



Editorial

Only connect... an invitation to scholarship

Several years ago I read a short piece by the French writer Roland Barthes (1994) entitled *Et si je n'avais pas lu...* (And if I hadn't read...) where he poses the question to academics: 'Where do my reading duties begin?' A better question, perhaps, is 'where do my reading duties end?' Is it enough for me as a professor of nursing to read only nursing texts, or only healthcare texts, supplemented perhaps with books and papers on research methodology? Perhaps I might read novels or biography or popular science in my spare time and for my own pleasure, but most people would probably say such reading is beyond the call of academic duty. Nevertheless, I wish to propose that, as academics, our reading duties extend far beyond our subject specialisms and even beyond what might usually be considered as academic texts.

When the modern University was founded in the early nineteenth century, its mission extended to both the *unity* and the *universality* of knowledge; that is, at the same time to bring knowledge from all the disciplines together and also to disseminate it widely. During the course of the twentieth century, the idea of a University changed considerably from the Enlightenment ideal of a *community* of scholars who work together on the universal project of knowledge to a *patchwork* of specialist departments full of specialist individuals, to the point where, as C.P. Snow (1959) pointed out, scholars from different disciplines are unable and even unwilling to communicate with one another. There are, of course, many reasons for this shift in purpose and focus, not least the increasing economic and practical need for experts in ever-narrowing fields. However, I hope that I am not alone in thinking that something important and valuable has been lost along the way.

In his book on the nature of creativity, Arthur Koestler (1964) argued that acts of creation occur when two seemingly unconnected and often quite disparate ideas form a 'bisociation' in which the result is greater than the sum of its parts. I would suggest that the growth and success of the modern University over the past two hundred years lies in part in the provision of a physical and intellectual site for scholars from different disciplines with very different interests to come together and make creative *connections* of ideas and concepts that, on the face of it, appear to have little in common. But that in turn requires scholars from differing and often disparate disciplines not only to meet together but to be able to communicate with one another on a relatively deep and sophisticated level.

My fear for the discipline of nursing is that it is being largely excluded from what remains of this universal and unifying scholarly discourse. In some cases there exist physical boundaries to face-to-face communication; many departments and faculties of nursing are geographically remote from the main university campus, often on sites of existing or former hospitals. However, many of the boundaries are psychological and sociological; in many cases we exclude *ourselves* from the life of the wider academic community. Some will no doubt

argue that nursing, and particularly nursing research, is becoming ever more multidisciplinary, and I would agree with them. However, particularly in the case of research, it is the multidisciplinary of the car production line, where each member of the team has her or his specialist skill and where the research project passes down the line to each in turn, rather than the *transdisciplinarity* of the senior common room that is required for the creative process.

Whereas the connected and bisociated University is greater than the sum of its parts, the converse is true for the patchwork University, where each part, each individual patch, has no meaningful connection to the whole and can be readily removed and replaced with another. We have seen this happen in recent years to departments of sociology, chemistry and various other disciplines that had formerly regarded themselves as 'core' and central to the University. If the discipline of nursing is to survive and flourish as anything more than a provider of vocational training it is imperative that we make connections and find our place in the wider community of academics and scholars in what remains of the modern University.

This brings me back to my reformulation of Barthes' question: *Where do my reading duties end?* Not with the seminal nursing texts, not with the latest nursing research papers, not even with more loosely related texts on the sociology, psychology, biology and philosophy of health. I would suggest that, as aspiring academics and scholars, we have a duty to read far beyond the natural boundaries of our discipline if we are to make meaningful connections and creative contributions to wider University life. For some of us, this will entail a struggle on several levels: a psychological and perhaps emotional struggle as boundaries fall away and we realise the virtually limitless scope and prospects of our reading duties; an intellectual struggle as we attempt to get to grips with unfamiliar concepts and alien modes of thought; and a social and political struggle as we attempt to take our place in a community whose rules, assumptions and mores are unfamiliar to many of us and which perhaps currently regards us with a degree of disdain.

As I have said, the full scope of what we might read is almost limitless and our selections will vary greatly according to the taste and preference of each individual reader. Inspired by Barthes' challenge to produce my own list of books that have influenced me over the years, I decided that the only way to keep it manageable was to introduce some rules and restrictions. Firstly, then, I have restricted my selections to short books, mostly less than one hundred pages, that can comfortably be read in a single evening. Secondly, I have selected books that were all originally published more than ten years ago, based on the rationale that fashion is fleeting and the real worth of a book does not become apparent for many years. And thirdly, none of the books I have selected has any overt connection to the academic discipline of nursing.

Heading my list would be *The Two Cultures* by the physicist C.P. Snow (1959), who first put forward many of the arguments found in this editorial in his plea for greater connectedness between science and literature over fifty years ago. Somewhat counter to this view but equally compelling is the sociologist C. Wright Mills' short work *On Intellectual Craftsmanship* (Mills, 1959), in which he urged the academic to 'stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society'. In a similar vein, the literary theorist Roland Barthes's essay *The Death of the Author*, which has been much anthologised (Barthes, 1969), urges us to write our own meanings into the texts we read to the extent that each reading of a text becomes an act of rewriting it. I have been influenced by numerous works of philosophy but I would single out Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* (Sartre, 1974) for making a difficult and radical case for individual choice and responsibility with extreme brevity and clarity, or perhaps Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 1922) for making a very different but equally radical case with as much brevity but somewhat less clarity. I would have to include *Knots*, the short book of poetic double-binds by the psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1970) and, not entirely unrelated, Eric Berne's *Games People Play* (Berne, 1964). To counter their worldly cynicism, I would also include *The Art of Loving* by psychologist, psychiatrist and philosopher Erich Fromm (1957). The visual arts demand very personal responses from us, and generally do not translate well into words, and so I have restricted my choice to a single short volume by Michel Foucault (1973) entitled *This is Not a Pipe*, which explores the very problem of the relationship between words and images with reference to the paintings of Rene Magritte. Finally, I have chosen *Zen in the Art of Archery*, written in the nineteen thirties by the German Eugen Herrigel (1936), as the most remarkable example I have ever read of a reflective journal.

I am aware that my list of 'desert island books' is a huge personal indulgence, and that most readers would perhaps not include a single one of my choices in their own top ten. However, the aim is not necessarily to convince you to read my selections, but rather to think about your own reading duties. If the first step towards wisdom is recognising the limitations of our knowledge, then the wider we read, the more we realise how little we know, the wiser we become and the more we are able to connect with our colleagues.

As well as an editorial, then, this is also a scholarly invitation to think about your own reading duties and to submit a short essay of about 1500 words to the journal on a book that has influenced your own academic life and which meets the criteria I set out above. Firstly, then, your chosen book should be short, that is, able to be read in a day (we are all busy people!). Secondly, it should have withstood the test of time, preferably being first published more than 10 years ago. Thirdly, it should, on the face of it, be unrelated to nursing. That is not to say that it should be of no practical use to us as nursing academics and practitioners, but rather that it is up to you as the writer to make the connections. As C. Wright Mills (1959) wrote over 50 years ago, 'Scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career'. I believe that it is important that our careers are as rich, diverse and well-connected as our lives.

References

- Barthes, R., 1994. Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes. University of California Press, Los Angeles.
 Koestler, A., 1964. *The Act of Creation*. Hutchinson, London.
 Snow, C.P., 1959. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
 Mills, C.W., 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Books cited

- Barthes, R., 1969. The death of the author. In: Barthes, R. (Ed.), *Image Music Text*. Fontana Press, London.
 Berne, E., 1964. *Games People Play*. Grove Press, New York.
 Foucault, M., 1973. (English Translation 1983) *This is Not a Pipe*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
 Fromm, E., 1957. *The Art of Loving*. George Allen & Unwin, London.
 Herrigel, E., 1936. (English Translation 1953) *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
 Laing, R.D., 1970. *Knots*. Tavistock, London.
 Mills, C.W., 1959. On intellectual craftsmanship. In: Mills, C.W. (Ed.), *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
 Sartre, J.-P., 1945. (English translation, 1974) *Existentialism and Humanism*. Methuen, London.
 Snow, C.P., 1959. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
 Wittgenstein, L., 1922. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. Kegan Paul, London.

Gary Rolfe
School of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University,
United Kingdom