



A ZEAL OF SCHOLARS: MY YEAR AT WIKO  
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A tower of giraffes. A sleuth of bears. A parade of elephants. A murder of crows. Many conversations over Thursday night dinners at Wiko stand out in my mind, but among my favorites was a heated debate over the most appropriate word for a collection of Wiko scholars. As these different names suggest, collections of animals may take many forms and the diversity of scholarly communities is similarly wide-ranging. Interdisciplinarity has long been a cornerstone of my work, which typically occurs in research collaborations, working groups, symposia, panels, and other structured forms of intellectual engagement.

While these were all modes of interaction that occurred at Wiko, the aspect of interdisciplinary engagement that I found most surprising, unexpected, and ultimately transformative during my Fellowship year was something murkier, less formal, and harder to quantify in terms of concrete outcomes or outputs. This yearbook entry reflects on that aspect of my experience and what it taught me about scholarly communities, interdisciplinary engagement, and opportunities for discovery.

### What It Was

In my experience, much interdisciplinary work has an instrumental aspect: an outside field has a method or model that seems relevant to one's own question or problem; that field is explored in a way that is guided by one's own questions or problems. To put it more bluntly: reading and listening are selective; pieces of the outside field that do not resonate are mostly skipped over for expediency. Most interactions occur in working groups and other "semi-structured" settings in which the people are mobilized around a particular problem or question. This can be a tremendously useful and generative mode of doing research. But I'd like to contrast that with an alternative, more open-ended and exploratory mode in which a field is engaged with for its own sake: one is drawn into moments of bafflement and unfamiliarity, rather than shying away from them.

One of the best but most challenging aspects of my Wiko experience were my interactions with scholars in fields quite far from my own. The ones that stand out in my mind are: architecture, archeology, literature, biology, law, and diplomacy. In each case, the experience unfolded in three distinct phases. First, I had an initial moment in which I assumed I knew something about the field or at least how the questions and research might relate to my own areas of expertise. Second, something happened – a Tuesday colloquium, a hallway conversation, or some other interaction in which that area of scholarship revealed itself as confusing, unfamiliar, and strange. One lunch with a recently arrived Fellow stood out in this regard, as it quickly became apparent when we first started talking that not only did I not understand what she was doing, but also I actually had no idea why she was asking the types of questions she was asking. Third, there was an opportunity for a follow-up conversation that addressed the confusion and led to some deeper appreciation of what the scholar was aiming to do and how she went about that effort.

These open-ended interactions were not trying to solve a particular problem or achieve a particular goal, although they certainly might lead to that in the future. Sometimes you

don't want to lead with a specific question or problem you're trying to solve; you want to lead with bafflement or confusion or an acknowledgement of the unfamiliar. The result was a much deeper appreciation of the richness and diversity of intellectual life.

This experience also went beyond academic interactions; it permeated my experience of Berlin and the friendships I formed during my fellowship year. For example, sometime in late fall I went on a two-hour walk through the forest with a Wiko colleague. We talked non-stop the entire time and had a wonderful conversation. On the way back to the Villa Walther, she remarked that if we were Finnish we might have spent the entire walk in complete silence and it would still have counted as a complete success for a new friendship. I recall that idea sounding so exotic to me as an American, but also so completely alluring and freeing. The Finnish silence!

Some of my happiest memories in Berlin were just walking through neighborhoods and stumbling on historical buildings and monuments. Moments of discovery and rambling through the city; one favorite excursion was an afternoon spent in Rixdorf, where I discovered an 18th-century village in the middle of hipster Berlin. I am very grateful to Wiko for supporting both the language courses and the architectural tours, as they provided the initial foundation for these explorations.

### Environmental Factors

I believe several factors contributed to and supported these experiences.

*Frequent Interaction:* Of course, there are many opportunities for formal socializing at Wiko during the lunches and Thursday night dinners. But I especially appreciated the informal opportunities made possible largely through our shared co-residence: chatting on the steps of Villa Walther, waiting at the bus stop, sharing the walk to work, encounters in the Grunewald forest, ping-pong tournaments, and hallway conversations. These small interactions cumulated into a larger set of rewards: a steady patter about what was on people's minds, what they were struggling with, their goals for a particular day, where they had been the previous week. And small and not-so-small gems of sociability: for example, one breakfast that started as my catching up on e-mail and morphed into an hourlong discussion about overlaps between data science and methods in the digital humanities.

*Playfulness, Openness, Generosity:* I suspect that having regular interactions is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to create the sorts of interdisciplinary interactions described above. I believe it also requires a particular set of attitudes or orientations among

the Fellows. Whether it was brainstorming new directions for architectural exhibitions or exploring the connections between sociology and animal behavior (another delightful, albeit planned, breakfast encounter), one thing that fueled some of my most wonderful Wiko interactions was an attitude of playfulness, exploration, openness to trying on ideas and being wrong, and willingness to tread on uncertain territory. I'm not entirely sure what factors foster these types of attitudes, but I do know that the dance parties certainly did not hurt!

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge one other critical factor that contributed to this environment: the warmth of and expert care by Wiko's staff, who looked after our needs so well during the year. Not only did their efforts eliminate so many of the everyday concerns that sap one's energy, they also injected an energy and enthusiasm into domains ranging from German wine to literature review to recommendations for haircuts. These interactions, as much as my time with the Fellows, made Wiko a place of such openness, ease, and discovery. Thank you.