

There is No Box: The International Interdisciplinary Nature of Higher Education

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Abstract

--Let me just start by saying:

THERE IS NO BOX

There.

I feel a lot better already.

-----Or should I say, I think a lot better already? I wonder if there is much of a difference sometimes between the two. The title of my paper today is:

THINK BOXING OUTSIDE

My abstract begins by noting that one can grow weary of such terms such as "critical thinking" or "thinking outside the box," which like many other phrases perhaps once vibrant and meaningful, have been worn thin and often meaningless by constant repetition and questionable application. --We often hear people saying that they "think outside the box," when just the use of that phrase alone suggests that they may not be as far from the norm, as radical or revolutionary, as out of their box as they might imagine. Perhaps a part of the problem is a lack of imagination in thinking.

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And, by the way, I think that we could make a good case that: there is no box.

In The Scarlet Letter, the first great novel written in the United States, Nathaniel Hawthorne makes a powerful case against the Puritan elders who so calmly pass legal and moral judgment on Hester Prynne for her sins, making her wear the scarlet A and stand outside the normal intercourse of society. The novel underlines the dangers of putting her—and themselves—in a box. They attempt to deprive her of her individuality and make her, in Hawthorne's words: "the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and ...embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion."

He notes that long after the townsfolk forgave and accepted Hester, those in positions of authority, the rulers and the judges, had a much more difficult time letting go of their prejudice toward her. He writes:

"The rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community, were longer in acknowledging the influence of Hester's good qualities than the people. The prejudices which they shared in common with the latter were fortified in themselves by an iron framework of reasoning that made it a far tougher labor to expel them."

I love that phrase: "an iron framework of reasoning." We often use "reasoning" as synonymous with "thinking," but in this case it's presented as a barrier, a box that keeps us from thinking.

(In Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown", Brown meets what appears to be the devil in the forest but tells him he's uncomfortable and must return home. To which the satanic figure replies: "Sayest thou so? ... Let us walk on, nevertheless, reasoning as we go; and if I convince thee not thou shalt turn back..." Here we see reason presented as not simply confining but as an instrument of evil.)

Earlier in the novel Hawthorne uses similar language and the metaphor when describing the effects of unquestioned faith, something that some might consider opposite of reason. He writes of the Reverend Dimmesdale: "it would always be essential to his peace to feel the pressure of a faith about him, supporting, while it confined him within its iron framework."

Both reason and faith, then, can become confining boxes that keep us from thinking. They supply us with a short route to the correct answers, so there's no need to think.

But knowing the answer isn't the same as thinking, just as a lot of facts are not the same thing as knowledge—which recalls Wolfgang Von Goethe's comment that "thinking is more interesting than knowing."

We have to be sure that our thinking stays elastic. Four years earlier, in 1846, in his graceful introductory essay to his collection of stories Mosses from an Old Manse Hawthorne employs the same metaphor when questioning the reformers of his own day. He laments not only the “young visionaries ... [and] their self-involved bewilderment,” but also the “gray headed theorist—whose systems, at first air, had finally imprisoned them in an iron framework.” Prisons of Air is a most interesting concept. Even a theoretical system, even one designed to liberate, can confine us. As soon as it becomes THE ANSWER and not a path to greater understanding it becomes a box. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes “The quality of the imagination is to flow and not to freeze.” Perhaps that is the case with thinking as well.

Robert Richardson's 1995 biography of Emerson has the intriguing title: Emerson: The Mind on Fire. I like it. I think he would like it. It captures some of the Emersonian energy and enthusiasm, his insistence that thought is not about the result but about the process. It emphasizes his gift for unusual metaphor and juxtaposition. And that thinking is a creative act, an imaginative act, one that demands much more from us than mere reasoning. By its very nature it crosses boundaries, disciplines, and conflates the intellect and the passions.

In an 1839 notebook passage Emerson writes: "Everything should be treated poetically,-- law politics, housekeeping, money....If you would write a code, or logarithms, or a cookbook, you cannot spare the poetic impulse. We must not only have hydrogen in balloons, and steel springs under coaches, but we must have fire under the Andes at the core of the world." (It reminds me a little of Emily Dickinson's description of herself as "Vesuvius at home") Such intriguing lines--"you cannot spare the poetic impulse"—even when writing logarithms and cookbooks—remind us of how artificial are our disciplines and intellectual boundaries. The "fire...at the core of the world" burns away superficial academic demarcations. Why is William Shakespeare the province of English Departments and not at the center of numerous psychology and philosophy courses as well? Business and religion and sociology studies would also benefit from listening to the Bard. Oh, we love our boxes, our categories, our disciplines, the clean breaks, the Puritan sense of absolute right and wrong.

But didn't we decide earlier that: There IS no box?

In "The American Scholar," 1837, in a sentence both obvious and profound—one that might put most texting and perhaps much of the Internet out of business--Emerson writes: "Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life and whose not." He notes that "Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom....Action... is the raw material out of which the intellect molds her splendid products. A strange process too, this by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is concerted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours." Such a metaphor captures the interrelatedness of the different aspects of our lives: experience converted into thought, a mulberry leaf into satin. Action, passion, thought are all part of the same process. There ARE no boxes. The ones we perceive are but signs of the limits of our energy and imagination.

Remember that song by the Eagles in the 70's, "Already Gone"? : "So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains/ And we never even know we have the key." Good line. We have the ability to unlock our chains, climb out of our boxes; we just have to realize it.

The intellect itself is not enough to free us. Indeed, in Walden, 1855, Henry David Thoreau suggests that the intellect can separate us from what is truly important. He calls the intellect "a cleaver" and writes: "I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born." In his essay "The Poet," 1841, Emerson celebrates the poet as one who "stands among partial men for the complete man." He holds this exalted position not because he is smarter or has more degrees, but because, but because he sees things more holistically. In Emerson's words: "it is dislocation and detachment...that makes things ugly, the poet...reattaches life to nature and the Whole."

Such reattachment can come in a multitude of ways. Artists of all sorts—Van Gogh and Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Kafka, Wordsworth and Whitman—have shown us fresh ways to look at the everyday world. They have shown us that the limits of what we thought possible are often just reflections of our own limitations. "My business is circumference" Dickinson wrote. We look to such artists and thinkers to help us see what is within ourselves. They don't put it there; they just show us what is already inside us. Soren Kierkegaard echoes this idea when he writes, paradoxically, that "education [is] the curriculum one [has] to run through in order to catch up with oneself, and he who will not pass through this curriculum is helped very little by the fact that he was born in the most enlightened age."

In an early poem, after praising the Poet for "[distilling] amazing sense/ From ordinary Meanings-" Dickinson follows with this stanza:

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door -
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it - before –

Perhaps such artists can give us a few hints on how to recognize, see beyond, and dismantle the self-imposed boxes we live within, or believe we think outside of. Because, after all, THERE IS NO BOX.

One way they help us see this is by rejecting Reason as the ultimate tool or path to self-awareness.

Walt Whitman, as usual, puts the matter in a direct in-your-face style, writing:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

He's not concerned about appearing logical or even consistent. He knows that we are complicated beings, that reason and logic are only a part of what we do, and play a limited role in how we make sense of the world and ourselves.

Thoreau writes that "The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly." He says he desires "to speak somewhere *without* bounds." Perhaps that was a typo, and he really meant: "without boxes"!

Poets such as William Blake and William Wordsworth also recognize that the way we perceive and process the world is not a logical but, at least in part, a creative act. In "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey," for example, Wordsworth celebrates "all the mighty world/ Of eye, and ear," but follows that with "both what they half create, / And what perceive;"

Such writers can help us see beyond the imaginary boxes that we've built ourselves or had imposed on us by the conventions and expectations of society. But we have to be careful. We can look to such writers for inspiration but not for answers. They, too, can become of a kind of box—prisons of air—if we rely on them too much. Emerson captures this concept when he writes: "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books."

Good point. When he urges us to "enjoy an original relation to the universe," he means it in a couple ways. Such a relation will be both as new for us individually and similar to what the great minds of the past have experienced. If we climb our own mountain we won't have to read about Moses' climb or anyone's. We'd have that religious experience first-hand. And think of all the boxes that we'd crush on our way up! They'd disintegrate in that lofty mountain air in any case.

Even the divisions, the general topics, of this Conference can be boxes. But artificial doesn't have to mean superficial. Lines and boxes can be useful as long as we see them for what they are, as long as we use them as ladders to help us climb and see further and not as "iron frameworks." Generalizations and distinctions are necessary to think at all. This point is made brilliantly in Jorge Luis Borges' insightful short story "Funes the Memorious," published in 1942. In it we see that a perfect memory, an ability to recall EVERYTHING as distinct can be a burden to thinking clearly. To think at all is to draw comparisons and generalize to some degree.

One method that some American writers have used to present their sense of the world and to convey their insights, without the "iron framework" of ideology or history boxing them in, is by couching their stories in a realm between fact and fiction. Faulkner noted that by "sublimating the actual into the apocryphal" his would be able to maximize his gifts.

It is a technique that we see as far back as Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and Hawthorne's "Legends of the Province House," his Twice Told Tales, his A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys, (based on the Greek myths), and his "philosophic romance" "The May-pole of Merry Mount." The Transcendentalists, too, were careful to interweave their new philosophy of self-reliance with ancient teachings from both Greece and the Orient.

It is the artist's task to show us that the boxes we take for granted are almost always artificial, that new perspectives and insights are possible. They are Master Chefs who show us that even though the ingredients are the same, the recipe can be new. Human nature may not change, but the ways that it's understood and presented does. That there really ARE NO BOXES.

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