is increasingly in folklore and folkloristics, in courses that allow me to find students well beyond the audience for Slavic studies and to encourage them to use whatever languages they may know to do their research.

From the perspective of the university, I see that designing administrative structures in a way that strengthens the connections between scholars of various literatures and languages, by encouraging conversations across geographical boundaries, can work effectively against methodological provincialism. In a multilanguage unit where the senior faculty use a wide array of methodologies, assistant professors are more easily emboldened to depart from the norms in their

particular fields. The risk, though, is that the ties of faculty and students alike to the place that they study will diminish, their local knowledge become attenuated or out-of-date. Time is finite, especially for scholars juggling commitments to family as well as teaching, writing, and institutional and national service. Any time they spend at a talk by a colleague in another language is time when they cannot attend a talk by a colleague who studies their area from a different discipline. The risk of the dulling of local knowledge is borne first by individual scholars, faculty, and graduate students, who cannot afford to become too out of touch with their scholarly interlocutors at other institutions and the field-specific apparatus that legitimizes and publishes and hires them. This risk is borne as well by an institution that needs its faculty and students to retain their outward face, their willingness to respond to the nondisciplinary questions of nonacademics.

Ideally, we and our students in the DLCL will not be forced to prioritize between the local and the global. Ideally, our grad students will write grant applications that appeal to readers in other disciplines as well as in other literatures. Ideally, we will be able to think both like an area studies center and like a multilanguage division. Thinking like an area studies center makes one able to package and display one's knowledge in ways that make sense for the world—first, for the federal government, of course, which was responsible for funding these centers in the United States after World War II, but then for other countries' governments and citizens, for the media, for undergraduates, for travelers, migrants, and alumni. Thinking like a multilanguage division makes one able to package and display one's knowledge in ways that make sense for the rest of the university—deans, program heads, the development office. Ideally, we as scholars can communicate with both sets of audiences. When people outside the university ask questions that do not line up with our graduate training in a specific discipline, we will have enough local knowledge—and enough ability to see those questions through nondisciplinary eyes—to answer sympathetically. And when the university wants us to speak to each other in ways that show our freedom from the real-world boundaries that constrain the motions of the people we study, we will have the broad view and sophistication to do that too, and in doing so, we will place our interests and our knowledge in a stronger position in our own institution.

Now that I have been in place for three years, I can report that none of my initial fears were borne out. No one seems to worry about the Slavic department (the smallest department in the entire university) getting too much influence or power. (Before I took office, I met with the people who ran some of the university's largest and most complicated departments; the chair of anthropology told me, "You know, it can be a political advantage to come from the smallest tribe.") The DLCL faculty have been welcoming, and my favorite part of my new job has been getting to know them. The deans turned out to be well-meaning, willing to listen, and committed in principle to the humanities. They understand the value of preparing undergraduates as well as graduate students to do research in languages other than English. As yet, I have no sense that there are weaker departments inside the DLCL dragging stronger ones down or that tension between the departments could erupt in internecine warfare.

Some of the goals that I articulated when I took office are being accomplished. We have maintained our budgets. And we are beginning to teach Near Eastern literatures: a Turkish literature lecturer has been in place for a year and a half, and assistant professors in Persian literature and in Arabic have recently arrived. Meanwhile, we are working with our faculty in Hebrew literature to develop strategies for training graduate students in language fields where we have few literature professors but can draw systematically on faculty outside literature for help.

The results of the effort to foster community are harder to tabulate than budgets or new hires, but I believe that this too is happening: faculty and students are learning more about each other, and each other's research, across departmental lines. Especially before the 2008 crash, Stanford, like Russia and Saudi Arabia, suffered from the "resource curse" that haunts countries with abundant oil or other natural resources. Because we had relatively generous funding to bring in outside speakers, we were not motivated to work creatively with the materials we had at hand. That is, we tended to spend time listening to famous people from far away whom we had brought to speak to us at great expense, rather than listening to our own colleagues from the next building—even though establishing an intellectual connection with a Stanford colleague would be likely to be a better long-term investment than a brief encounter with a star. The Focal Groups work against this tendency because they provide a place where we listen to each other regularly. In a new lecture series, "How I Think about Literature," DLCL faculty take turns explaining their answers to the big methodological questions in our fields, and other faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates respond. Whether because these enterprises have brought them together or for some other reason, the senior faculty across the division have been genuinely invested and involved in the reappointment and promotion of our junior faculty.

My convictions about the importance of little things and local knowledge are unchanged—but as I learned by attending the Performance Focal Group, when you are addressed as the performer of a given role, you begin to inhabit that role. "The address," as Judith Butler remarks, "animates the subject into existence."¹ Perhaps we as foreign language teachers already know this. When you are spoken to in a language that you are studying, you have to answer, if you can, in that language, and with each word, you sign the contract making you a different kind of person from who you were before. "Sholem aleikhem" (peace to you), someone greets you in Yiddish, and you answer, "Aleikhem sholem" (and to you, peace). Thus, when people address you as the spokesperson for a big thing like the DLCL, with its 34–51 ladder faculty (depending how you count), 90 language lecturers, and nearly 100 graduate students, not to mention undergraduates, you begin to answer on behalf of a big thing, as the master of global, generalizable knowledge. Sometimes you even begin to forget that your big thing is made up of many little things, the sum of a set of local parts.

Your assumption of the identity of a big thing can work to the advantage of the people you represent. When you are privy to the details of an arrangement that has been made to benefit someone in one modern language and literature department, then you can cite it as a precedent for an arrangement you want to make on behalf of someone in a different department. The more people you represent, the more precedent cases you can cite. You also benefit from what other units in the university experience as an economy of scale. Many students at Stanford major in Inter-disciplinary Programs (IDPs) rather than traditional departments. Last year, the directors of two IDPs, International Relations (IR) and Science, Technology, and Society (STS), contacted me to say that they wanted to provide their students with greater area studies knowledge—to "globalize" their major, the STS director said—and they wanted to know what DLCL courses they could list for their students. As the chair of the DLCL, I could give them what they wanted, speaking as a purveyor of "globalization" far more confidently than the chair of any individual language department could. Clearly, it was easier and more efficient for these directors to contact me than to contact all the leaders of the different modern language departments. Because

¹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 25.

the biggest problem of the foreign language departments—like other humanities departments at Stanford—is low undergraduate enrollments, the possibility of attracting more students as a consolidated entity than as a set of smaller units matters.

The question is how far one should let oneself go in identifying with the big thing and how to resist mission creep. I have worked to build a minor in translation inside the DLCL—to try to attract more enrollment by laying claim to translators’ creative and real-world uses of language study—but what if a new program that appeals to some faculty threatens others? If I hear complaints from faculty about scheduling conflicts, should I start telling the French or German professors that they should spread their courses out more across the day? If I hear graduate student complaints about inconsistent faculty feedback, should I insist that all DLCL departments give the same kind of annual written evaluations to their students, covering the same points, at the same time of year? If a department is divided and I am asked to adjudicate, of course I should do so—but should I then try to head off a similar crisis in a department where no one asked my opinion? If my role as I see it is to argue against homogenization, how can I justify enforcing sameness?

Even while I hesitate to answer these questions too quickly, I accept that small things such as our modern language and literature departments are vulnerable on their own. In an era when state money for education and federal money for research are both going down, and tuition bills are going up nationally, questions inevitably arise about the value of the service we in higher education provide. In a time of increased scrutiny, we have to use clear language to defend what we offer. For modern language and literature departments, that means speaking about the use of high-level linguistic skills and cultural literacies in the work world. We must play the card of the “global,” presenting each of the little things we teach—whose value may be easy to question—as part of a larger thing whose value is self-evident. At the same time, running a multilanguage unit requires balancing the global and the local, acknowledging that our big global endeavor is composed of many little and varied local projects, and if those local projects are not of sufficiently high quality, then the worth of the global endeavor inevitably diminishes. The tension between the impressively global façade and the need for firm local foundations mirrors the tension at the heart of administering people—that a big structure that looks good from the outside can be built only on a set of strong relationships with each person inside it.

What is good is that after my stint as DLCL chair is done, I will return to the Slavic department. I will become a local person again, a little part, and some other local person will take on the role of representing the global endeavor. I believe that in order for the system to work, we must all take turns speaking on behalf of big and little things. A