The Challenge of Bridging Between Disciplines

The September 2000 issue of JAMIA presented three papers on the intersection of bioinformatics and biomedical informatics.1–3 That set of papers was written by individuals who are grounded in biomedical informatics and working in areas of bioinformatics. Their papers explain aspects of bioinformatics research in the language of biomedical informatics.

This issue of JAMIA contains the first of two sets of papers4 coming out of the Human Brain Project. With one exception, these papers are written by people who are grounded in neuroinformatics (the intersection of neuroscience and bioinformatics). They are working on problems that are analogous to the ones being tackled by researchers in biomedical informatics. Nonetheless, they come at these problems from a different perspective. Although they use many of the same words to describe what they do, the careful reader with a background in biomedical informatics will find that the words mean something different to them. For example, Gardner et al.5 use metadata as “the neurobiological descriptors characterizing neurophysiology datasets.” In other words, their metadata describe the experimental context in which the data were acquired. This difference in use is explicitly stated in the text, but it may be missed by someone who has a different expectation about the meaning.

The review and revision process was lively. As Editor-in-Chief, I suggested that the work be re-framed to communicate clearly to the journal’s audience. The authors disagreed, pointing out that these were the primary archival publications about this work and that they had to communicate clearly to people working directly in their area. On reflection, I came around to their view.

We are fortunate to have these papers in the mainstream of biomedical informatics. Otherwise, most of our readers would not get an in-depth view of this important area of research. But, read the papers carefully. If you see a statement that you think is naive, you have probably come across a place where the author uses words differently than you do. After you finish the papers, think about how you might apply the techniques to problems in your area of work. I think you will find the extra effort worthwhile. If you take the time to bridge the communication gap, you always learn more from people tackling problems from a new perspective.—WILLIAM W. STEAD, MD

References


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