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Toward a Gentle, Generalizable Framework for Scholarly Impact Conversations

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Toward a Gentle, Generalizable Framework for Scholarly Impact Conversations

Thursday, October 10, 3:35 p.m.

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Hello, you may remember me from yesterday. I am Rebecca Welzenbach, research impact librarian at the University of Michigan Library, and I am highly conscious of being the veeeery last speaker at this conference, so I'll try to keep this snappy. Today I'll be sharing with you my thought process toward developing a sort of template for conversations, particularly with researchers, about scholarly impact, that can be adapted regardless of their existing level of expertise--or attitude.

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I want to stop for a second and tell you a bit about my role at the University of Michigan. Most librarians that I've encountered in the UK with research impact responsibilities have a key role in producing or evaluating reports for mandatory assessment activities, like the REF. Most (but not all!!) research impact librarians that I've encountered in the United States are based in health sciences libraries and specifically focused on that discipline. Neither of these descriptors apply to my role. I'm based in our central university library--assigned to no particular discipline. I represent the library in the implementation of research management systems on our campus, and provide expertise and education for faculty, students, and others on research impact issues, and more broadly, thinking carefully about how they represent themselves and their work online.

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As a result, I have the opportunity to meet with folks from all over our campus, working in all types of roles. Here you can see me, happy in the University Library, and the orange stars represent just some examples of schools, colleges, departments, and offices where I've had firsthand experience with an instruction session, a consultation, a meeting, or even just a conversation about research impact.

Working from top to bottom, we see our Health Sciences Library, our Graduate School, our School of Environmental Studies and Sustainability, the School of Social Work, the School of Education, the University Office of Research, the Institute of Social Research, and, down here in the corner, even our University Press.

As you can imagine, each of these conversations are unique, depending on whether I'm talking to a graduate student in social work, a Vice Provost in the office of research, the acquisitions editor for theater historiography, or a clinician in the medical school. Sometimes it feels like every singe only of these conversations is entirely unique.

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But as I accumulate more of these experiences, I'm starting to envision them as fitting into one of these four quadrants along these two axes. On the X-axis, the person's attitude about metrics--from "metrics are meaningless" to "metrics are everything" and, on the y-axis, how standardized or well established the research impact metrics are for their type of work, from "many known measures exist" to "no one knows how to measure this." So let me talk through how I recognize whether I am interacting with someone whose research impact worldview aligns with each of the four quadrants.

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"The Machine" is the name I've given to the individual who is very enthusiastic about metrics, and who also has (or truly believes that they have) many well known and tested metrics at hand to choose from.

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The primary assumption of "the Machine" is that Research impact metrics communicate something meaningful about their work and should be monitored closely. An increase in the numbers means that I'm doing better work! This person is likely to ask questions focused on increasing measures like the Journal Impact Factor, or stressing very specific numbers, rankings, or percentiles, and how to move from one to the next.

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Next is "The Cynic."

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The Cynic has many known metrics available to them, but has doubts about their value. The key assumption of The Cynic is that metrics are flawed, but they can't do anything about that. Playing "the game" is the best way to ensure that I get to carry on with the work that matters to them--by getting funding, promotion, a contract extension, etc. .

The Cynic might say something like "Everyone knows the JIF is flawed but we all use it anyway."

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Next comes "The Resistance." This is someone who at best doubts the value of research impact metrics--or perhaps, more likely, actively asserts that they have no value. Additionally, "The Resistance" often takes the view that research impact metrics do not and cannot represent their work--these measures don't apply to their work. I wasn't being glib when I chose the name "The Resistance." There's a sort of moral stance implied there, a decision to stand one's ground against a terrible, powerful force, and that is, indeed, exactly the tone that these conversations often take on.

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The key assumption of "The Resistance" is "you don't actually understand--and perhaps don't want to understand--my work. You just want me to conform to a system that doesn't serve me."

Popular quotes include "My work can't be quantified!" "I only write books, so the JIF is meaningless to my field!" and "We must push back against the rampant neo-liberal culture of assessment that is destroying the university."

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And finally, we come to "the Gatherer."

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The Gatherer exists in a space of not knowing how to measure the impact of their work--but believing that there must be an answer, somewhere that they just haven't found yet. There must

be another, better, metric. The Gatherer wants to know everything that's possible, and even some things that aren't possible. Famous quotes include "Tell me all the things we can count and then I'll tell you which ones I want to use." "What else can Google Analytics do?" "OK, we have 5 or 6 different metrics, but I'm not sure any of these actually show REAL IMPACT, isn't there some other new metric we can use?" Very often, Gatherers' work takes somewhat new or non-traditional forms--a digital scholarly project, an independently published, born OA journal, and they have big, broad questions about what is even important to measure, let alone how to do it. They're hoping for a simple, clear, unambiguous answer. This doesn't usually exist, but it doesn't mean we can't do good work together toward a meaningful plan.

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This is another painting from the Detroit Institute of Art, called the Nut Gatherers. I love these little girls because….what on earth are they up to? They've got some nuts….not enough to sell or cook with or go much beyond a snack for themselves. But too many to carry any more in their hands, and they haven't brought a basket or a bag. These particular nut gatherers seem to have just realized they maybe don't have a clear plan for these nuts. And in that way, the girls in this painting actually really remind me of many of the Gatherers I've had conversations with. The Gatherers don't have a predetermined plan--for their scholarship, yes. But for measuring and communicating its impact, likely not. And they're open to any option--but they need some advice to do *something* practical and sensible. And as a result, it's my conversations with The Gatherers that have most fruitfully informed my development of a script for helping researchers take a strategic, meaningful approach to thinking about scholarly impact.

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So, what does that script look like? Well, here it is:

1. Tell me about your work. This is always a safe place to begin with a researcher!

   ○ Why is it important to you?

   ○ What does success look like to you?

2. You're here for a reason--probably, you have to make a case for your work.

   ○ Who is evaluating you?

   ○ What are the stakes?

   ○ What is your desired outcome? This helps me--and them--to understand what they really need and want out of this. Are they in a position to push the envelope, ask questions, or propose something new, or is that too risky?

3. What kind of work is valued in this scenario?

   ○ Can we specify outputs that serve as evidence that you have done this work? This can help folks step back from jumping straight to "journal article" or "monograph." Very likely those things will be in the mix, but this is an opportunity to think a little bigger as well.

4. What criteria will be used to determine whether the work is good--has done what it's meant to do?

   ○ Are these criteria implicit or explicit?

   ○ Are there written guidelines or rubric

○ Have you made any commitments or promises?

○ For each relevant research output, can we identify indicators or measures to demonstrate that it meets or exceeds the criteria? This helps to connect the idea of metrics to a narrative. Not just "my numbers are x, y, z," but these measures show how I have met A criterion in B way.

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This script tends to work with Gatherers because--by definition-- they're usually not in a position to jump straight to a metric, regardless of whether it adequately represents their work. Often, they don't know how to measure the impact of their work--so working through this script is not only useful, it's necessary. And the result, if it works, is that the Gatherer moves from feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of talking about their impact of their work to strategically developing a plan that doesn't do *everything* but does serve their particular need.

OK, that's all well and good. But what I wanted to know was, would this script work with folks in the other quadrants? Could we shift them away from the assumptions and attitudes they brought to the table, and into a fresh point of view?

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For the Resistance, my experience has been that this script provides a way in to conversations sort of from the side--by focusing on what's important to the researcher, and what story they need to tell in order to give their work its due--NOT jumping to what they feel has been imposed upon them. The goal here is that they move from feeling defensive, to feeling empowered.

My most substantive experience thus far with using this script was this past summer, when I was an invited speaker for a 6-week workshop on public engagement and humanities scholarship. The workshop included 6 faculty and 6 graduate students, each with their own particular project in mind for connecting humanities scholarship to a broader audience. The projects ranged from developing a local lecture series, to launching a youtube channel for video introductions to Philosophy concepts, to editing a special journal issue on Latin American studies that would be published simultaneously in English, Spanish and Portuguese for the first time, to a public radio resource in rural Alaska. The participants all fell into the area of either Gatherer or Resistance and were in the situation--new to them--of having to decide *what* in a video, lecture series, or uniquely edited and produced journal issue, would indicate success--impact--and how they could plan for capturing and communicating that information. For graduate students, there was the added burden of thinking through how they would convince their supervisors of the importance of this work. Most of the faculty were tenured and had the freedom to take these risks. For me as the facilitator of a room full of folks, it was immensely valuable to have a single starting point to help navigate this conversation, though it was incredibly challenging to then respond to *all* of the different directions the conversations took for each different project.

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Now, I've had a lot of hands on experience with Gatherers and with Resistance. That's sort of the space I most live in. I actually have done less face-to-face work with Cynics and Machines, often because they're working closely with a different expert in our library. So here I am being a bit more aspirational describing what I hope might happen, as opposed to what I've experienced first hand.

By working through this script, I hope that a Cynic might realize that in fact there are *other* things they'd like to measure and communicate about their work, that they'd rather spend their time on than the existing metrics they've been using even while doubting. And this might light a fire under them to assert their values, rather than going with the flow.

And, finally, for the Machine…

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My hope is that this guide conversation might reveal that the known and widely used metrics don't actually show what they hope they will -- moving them, perhaps, from comfort to...panic?

Congratulations, Machines--You're a gatherer now. And the process begins again.

For discussion, I'd like to invite your comments and questions. Does this script make sense and seem usable to you? Do the categories I've described fit your experience reflect other research university cultures, or is my experience sort of limited to the culture in the United States? GO nuts!