

# 1

## Finding the Right Conversation



*This chapter describes scholarly conversation as ongoing sensemaking and sensegiving that occurs primarily within the context of academic institutions. The most rewarding conversation for a given scholar accomplishes the following four things:*

- *Draws on personal insights*
- *Facilitates design and output decisions that attract the attention of other scholars*
- *Fits scholarly identity and career trajectory*
- *Inspires both agreement and disagreement*

### ❖ SCHOLARSHIP AS A SOCIAL, SENSEMAKING ACTIVITY

I recently read an intriguing newspaper article about Gordon Matta-Clark, who in the early 1970s purchased 15 parcels of land in New York City described as “tiny, irregular, inaccessible, or otherwise unusable.” Acquiring the results of zoning anomalies and

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survey errors seemed very idiosyncratic to me. It was hard to understand what was going on until I realized that the article was in the Art section of the paper.<sup>1</sup>

Matta-Clark created collages of deeds, maps, and photographs of his sites, which he called “Fake Estates” (a play on “real estate”). He made a video about his effort to find each property and outline it in chalk. This was not his only artistic endeavor. Another project involved clandestinely cutting holes in buildings scheduled to be destroyed, which according to the article made them into unexpected sculptures. The report referred to other activist-artists responding to the “inaccessible and forlorn.” It discussed a broader interest in absence that has fascinated several different artistic movements, and reported that 27 years after Matta-Clark’s death, a New York gallery was showing a commissioned set of responses to Fake Estates by 19 different artists, while the Whitney Museum of American Art was planning a major retrospective exhibition of his work.

The story illustrates a critical point for academics as well as artists, in my mind. Most of us are involved in activities that we find interesting, but some observers might consider to be as singular as buying odd bits of unusable land or as transitory as altering buildings slated for destruction. Yet we do not work alone. What makes us social scientists (historians, chemists, or artists) is that we are part of a collective effort using similar language, values, methods, and training to respond to similar questions. As the result of both our conscious decisions and attributions made by others, social context highlights related actions and reinforces claims for their significance. Because of context, Matta-Clark can be understood as an artist influenced by and contributing to several conversations in the arts and humanities focused on the absent and neglected. The results of that collective effort have had a significant impact on how society understands a changing world—though I did not immediately recognize that connection.

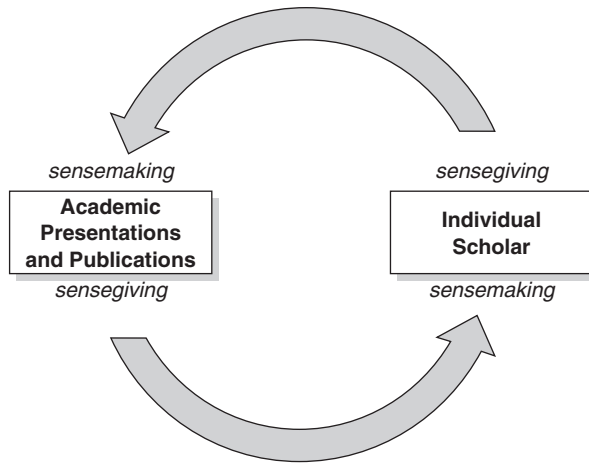
As scholars, we hope that our work will attract an audience that finds our accomplishments significant, just as Matta-Clark did. We would be delighted if others were inspired to do related work for many years afterward. Whether or not fame is the outcome, however, it is important that each of us recognizes that we will be compared to other academics. Furthermore, we are very likely to understand what we are trying to do (at least in part) by comparing our efforts with what others have done. The ongoing process is visualized in Figure 1.1,<sup>2</sup> which is used as a basic framework in this book to discuss key research and publication decisions.

The figure suggests that we are continuously involved in trying to relate to and understand what other scholars are saying in conversation, more formal presentations, and their written/visual productions. That **sensemaking**\* effort informs our own scholarly activities and subsequent conversation, presentations, and other outputs. Whether we are conscious of the effort or not, we provide **sensegiving** cues that affect our audience in their own sensemaking efforts.

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\*Words shown in bold in this and subsequent chapters are defined in the glossary.

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**Figure 1.1** The Sensemaking/Sensegiving Circle of Scholarship

*Intellectuals seek knowledge based on individual interests. Scholars increase publicly available knowledge in areas of study developed by interacting with other scholars.*

The powerful idea that scholarship is an interactive and collective activity was not salient in my doctoral education. I was certainly trying to make sense of my new profession as I listened to lectures, read, and interacted with others. The expectation of giving something back might have (or should have) influenced designing and writing my dissertation,

but instead I began and ended with an individual agenda. In frustration, I thought that more successful people were part of a conversation that excluded me. But that basic idea was the needed breakthrough, as described in my book, *Writing for Scholarly Publication*.<sup>3</sup> I already knew a lot about conversation, as we all do, and I used this knowledge to redefine my academic writing as a “statement” that learned from and then responded to statements written by others. It was a move from what might be called “intellectual inquiry” to the give and take of **scholarship**.

Before going into detail, it is worth saying a bit more about the consequences of deliberately choosing **conversation**. First, the conversation you join will (and should) influence *what* you study. You want to talk with other scholars because what they say interests you and because you hope that your work will interest them. Anticipating their interests, you must select a relatively small subset of what you might possibly offer.

Once in conversation, some ideas you wish would attract attention will be ignored or dismissed. Think about how often conversation at a social event gallops after one remark, never returning to subjects you thought were more interesting. Similarly, only a few ideas from a presentation or even a published article are likely to lead to further discussion in

academic conversation. It is sensible to follow up on these ideas, even if you must abandon other topics you still find appealing.

This is an important aspect of academic work that is given too little attention, in my opinion. Successful scholarship requires the discipline to listen to others. With a few brilliant exceptions, the activities of published scholars are shaped by what those around them find compelling. Of course, you will try to make your unique contribution attractive, and it is always possible to search for a new conversation that might respond to an insight that has not found an audience where you are. But no conversation covers everything that might be said about a particular **project**, and no scholar has the resources to develop all the ideas he or she would like to pursue.

The second important implication of recognizing the social side of scholarship is that it will modify *how* you work. Other scholars will recognize and accept what you do in part because they understand and approve of your activities. Their sensemaking is facilitated by making familiar and tested **research design** decisions. Some contributions require challenging expectations, but unnecessary novelties are better abandoned.

In short, the definition of scholarship as a sensemaking/sensegiving circle clarifies the ways in which individual scholarship is molded. However, I feel strongly that the collective context of scholarship is far more enabling than constraining. We have more resources at our disposal when we choose to be scholars rather than independent intellectuals. Knowledgeable colleagues help us understand and refine our ideas. Originality is revealed by comparison with others. Most important, what we might have done as an individual is leveraged by contributing to a larger effort. Thus, the most important advice in this chapter is

—◆◆—  
*Use your personal interests and experiences as a source of inspiration  
for scholarly work, but frame and develop them in ways that relate  
to an area of inquiry other scholars will recognize.*

—◆◆—

#### ◆ IDENTIFYING SCHOLARLY CONVERSATIONS

“Conversation” is a metaphorical description of scholarly work. The idea helps resolve confusions that can arise when different groups of scholars discuss similar topics. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the number of citations found when searching for references to a subject of interest. For example, if I search for “identity” on Google Scholar, a subject that has been of interest across the humanities and social sciences for several decades, there are over 4 million references available. My more specific interest is in organizational identity, but that subdivision yields over 5,000 references. No one can pay equal attention

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to all of these publications, nor should they. A quick scan indicates very different interests or questions, one important indicator of different conversations.

It is very helpful to have a mental map like that found in Figure 1.2, which is deliberately abstracted so that you can imagine multiple conversations about other topics that interest you. The figure distinguishes just two conversations—about “I” and a quite similar subject, “I.” The conversation on the left is connected with a professional subfield (say, organization theory, associated with scholars in business or management); the one on the right is linked to sociology. A second important clue to the existence of different conversations is that papers from what I’m distinguishing as different conversations appear in different journals, some of which are associated with management-related journals (on the left), and others of which are associated with sociology (on the right).

Yet Figure 1.2 also reveals confusing inner connections. Many distinct conversations like the two shown in Figure 1.2 draw on the same base discipline, in this case psychology, and often there are common references to the same theory (in this case “Theory X”). There can even be similar ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of research and similar methods. However, if a mind map like the one shown is useful for distinguishing conversations, there will be other indicators of separation.

Look especially for reference to distinct, field-related theories, an important clue that can be found in a careful review of text and references. You should look beyond the papers themselves for other clues, if you think you are homing in on a conversation of interest. Indications of a scholarly conversation of interest come from compatible biographical information found on the Web pages of individual scholars, association sites, and information gathered from colleagues around you.

Figure 1.3 suggests that conversations are supported by informal interaction at conferences and cocitation in formal publications. Behind these commonalities, you are likely to find that major figures in what you suspect is a “conversation” have similar training and work in institutions with similar titles. The granularity of your definition of a scholarly conversation will depend upon your purpose. In my opinion, two or three publications with a high degree of interconnection are far too few to be helpful, while it is generally a good idea to subdivide an area marked by hundreds of references over a few years.<sup>4</sup>

I feel strongly that it makes sense to identify and reference *one* conversation as a focal point for the **project** you are working on now, even though I know that you will almost certainly participate in more than one conversation over time, and your current project might be of interest to more than one conversation. You increase the chances that other scholars will value your current project if you target a conversation in a recognizable disciplinary or professional subfield. If you continue to interact with this group, the depth of your subsequent contributions is likely to increase. You signal your participation in a specific conversation not only by the subject and outcomes highlighted in title and abstract, but also by the many research design decisions we will discuss in later chapters.

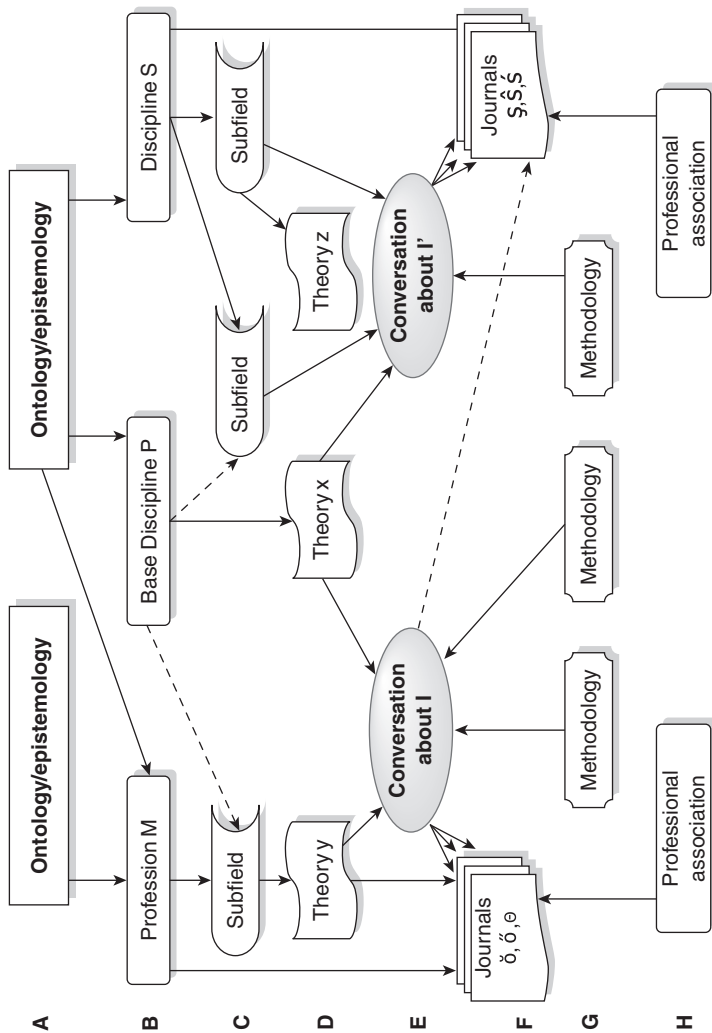


Figure 1.2 Two Conversations About Similar Topics, I and I'

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**Figure 1.3** Indicators of (and Contributions to) Scholarly Conversation

❖ CHOOSING YOUR CONVERSATION

It is important to obtain as much clarity about the conversational “home” of a project as possible, before too much time is consumed in research. I have found it helpful to ask workshop participants to draw circles of the conversational domains that they and their potential readers might use to understand their current scholarly effort, overlapping them as appropriate. The resulting “bubble map” helps people clarify possible connections between a project that is still being formed and existing conversations. The map often facilitates decisions that lead to a sensible conversational choice. I urge you to explore the potential conversational domain of your current project in this way: a “first cut” at project definition refined in subsequent exercises.

## EXERCISE 1

### **Present the Conversations Your Project Might Draw on and Contribute to**

1. Define your current project in a short abstract of 150 words or less.
2. Draw an initial “bubble map” of the conversations that might contribute to your project’s successful completion. (Some examples are shown in the next paragraphs.)

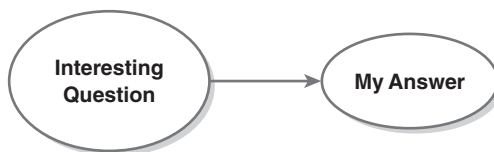
3. Evaluate each in terms of your identity and trajectory as a scholar.
  4. Make decisions that lead to a more focused conversational map.
  5. Put a star on the *one* conversation that you think is the most promising focus of your sensemaking and sensegiving in this project.
- 

Some people characterize their project in a very focused way in response to this exercise, as simply represented in Figure 1.4. Most scholars want to see their work as distinctive—as unlike anyone else’s project. A question/answer pair like the one shown typically comes from personal experience and is closely tied to the researcher’s identity. Though understandable, I will point out again that the leap to scholarship and publication as I understand them requires an explicit connection with other scholars.

The task for people who are having a conversation with themselves is to find work by others that can provide broadening or linking vocabulary and explanations. An important indicator of rewarding connection is that other scholars are asking roughly similar questions. Once a potentially compatible conversation is found, the scholar’s task is to frame his or her work in ways that relate to this more widely understood set of questions. You have to make the link, but a satisfactory conversation has not been found if it would require abandoning your interests. Luckily, there are many academics at work. The very few people who cannot find fellow travelers seem better off writing, teaching, or consulting for a more general audience.

Figure 1.5 poses problems that are the opposite of those revealed by Figure 1.4. Scholars who draw this kind of map are burdened by recognizing too many potential connections between their work and the efforts of other scholars. Often people fall into this trap because of interdisciplinary training. In addition, we all now use search engines and other resources that generate many plausible links in response to our every key word. It is important to narrow these possibilities, ideally deciding to focus on one conversation as the focus for sensemaking and sensegiving.

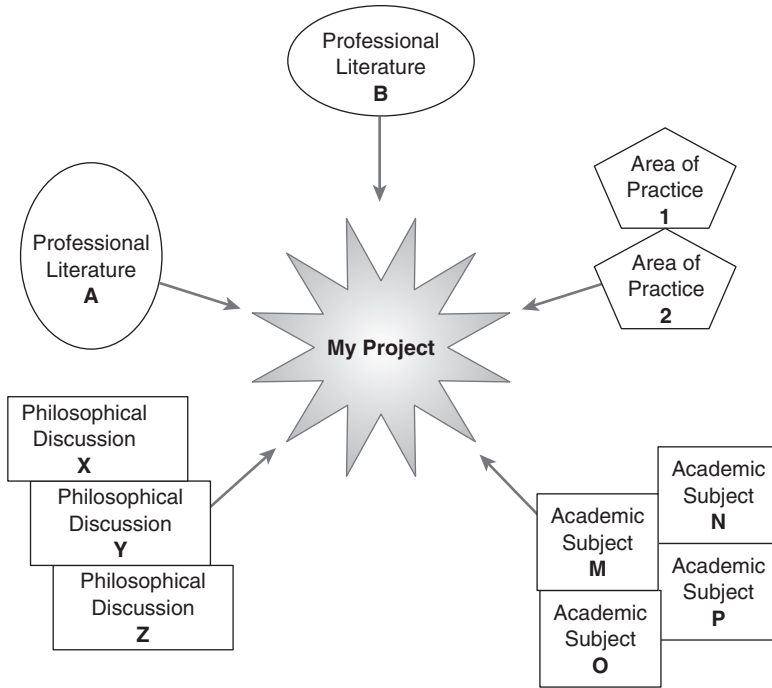
One piece of advice is often very helpful:



**Figure 1.4** An Overly Restricted Conversational Map



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**Figure 1.5** An Overly Ambitious Conversational Map

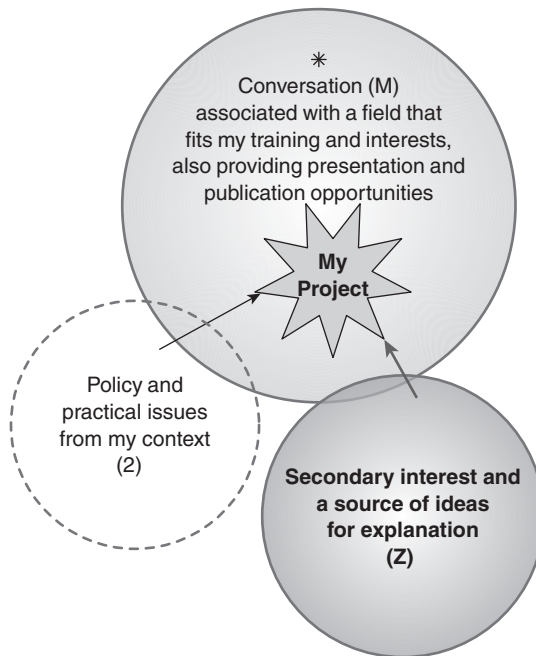
*The scholarly conversation that makes career sense  
 is with people you expect to see at professional conferences  
 over the next few years.*

Early pruning of your conversational ambitions is important for two reasons. First, those who listen to or read your work will often use your vocabulary and references to infer the kind of conversation you want to have. If these clues point in too many directions, or involve too many subjects, you are likely to lose the attention of readers who do not know or care about your disparate interests. That is regrettable if the references are tangential to your own interests as well. A second and even more important reason to be clear about your conversational focus is that a disorderly pattern of referencing can confuse you! It is hard to decide on the contribution you want to make when your references point in many directions.

It is logical to suggest that the conversation you choose should

- Be interesting from your point of view
- Fit your past training
- Be compatible with current or desired future employment
- Provide outlets for presentation and publication that meet your aspirations to communicate with a larger audience.

Paying attention to these objectives should ensure that you talk with people you respect and thus are likely to continue to interact with. They should eliminate “trendy” subjects as your project focus, though subjects of current concern may be a part of what makes your project interesting within a more established conversation. An ideal solution, but only one of several desirable outcomes, is offered in Figure 1.6.



**Figure 1.6** A Manageable Conversational Map

\*The conversation I want to contribute to.

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❖ DEVELOPING A SCHOLARLY IDENTITY  
THAT INFORMS SCHOLARLY CHOICES

An important implication of the social side of scholarship is that each of us is where we are in our unique scholarly histories because of other people, and our future opportunities are shaped by this experience. Even if you have been involved with academics for some time, it can be revealing to explore this web of connections because it can be a helpful guide to current design choices.

## EXERCISE 2

**Map Your Biographical Trajectory**

1. Position yourself in the academic world by putting your name and your current institution in the middle of a visual map.
2. Draw lines to this position from important influences you list at the top of the page, including advisors and their institutions (and perhaps *their* advisors and institutions).
3. Then list one or more destinations you would like to reach in 5 to 10 years at the bottom of the page, drawing arrows through experiences that might lead to these desired targets.

This exercise is meant to help you be purposeful in responding to current and future opportunities. If you share your biographical map with others, it can be a useful shorthand for getting to know your colleagues. I hope it also encourages you to think about your scholarly **identity**.

The most succinct statement of who you are and what you are trying to do is your curriculum vita, along with your website if you have one. Working on these statements is not just a matter of external communication; it is an instructive mirror for self-reflection. At the beginning of their careers, many people feel that they do not have that much to present on a vita, what they do have is the result of past efforts not fully under their control, and they are just discovering what they really want to do. If you feel this way, you may be amused to know that many people with longer histories feel exactly the same way—I do myself. We move forward by creating a plausible “storyline” that clarifies our choices, both to ourselves and to others.<sup>5</sup>

Ideally, you have a clear sense of who you are and where you want to go, and are working on a compatible project that you will use as the subject of subsequent exercises in this book. I strongly urge readers who are less sure of their scholarly identity and trajectory to stop and use their vita to purposefully choose one project as the subject for exercises that follow. The same exercise can be helpful to prune a large agenda.

## EXERCISE 3

### **Use Your Curriculum Vita to Envision and Choose Among Research and Career Opportunities**

1. Make a list of the subjects you are currently working on, or would like to investigate in the next year or so.
2. As a separate activity, select two or three plausible career trajectories and make a separate draft of your current vita that expresses these alternatives. Though it may not be worthwhile to develop polished drafts, I suggest you think about how different formats, different statements of objectives, and different descriptions of past and current activities present realistic career and research alternatives.
3. Systematically examine how the subjects identified in the first task of this exercise fit each vita scenario.
4. Choose the most attractive combination and consider how additional entries over the next year or two might reinforce your selected identity. You should consider not just publications and submitted articles, but also conference attendance, teaching, coursework, work in progress, and so on.
5. Post this target vita where it can help focus your day-to-day activities and be frequently updated.
6. Identify a specific research project to develop in subsequent exercises in this book that will contribute to the path you have chosen to follow.

Exercise 3 can be time consuming, but it involves important tasks. Too many people coming to the workshops I offer are simultaneously working on disparate subjects without thinking about the implications of this investment. I can identify with those who find many projects attractive, because disparate topics interest me as well. Over time, my enthusiasm has led me in various directions, but some of these have been much more strategic excursions than others. While flexibility may be necessary, and exploration is critical to innovation, I point out that people who want to keep more than one career trajectory alive are able to draw on only half (one third? even less?) of the energy they might be using to create knowledge around a more focused agenda.

The “ci” root of the word “decide” means “to cut.” (It is also present in the words “incisors” and “scissors.”) You decided that you wanted academic training when you enrolled in a time-consuming graduate program and rejected other careers, for example. Similar focusing decisions continue to be required over time. We all accept new jobs, meet new colleagues, start new projects, and teach new courses. A relatively clear sense of identity helps you chart a path through the many possibilities for scholarly work that will come your way. With attention, you can significantly increase your scholarly abilities while also creating a comprehensible pattern that has an impact on others. (A friend of

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mine once helpfully observed that her “to do” was a set of options, not mandates. I’ve adopted that perspective for my own list of scholarly projects.)

Of course, you are likely to alter how you define yourself over time. Karl Weick puts it very succinctly in his 1995 book about sensemaking:

When I know who I am, then I know what is “out there.”

But the direction of causality flows just as often in the other direction.<sup>6</sup>

My elaboration of this profound assertion is that

*Choosing a scholarly conversation involves two interacting decisions:*

- *The kind of scholar you want to be*
- *The kind of knowledge you believe is worth developing*

When I know who I am and what conversation I am in (or want to be in), then I know what is worth paying attention to as a scholar. But as we collectively identify subjects that are worth knowing more about, and I discover my ability to say something about them, the direction of causality can flow in the other direction. I may redefine the conversations I want to be part of and the subjects I want to study. As I do that, my identity as a scholar will change, whether I intend it to or not.

#### ❖ BALANCING ATTRACTION, AGREEMENT, AND DISAGREEMENT

Academic conversation is a relationship. As with all relationships, a rewarding encounter depends not only on your characteristics, but also on the characteristics of your counterpart. Thus, the “right” conversation to join depends on your identity, training, and career trajectory, as well as on distinctive features of the collective effort you envision joining.

Choice is an intellectual decision, a practical decision, and a political decision. I emphasize the second and third ideas because these aspects of decision receive too little attention. I was so aware of what seemed to be the hidden sociopolitical side of academics that one of my first scholarly publications was a theoretical comparison of how less powerful actors can influence their fate in organizations.<sup>7</sup> Harold Lasswell’s definition of politics as “who gets what, when and how”<sup>8</sup> is a useful definition in this article, but I later decided that people often label actions as “political” when they do not understand what is going on. As I gained experience, a number of outcomes continued to vex and confuse me, but many things that once seemed political began to make more sense.

We all have questions about the consequences of the choices we are making. Some of these questions appear in italics in this book. The situations described typically have positive as well as negative aspects. Consider this example:

**Workshop Question:** *My advisor expects to define the subjects I work on. Do I have any alternatives?*

This is one of the situations I once found intolerable, but now see in a more complex way. There are considerable benefits to doing research on a topic chosen by an advisor, even for those who are not that interested in the subject. Advisors have much more experience than their students and are therefore able to define researchable topics that are likely to interest others. They point toward subjects about which they can offer expert advice. This is particularly useful when things do not work out as planned, as must be expected in projects of any complexity. Your advisor is likely to have data and other resources that will ease the research process, as well as useful contacts with other scholars interested in the topic. These are advantages that cannot be abandoned lightly.

However, I believe that it is critical to be genuinely attracted to the scholarly community one joins. Choosing on practical grounds alone is risky. Students who follow the interests of an advisor start at a disadvantage. (This paragraph also pertains to those who choose to work on a topic merely because it is currently popular.) Less enthusiastic scholars can gain ground if they work hard, but it will be difficult for them to contribute as much as those who are strongly attracted to the topic. Sooner or later, conversation will turn to new topics, and the weakly connected are likely to have gained less insight for subsequent projects. Even more problematic, in the minds of other scholars they are associated with a topic that they do not care about. The tie can be an unwelcome anchor when it comes to future options.

Students who continue to be aggravated by a forced choice are strongly urged to seek another advisor. Before doing so, however, you might propose an adjacent (more interesting to you) conversation that expands an advisor's assignment. Or, you might see if you can carry out an assigned investigation in a context that interests you, and thus forge a personal link to a task you have been given. At the least, it is important to continue to do some work on topics and problems that genuinely compel your attention. Scholarly activities of your own choice on weekends and during time off will maintain contacts and contribute to a vita that may lead to more appealing future employment.

There are many questions about the practical and political aspects of research design. Only a few can be addressed in this short book, but two more are particularly relevant to the problem of finding the right conversation to join.

**Workshop Question:** *I am attracted to a conversation that I do not really have the skills to join. Surely that is too risky?*

Scholars do walk away from a conversation that attracts them because they feel unprepared to make a contribution. However, attraction is an emotion to be taken seriously. It is virtually impossible for most people reading this book to choose to be a brain surgeon at this point in their lives. Gaining the skills required to contribute to the scholarly conversations around you is more likely, though significant effort may be required. In fact, it makes sense to choose challenging conversations precisely because they call for developing new skills that will expand your conversational opportunities in the future.

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You might rightly respond that there is a higher chance of success from contributions that build on your current skills, and I agree that these opportunities should be taken seriously as well. Why not attempt to benefit from both strategies? Recent conversations in the field of management have praised ambidextrous organizations that can exploit current capabilities and also explore promising new territory.<sup>9</sup> I believe this is also a good model for managing an academic career.

This possibility highlights the fact that “conversation” is a mental construction. You define the conversation you want to have, though the result must be accepted by academic editors, reviewers, and readers. Much more detail on this topic is provided in Chapters 3 and 8. In brief, you help yourself and the scholarly community understand the nature of your contribution through research design, starting with your selection of subject, arguments, and references. These choices should make the most of what you have to offer.

**Workshop Question:** *What about trying to influence a conversation that I’m convinced is going in the wrong direction? I have a lot of energy to work on that!*

I will admit that strong objection to a line of inquiry is an energizing point of departure, but I worry about this decision. If the idea of conversation is taken seriously, it is easy to see that saying “you’re wrong” is unlikely to be the starting point of genuine exchange. Saying “you’re immoral” is even more of a nonstarter, and yet this is often where strong energy comes from. As Gadamer says, “the first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us. . . . [O]ne does not try to argue the other person down but . . . really considers the weight of the other’s opinion.”<sup>10</sup>

The quote comes from a recent article on “Conversation as Experiential Learning” by Baker, Jensen, and Kolb. It is part of a particularly interesting argument, because the authors go on to say (in apparent contradiction) that “conversation is a meaning-making process whereby understanding is achieved through the interplay of opposites and contradictions.”<sup>11</sup> I think they have identified an essential tension. It is hard to say something new to people you agree with completely. Disagreement tends to be more exciting, and it leads to innovation. Furthermore, as Mike Wallace suggests in Chapter 13, discerning judgment lies at the heart of scholarship, and meeting the challenge of your future reviewers requires that you are a critical reader and writer yourself. The only conclusion is paradoxical. Thus, another piece of important advice:

—◆◆—

*Do not join a conversation if you cannot agree with many central assumptions and domain interests, but also walk away from conversations that do not offer something significant with which to disagree.*

—◆◆—

One possibility for those who feel a group of scholars is misguided is to look for others who have come to similar conclusions. Opinions about what is wrong and what might be done will almost certainly be varied enough to generate an interesting conversation among those who share a common concern. This interaction should be much more rewarding than trying to chip away at the well-fortified foundation used by colleagues for whom you have little sympathy. Of course, the basis of your disagreement may be less central. If the conversation that concerns you occurs among scholars about whom you feel positive in general, you are urged to stay engaged. Chapter 3 provides several ideas about how you might introduce your objections.

This is just an overview of issues elaborated in subsequent chapters, but I hope it helps you see additional implications of understanding scholarship as a social activity. An important part of sensemaking is learning about the norms of the group you want to join. It is worth thinking about what it means to be a good citizen, and it is important to recognize that what you do in turn affects that community. The social context of manuscript review, for example, in my opinion means that reviewers (like dissertation chairs and other advisors) should be careful about imposing their interests on an author. Chapter 12 adds further detail on reviewing, based on the idea that judgment and advice about improvement are facilitated by basic positive regard—in reviewing and all other scholarly conversations.

Moving back to an individual level of analysis, we have been considering the balance between your interests and your opportunities. This is a subject you are likely to consider many times. Your best job offer may be from a research project that is not that close to your interests. Dual career considerations or desired geographic location may lead you to unanticipated choices. A valued colleague may ask you to work on a project that is far from your current interests. You may have an opportunity to collect excellent data about phenomena that have not previously attracted you. The key questions at these and other choice points in my opinion are the following: What can I learn from this possibility? Can I reframe the situation to bring it closer to my interests? Are there options for keeping previous interests alive as part of my portfolio? How distracting will that be?

Your decisions will inevitably affect the way you and others think about your work. You can help both internal and external sensemaking by using clear communication.

## EXERCISE 4

### Prepare Your Scholarly Name Tag

Imagine that the typical name tag at a social event had room for the information you hope other scholars will remember about you.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

(the name you will consistently use in presentations and publications—e.g., Ellen Rosand, Frank Piller)

(Continued)



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(Continued )

I am a \_\_\_\_\_

(disciplinary or professional affiliation—e.g., professor of music, professor of management)

My primary subfield is \_\_\_\_\_

(an area of research and training recognized by other scholars—e.g., renaissance and baroque opera, innovation)

I am currently working on \_\_\_\_\_

(your conversation, a more specific subject or problem that also interests other scholars—e.g., 17th-century Venetian opera, value cocreation by businesses and customers)

My contribution will be \_\_\_\_\_

(a *short* description of what you hope will be distinctive about your work, using words that might someday be used in the abstract of a book or article—e.g., how relatively little-known Venetian works created a new genre,<sup>12</sup> how customers can make product design and selection decisions that are more typically made in R&D departments<sup>13</sup>)

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The example responses I just offered describe two people with well-established careers, as noted in footnotes 12 and 13. Yet in workshops I have found that many people at an earlier point in their careers can complete this exercise with a similar level of detail. Not surprising, a few others find it impossible. The second group is urged to work for awhile on the specifics of their current project, then return to the important task of positioning that project in a specific conversation. Name tags are useful. They help people know who they want to approach for conversation and what they are likely to talk about.

## ❖ CONCLUSION

Perhaps the descriptions of scholarly conversation in this chapter seem too formidable—something that only the most experienced scholars have the insight to identify and join. Let me assure you that they are not. One of the reasons I rely on the metaphor of conversation is to remind you of your own past participation in interesting and rewarding exchanges. Also remember that positive evaluation of your ideas by established academics brought you this far. In the right context, you can find something interesting to say to other bright people, in part because you already know a lot about how good conversations work.

Recently, a participant in a workshop I was running showed me a book he had been assigned in another course. The authors suggest that a dissertation is an apprenticeship, and observe that few people make important contributions early in their careers. They

believe that applying established theory in a new setting or some other derivative project is sufficient for a dissertation since it is a first effort. Presumably a similar logic applies to research after the dissertation as well, with individuals gradually increasing their skills and aspirations until the time for significant contribution arrives.

The laudatory intent of that text was to reduce anxiety, but I strongly disagree with the advice because it limits ambition and is unlikely to yield satisfying conversations. In the next chapter, I suggest that the primary purpose of scholarship is to discover claims that both you and other scholars find to be

- Interesting (and possibly engaging)
- Significant (and one hopes, but cannot assure, enduring)
- Trustworthy (and ideally authoritative).

Yes, these are challenging objectives. However, people all around you have been successful enough at designing and carrying out scholarly projects that their work was published. This must be your objective as well, starting with your dissertation research if not before. Timidity clogs academic conversation with triviality and is a hard habit to break. I asked those in the workshop whether they would apply for a difficult job that required following in the footsteps of others for a minimum of 6–10 years with insignificant personal accomplishment. They wouldn't, and you wouldn't either. Enough said.

#### ❖ NOTES

1. Kimmelman, M. (2005, September 10–11). Tributes to a bohemian artist of space. *International Herald Tribune*, p. 9.
2. Karl Weick's work on sensemaking has had a tremendous influence on how I understand the world in general, and the work of scholarship more particularly. See, for example, Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. Gioia and Chittipeddi extend Weick's use of sensemaking with a discussion of sensegiving in Gioia, D., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12, 433–448. All graphics in this text were considerably improved with the help of Vivek Velamuri.
3. Huff, A. (1998). *Writing for scholarly publication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
4. This view of scholarly conversation is strongly influenced by Thomas Kuhn's description of scholarly activity, though I am describing more specific interactions than he did when developing the idea of a scientific paradigm. See Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Schank, R. C. (1995). *Tell me a story: Narrative and intelligence*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
6. Weick (1995), *Sensemaking in organizations*.
7. Huff, A. (1980). Organizations as political systems: implications for stability and change. In T. Cummings (Ed.), *Systems theory for organization development* (pp. 163–180). New York: Wiley.
8. Lasswell, H. (1990). *Politics: Who gets what, when, and how*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith. (Originally published in 1935). For general information on Lasswell, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold\\_Lasswell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Lasswell) (accessed May 30, 2007).

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9. Tushman, M. L., & O'Reilly, C. A. (1996). Ambidextrous organizations: Managing evolutionary and revolutionary change. *California Management Review*, 38(4), 8–30; Birkinshaw, J., & Gibson, C. (2004). Contextual determinants of organizational ambidexterity. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(2), 209–226; Birkinshaw, J., & Gibson, C. (2004). Building ambidexterity into the organization. *Sloan Management Review*, 45(4), 47–55.
10. Gadamer, H.-G. (1994). *Truth and method* (p. 376). New York: Crossroad.
11. Baker, A. C., Jensen, P. J., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Conversation as experiential learning. *Management Learning*, 36(4), 411–428.
12. This description is based on praise for a book by Ellen Rosand, professor of music at Yale University. See <http://www.fathom.com/course/10701021/session5.html> and <http://www.yale.edu/yalemus/faculty/rosand.htm>, both accessed April 29, 2007.
13. This description is based on contact with Professor Frank Piller. See Ogawa, S. & Piller, F. T. (2006). Reducing the risks of new product development. *Sloan Management Review*, 47(2), 65–71. See <http://www.open-innovation.com> and <http://www.openinnovation.com/glossary.htm#oi> (both accessed April 29, 2007).