Barriers—or Bridges?

The article in this issue in which restorationists Ann Riley and Mark Spencer recount their experience working as partners with two large universities in California to offer a field-oriented course in restoration, provides an interesting perspective on the perennial task of building bridges between restoration and the academy.

This task is hardly a new one. In fact the "problem" (if that is what it is) of the gap between academic life and life in the marketplace goes back at least to the Greeks. Aristocrats who lived in a slave society and regarded the life of the mind as a prerogative of the leisure class, the Greek philosophers scorned work of the hands, leaving it to the monks of the early Christian era to discover its value for the life of the spirit, and to the inventors of science a millennium later to discover its value for the life of the mind.

It was Renaissance thinkers like Galileo and Francis Bacon who first demonstrated and insisted on the value of bringing the scholar into the workshop, and the importance of taking the work, the knowledge and insights of the craftsman seriously. This was a radical idea then—and it got people into trouble.

Galileo, for example, got into trouble with the Church because of his radical ideas about the solar system. But he got into trouble with his colleagues in the academy, in part because of where he got those ideas, hanging around with artillerymen and shipbuilders in the Venetian arsenal.

Galileo also irritated the professors by writing in Italian at a time when the rituals of scholarship demanded communication in Latin, a language inaccessible to the first-rank artisans whom Galileo tended to regard as colleagues.

How very little has changed.

A year ago I sat in a panel at the Estuary Restoration Conference in San Francisco while a university professor disparaged the work of a group of practitioners and volunteers as ecologically unsophisticated. Perhaps it was. In fact most human efforts are unsatisfactory in some way. What struck me, though, was the tone of voice. It was a tone that implied proprietorship over insight and skill and that conveyed little sense of the possibility that a new idea or better technique might come—as we know they often do—out of the work of practitioners and amateurs. It also conveyed little awareness that much that goes on in laboratories and academic settings is naive and unsophisticated from the practitioner's point of view. It was a tone of voice that said, we know how to do this. Or if we don't we are the ones who can find out. Give us the money.

And the fault, we must acknowledge, lies on both sides of the divide. If scholars should spend more time in the field listening to practitioners, practitioners should probably spend at least an occasional afternoon in the library.

The problem is that practitioners, by the very nature of their work, tend to live in an oral culture, where the origins of infor-

mation and ideas may be hard to keep track of. Scholars live in a print culture with an ethic that demands meticulous attention to the origins of ideas, but that tends to dismiss orally transmitted ideas as merely anecdotal—that is, in Greek, "an-ekdotos," or unpublished—and therefore as unworthy of attribution.

No one denies the importance of careful research or of high standards in the communication of ideas and information. But there are important intellectual, ethical and political issues here, and these must not be dismissed. Claiming that only one set of rituals—the controlled experiment, peer review and appearance in print—confers authority on information is not all that different from making the same claim for a particular book or religious tradition.

Elsewhere in academic life scholars have become aware of these issues. A generation ago, for example, anthropologists commonly published papers and books filled with knowledge derived from traditional cultures, but often regarded members of those cultures merely as informants rather than as colleagues.

Now all that has changed as scholars and writers have become increasingly aware of the value of "vernacular" knowledge as a source of insight, and as society has grown more aware of the importance—and the justice—of acknowledging all sources of ideas and information.

But in our field of ecology and restoration one still finds colleagues taking for granted the outmoded assumption that only print makes knowledge real, that theory is somehow "higher" than practice, and that "science," which until recently took little interest in restoration, should now be regarded as the ultimate authority in this area.

The problem, I believe, lies less in the presence of boundaries between what are in many ways two cultures, but in our way of thinking about boundaries and relationships.

There are, we should remind ourselves, reasons for making distinctions between academic and practical life, and there are also reasons, some of them quite sensible, why people don't readily cross the boundaries between them. The aim, as I see it, is not to obscure the boundaries, or to carry on as if they don't matter, when in fact they do. The aim is to respect these domains of experience, then to take on the work of fashioning relationships between them.

This has never been easy work. And one reason it doesn't get done is because of the way we think about it. As long as we think of the task of creating relationships as merely a matter of breaking down a wall and clearing away the rubble, we will never get around to the task of designing bridges. We will never invest the resources need to accomplish this special kind of work. And we will go on talking past one another, belittling each other, and missing out on what those on the other side might have to offer.

—William R. Jordan III