

Taking Responsible Risks¹

DeNel Rehberg Sedo
Mount Saint Vincent University

ROBERT FULFORD'S OCTOBER 2007 PIECE in the *National Post* re-ignited old debates about what kind of scholarly investigation is creditable and worthy of public funding. I am a researcher educated in a critical studies-based communication program, but employed by a professional studies department and experienced in applied communications. With this background and current engagement in multidisciplinary reading research, I am no stranger to these types of debates. Unfortunately, much of the difficulty that I face in communicating the “worthiness” of my investigations comes not from the likes of Fulford, nor from the general public, but, rather, from colleagues within my own program, university, and SSHRC-defined “disciplines.” My story of trying to get funding from SSHRC will illustrate how hard it is to have SSHRC acknowledge interdisciplinary thinking and research.

As anyone who self-identifies as “not fitting” within their discipline knows, research discrimination can be detrimental, not only to one's

¹ I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank my research partner, Danielle Fuller, whose ideas, intellect, and perseverance continue to make me excited about research. Many of my ideas are based on our conversations and experiences.

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DE NEL REHBERG

SEDO is based at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax and conducts research on the sociology of literature. Her interests are rooted in the social contexts of reading. She is currently working with Danielle Fuller from the University of Birmingham (UK) investigating contemporary reading culture in Canada, the UK, and the U.S.A.

sense of place within the academy but also to one's career. In this essay, I will briefly outline my own experiences in the grant process in order to encourage readers to commit to appreciating the value of research outside of their own areas and in the hope of persuading SSHRC itself to rethink its evaluation process for the long term. This kind of commitment calls for a suspension of what I, crudely, call disciplinary fence-pissing.

Much like dogs mark their territory by, well, peeing on fences, scholars are often trained to protect their own disciplines by finding fault in other areas while holding up their own as sacrosanct. I believe that this shortsightedness results in Fulfordesque ignorance which can be detrimental to Canadian social science and humanities research, to our students' learning, and, ultimately, to our ability to publicly and privately support the likes of Jes Battis, who works in an interdisciplinary field which some in the academy wish to belittle just as much as Fulford does. As my story will show, I'm not going to make an argument for the obliteration of disciplinary boundaries, but rather I'm calling for an openness to the permeability of those borders by readers of this journal, particularly when they are part of the SSHRC evaluation process. The result could be enhanced collaboration possibilities, facilitated assessment processes, and research results that could inform both scholarly and public knowledge-making.

Here is my story. After a short career in professional communication, and a subsequent one in university administration, I began my PHD studies at Simon Fraser University's School of Communication. Solidly ensconced as the program is in critical cultural studies, my American graduate-level education and professional role as a co-operative education co-ordinator for the School was a mark against me. Through the grapevine, I was told that my application lacked critical thought and that it was too "corporate-based." Like many students, I am certain, I was fortunate to find a supportive feminist supervisor who does not privilege one kind of knowledge over another and several like-minded mentors. One was cultural theorist Anthony Wilden. One day, early in my SFU years and much to my horror, Wilden yelled out down the hall, "Sedo, I know just by looking at you that you're American: you take risks and get things done."

It was embarrassing, but really, Wilden was right. I do get things done, and I do it by thinking big and taking risks. It took me nearly eight years to finish my PHD program while working full-time and teaching on the side. Both my experience and education inform my current research agenda, but I found this difficult to communicate in early promotion and grant applications. Because I was a relatively "new" scholar, I lacked the scholarly experience and language needed to justify research plans. This

became painfully evident when I received the results of my first SSHRC application.

Along with my current research partner, Danielle Fuller of the American and Canadian Studies program at the University of Birmingham, I decided in 2003 to apply for a SSHRC grant. Our three-year project to investigate how mass reading events reconfigure the cultural meaning of reading at the local, national, and international levels was declined because I didn't have a PhD yet—my defence date was scheduled but for after the grant application deadline. To be fair to the SSHRC process, I must make note that we did not receive funding that year from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in England either.

In 2004, we applied again to both funding agencies, carefully considering to which panel we would submit. Because our project did not fit neatly into any one discipline, we decided to apply to committee 26, Communication, cultural studies, and women's studies, because of my scholarly training and because by its nature communication is interdisciplinary. We decided against committee 8 (Sociology and demography) and committee 19 (Literature 2) panels because of the notorious reputation of those two panels in not considering the work of scholars trained and working in departments outside of the area. We also decided against the Interdisciplinary panel (committee 15) because of its low success rate.

Our SSHRC proposal was not successful. Feedback from the assessors indicated that I lacked the publication record demanded and that the proposal was "too ambitious." Neither the publication record of my research partner was considered, nor were the facts that the Canadian Foundation for Innovation had granted me nearly \$250,000 as a new scholar to engage in "leading-edge research" and that we had received a \$15,000 seed grant for the project from the British Academy. One assessor noted that the proposal demonstrated an "inability to articulate the theoretical/conceptual underpinnings that connect" the research objectives, while another assessor recognized that the research objectives emerged from different theoretical positions/kinds of data in part because it is an interdisciplinary project. At that point, we crossed our fingers in hopes that we would be successful on the other side of the Atlantic. The AHRC proposal was not significantly different from the SSHRC, except that it was limited to twelve pages. We certainly did not make it less ambitious—rather, we fine-tuned it according to the responses of the previous years' reviewers. In June 2005, we were awarded the sum of £239,005 (approximately \$525,000 in Canadian dollars) over three years by the AHRC. The success rate in this round was 22 percent and our application was graded A+, the highest achievable

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grade. Reviewers of our application used words like “groundbreaking” and “paradigm-shifting” to describe an “ambitious project ... built on solid preparation.” ARC funding has let us run a project across three countries and participate in the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration SSHRC is always urging scholars to try.

Why did the AHRC praise our project so highly but SSHRC would not even let us get our foot in the door? The difference is the different attitude each funding body has to what I’d call taking responsible risks. The humanities research funding AHRC is committed to supporting is called “significant” research: research that is urgent, socially useful or potentially socially applicable, and intellectually original. So, what does taking responsible risks mean? I think that it means acknowledging that some research projects will necessarily be big and, accordingly, costly. Assessors, and indeed all scholars, should be willing to recognize the existence of knowledge outside of their own disciplines. This includes, obviously, different theories and different ideas about research and research methods. We—and I am not considering myself outside of this imperative—need to better learn to communicate how research outside our own training informs the work we do. I also think that responsible risk-taking means that publication should not be so heavily weighted in the SSHRC evaluation process. Life and professional experience each need to be considered in the evaluation of project potential.

As the primary research phase of our project has ended and Danielle Fuller and I begin to write our book manuscript, I am thankful to the British taxpayers and AHRC for taking a responsible risk with us. We like to think that it has been worth it: to date, the research team has trained and employed more than ten people in three countries; we hosted an international conference, and we have published or have in the works one book manuscript and nine articles. Importantly to me, both scholars and cultural workers are interested in our work, and we have created a nascent network of people who are interested in all facets of shared reading. I am proud of the work we have done. I only wish I could be thanking SSHRC in my pending acknowledgements. If the SSHRC process allowed for taking more chances on new and unusual people and ideas, maybe SSHRC really could do what it says it does on the first page of its website: “develop talent.”