

What Stands in the Intellectual's Way? Getting Caught up in the Rhetoric

Nancy Matthews

When contemplating what stands in the intellectual's way, I realized that there are many things that can get in the way of being a graduate student, and I appreciate reading the many "communities" identified by Professor Roger Saul (2016). Saul (2016) explains,

If you approach graduate studies as something you're doing alone, you're in for a potentially painful experience. But if you approach it as something you're doing with others - if you think of yourself as part of a community, in the sense of belonging with others - then you're in for a potentially rewarding experience (p. 1).

After some personal thought and reflection, I realized that if I loosely was considered to be an intellectual, there are words that challenge me, in particular: the word *intellectual* itself, the word *academic*, and the word *researcher*; words considered when thinking of a learned person.

Who am I to think I can articulate the meaning of the word "intellectual" when writers such as Edward Said, a professor of literature and public intellectual, have already done so. But without writing verbatim all he shares, it still seems necessary to at least start with Said (1993), writing how the word intellectual has changed, that the whole jargon of intellectual is now more insular and that the value that the public puts on the intellectual is gone. More specifically, Said (1993) pronounces,

The space for individual and subjective intellectual representation, for asking questions and challenging the

wisdom of a war or an immense social programme that awards contracts and endows prizes, has shrunk dramatically from what it was a hundred years ago....Therefore, the problem for the intellectual is to try to deal with the impingements of modern professionalization, not by pretending that they are not there or denying their influence, but by representing a different set of values and prerogatives (p. 8).

He goes on to discuss this in the vein of an amateur fueled by care and affection, not by external factors, and wanting to learn more and bring more to the forefront. I compare this to being in the “community with the consciously ignorant” (Saul, 2016), a community where I relate to, amongst many other communities identified by Saul.

But how can you be an amateur and an intellectual? Eisner (1998) relates it to his life as a painter saying, “Seeing, rather than mere looking, requires an enlightened eye: this is as true and as important in understanding and improving education as in creating a painting” (p. 1). That is, understanding that it is not just things we see, but things we cannot see and being open-minded, like an amateur being hungry to learn, not letting the thought of being an “intellectual” stand in the way. Said (1993) says,

An amateur is what today the intellectual ought to be, someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity as it involves one’s country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as other societies (p. 8).

However, often our mind goes to a more group think that can cloud our judgment and stand in our way. Huxley (1966) explains

how this can deprive people of independent thought. It causes people to act without reason, get too emotional, go with the crowd and works on their fears. And when you are fearful, you will act; fear is a powerful motivator. This is evidenced by the power held by dictators throughout history. Similarly, Lessing (1986) shares the need to understand how groups are thinking. “It is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion, as a member of a group” (p. 50). We think when we are part of a group we can speak our mind, but often people do not. If amid a group and we have a different opinion, we still might not speak up. And one idea might seem right because more are supporting it, but it does not necessarily mean it is the right idea. So if we know that this is human nature to be prone to doing such, is the word “intellectual” the appropriate word to use when referring to such individuals?

In a comparison of the words intellect and academic, from the perspective of a Harvard humanities Ph.D., Jack Miles talks of his career outside academe, speaking to graduate students about how their doctorates prepare them for other careers. He regrets doing so however, as he later had conflicting thoughts. Particularly, his thoughts on the difference between an academic and an intellectual. Throughout his paper he shares the following three differences:

1. An academic has and wants an audience disproportionately made up of teachers and students, while an intellectual has and wants teachers and students in his audience only in proportion to their place in the general educated public.
2. An academic is a specialist who has disciplined his curiosity to operate largely within a designated area, while an intellectual is a generalist who deliberately does otherwise.

3. An academic is concerned with substance and suspicious of style, while an intellectual is suspicious of any substance that purports to transcend or defy style (Miles, 1997, p. 5-9).

So, Miles (1997) claimed that an academic is considered an expert or specialist and an intellectual is more a generalist.

Hess (2011) shares his thoughts on “experts” saying, “There are always exceptions, but most thinkers become experts by struggling to the top of their niche on the back of their big idea.... In fact, the very nature of expertise is that it stifles dissent and reifies the orthodoxy of the moment” (p. 7) and goes on to say, “it is frighteningly easy for experts to settle into a comfortable bubble where they are surrounded by like-minded peers and adoring disciples” (p. 77). Thus, staying in a place of contentment, going with the status quo, not soliciting different thoughts from unlike mind sets would be a roadblock to intellectuals. Prevention would mean understanding that academic life is all about learning, creating, teaching, and writing, which accompanies a researcher.

When researching, we must keep in mind that we have choices in research and must ensure the research itself does not stand in our way. We must look at our research interest like a craft waiting to be molded, a painting waiting to be discovered. When we commit ourselves to it, it almost takes on a life of its own, a life of intellect. But with it goes risks. We risk getting away from being comfortable where we are, questioning what we know to be true, knowing who we are in our learning. As we seek to learn more, we get confused, we encounter roadblocks. But we face trouble and fear head-on. Perhaps this is what urges us on. “Scholars know how much intellectual satisfaction can be derived from the roadblocks and missteps, the difficulties of research in the field of education” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 2). It challenges us. It pushes us to dig deeper. It revives our intellectual being. We find

something that demands our attention, and we take pleasure in being the author of a story, the potential giver of new found information. Those roadblocks could give us satisfaction if we dare to allow it.

We must understand as researchers that people's actions are not always motivated by knowledge. Other factors, such as personal preferences or belief, a person's relationships, or perhaps even where a person works might be a factor. If a certain way has been done for many years, an established culture in place, any amount of research is not going to change something overnight. Perhaps a drastic event may jar the door, but belief and practice are very difficult to change. And if research is put out before it is verified or proven, people could be cynical about the research and of what is being portrayed as a "tried and true" new way, such as making an exaggerated claim or making recommendations that may not necessarily connect with findings from the study. To eliminate this roadblock from research, as said by Boote and Beile (2005), "a researcher or scholar needs to understand what has been done before, the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies, and what they might mean" (p. 3). They go on to explain, "in education research we are often faced with the challenge of communicating with a diverse audience, and it is very difficult for us to assume shared knowledge, methodologies, or even commonly agreed-upon problems" (Boote & Gaudelli, 2002, as cited by Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 4). If these things are not understood or recognized, and communication is not articulated accordingly, then the research would be for not.

In search of different perspectives, I discussed the words intellectual, academic, and researcher with those outside the world of academic studies, immersed in the world of hockey. One avid hockey fan gave this analogy:

If at a young age I decided I wanted to be a hockey player and very early on I am known as a great goal scorer (that being my expertise). As I get older, I continue to score goals and practice scoring goals, but I do not practice the aspects of skating such as agility, quickness, and power, nor do I learn the skills of stick handling and passing (that being, not becoming more of an intellectual in the overall intricacies of the game). And say I do not learn or understand the whole game and what has been done before, not looking at tapes or studying the overall game (thus, not being a researcher). Not learning these things exhaustively would eventually then prevent me from being considered a good enough hockey player to go to a higher level. What I was known for, my expertise (goal scoring), did get me in the game initially, but it did not keep me in the game (G. Matthews, personal communication, November 27, 2016).

My correlation was that perhaps if you develop specific expertise (an academic) in one area, that may get you noticed, but to be effective or make progress you must also have not only depth but breadth in your area (an intellectual). And with that goes a thoughtful pursuit of methodology for learning more (a researcher).

When sharing these thoughts with my professor, Dr. Saul, feedback produced more insight and points to ponder:

This discussion is not really about the terminology itself, but rather about what it represents, or rather what aligning with one or the other of the words (intellectual, academic, researcher) signals about who we imagine ourselves to be, what we imagine our work's impact to be. But what can be tricky about this? It can be very

difficult to settle on one or the other. What if I decide I will aim to be a public *intellectual*, as per the list from Jack Miles? In aiming to reach as many people as possible my writing may devolve into pandering or “people pleasing.” What if I decide to be an *academic*? This may feel less about pandering since “academic” work feels more exclusive and inherently meant for a smaller audience, but then the problem becomes wondering if academic work is too exclusionary and “closeted.” (R. Saul, personal communication, December 21, 2016)

Then what if I decide to be exclusively a *researcher*? Moving from problem to solution may become more machine-like, more robotic, creativity may be lost.

Thus, my final thoughts regarding the three words (intellectual, academic, researcher) as a graduate student resolved to: If I were to find solace in others I would find a “community” with those caught up in the rhetoric to prevent words from getting in my way; understanding that:

Perhaps engaging the rhetoric silently encourages us to habitually revisit what our goals are and what purposes we want our work to serve. Doing so is certainly better than going forward thoughtlessly and not giving these things a second thought. And once we make those decisions, maybe it allows us to put away the rhetoric for awhile, until of course it reappears again (R. Saul, personal communication, December 21, 2016).

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Nancy Matthews is in the PhD program in Education Studies at the University of New Brunswick. Her research interest includes comparing decision-making and implementation in the education system.

Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to nancy.matthews@nbed.nb.ca