

The Humanities, the Classroom and the Internet

Barton D. Thurber, PhD., and Jack Pope, PhD.

thurber@SanDiego.edu, pope@SanDiego.edu

Abstract. The authors present data suggesting that digital technologies are under-represented in humanities classrooms, and suggest reasons why; after briefly characterizing what the humanities exist to do, they then offer suggestions regarding what kinds of technology might best address those needs.

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1 Introduction

That digital technologies have impacted the humanities is beyond dispute. We take (for example) word processing and email for granted, yet each has profoundly affected how we read, write, and how we perform manipulations on and within written texts. Global substitutions, email attachments, or hyperlinks to texts (or sounds, or images) beyond texts are simple examples of operations we could not do, nor even dream of doing, before the advent of digital computing. The nature of the document itself has changed, and correspondingly the nature of reading and writing; we speak of the “hard copy,” yet for centuries that hard copy *was* the document, not merely one realization of a more global (and virtual) whole.

And the Internet has brought change at least as dramatic. For the humanities the principle change has probably been access to documents on a breathtaking and hitherto unprecedented scale. Marjorie Perloff, among others, has noticed, and marveled at, the new and improved access to previously ephemeral documents¹ we now enjoy, thanks to the web; and if that access is primarily in the service of scholarship and/or research in the humanities (insofar as it supplements the library) it can also affect the humanities classroom. Those documents are no longer *in* the library; they can be in the classroom itself, and therefore be more potent messengers from the past than they would be in tabernacles (libraries) where once the past was managed, catalogued or (sometimes) entombed. This change alone is one that we have not seen the end of, and which will almost certainly transform what we mean by method—knowledge itself, ultimately—in the humanities.

However, that day is some ways off, and whether the Internet will transform the humanities *classroom*, as it has already transformed humanities research, remains an open question. It has not, apparently, done so yet. An ECAR-sponsored May 2003 survey of faculty use of course management systems in the

¹ “Teaching in the Wired Classroom.” *MLA Newsletter*, 38 (4) (Winter 2006), 3-5.

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University of Wisconsin system² indicates that use of CMS among faculty is increasing rapidly, but that “faculty use the CMS primarily as an administrative tool to facilitate quiz administration and other classroom tasks rather than as a tool anchored in pedagogy or cognitive science models.” This is congruent with the results of a survey across various schools and colleges at the University of Minnesota.³ There, the two greatest factors causing faculty to augment face to face instruction are “the desire to facilitate access to course materials (86.2%), and “the desire to facilitate communication between student and instructors.” Far lower on the list (one of the three least important motivators) is any consideration that the use of technology will benefit students socially or culturally (30%).⁴

These data suggest that in mainstream college classrooms in the US, digital technologies, including the Internet, function as little more than bibliographic aids or electronic bookkeeping devices. Where the humanities are specifically concerned, however, the data are more revealing. In 2003, in an attempt to determine how web-based technology was actually being used at our own university, we looked at the number of courses utilizing WebCT – the distributed learning tool then in use⁵. Of 506 active courses, 353 were located in the professional schools, most (252) in the School of Business Administration. (The School of Law only had 4 such courses.) Within the College of Arts and Sciences, only 153 courses were using WebCT and of that number 93 involved the sciences or Mathematics, 28 the Social Sciences, with the remainder concentrated in Foreign Languages. There were 2 WebCT courses in English; none in Art; none in History. In 2004 we supplemented that study with a look at

² Morgan, G., (2003), *ECAR Key Findings: Faculty Use of Course Management Systems*, available at http://www.educause.edu/content.asp?PAGE_ID=1788&bhcp=1.

³ Jorn, A. et al. (2003), *Multi-College Faculty Survey: Experiences with Educational Technology at the University of Minnesota*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

⁴ More recent data support these conclusions as well. As Kevin Oliver reports in “Design and Development of a Faculty Technology Practices Directory,” *Educause Quarterly*, v. 30 n. 4 (2007), <http://connect.educause.edu/Library/EDUCAUSE+Quarterly/DesignandDevelopmentofaFa/45538?time=1218558209>, “In a period of eight months (through May 2007), 89 faculty of 2,000 have visited and entered data, with only 43 completing a full entry. The directory includes complete information on 61 tools, but 23 of those entries came from 5 faculty, with the remaining 38 entries entered by 38 faculty (that is, just one entry each). Thus, most faculty in the directory reported one tool and stopped...Finally, many of those completing full entries are associated with the advisory committee, not drawn from the general faculty. As noted, committee members were asked to try out the directory first and enter some information from their courses. If not for this prompted response, the directory would contain little to no data.” The study shows, in other words, that “Faculty Technology Practices” at North Carolina State University are scarcely “practices” at all.

⁵ Thurber, B. & Pope, J. (2005). Learning Spaces for the Humanities. In G. Richards (Ed.), *Proceedings of World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education 2005* (pp. 1541-1548). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.

institutional patterns of media use. Those data were not unequivocal, but Business and professional school classrooms were, first of all, more heavily saturated with “smart” classrooms than were those in the humanities; even so, only about 1/3 of media and/or media production requests were even faculty-related, and, of those, only 40 (of 4740) came from buildings in which humanities classes were customarily sited.

Although we understand our university to be much like other mid-sized, liberal arts-based universities in the US, it is of course only one institution and our results may not be typical. Nor would we deny that innovative, web-based multimedia projects are and have been produced for humanities classrooms. We do suggest, however, that those projects have yet to fundamentally alter, or even significantly change, pedagogy or interpersonal dynamics in the humanities classroom; however welcome these projects may be, they have yet to progress much beyond enriching a teaching and learning paradigm that has remained essentially unchanged for decades, if not centuries.⁶

On the other hand, we would also suggest that there are reasons behind the apparent reluctance of humanities educators to embrace digital and/or web-based technologies; and that, once we re-imagine what the humanities classroom can become, this reluctance can be overcome.

2 Why No Technology In the Humanities Classroom?

There is a problem, first of all, in the ways that humanists understand what they do and why they do it.

This is because there is no longer (if there ever was) any widely-shared agreement about what the humanities are for. In a post-theory age, older verities, including the idea of verity itself, tend to wither in the face of multi-centered approaches to cultures, texts and authors. We attempt to privilege none at the expense of any other; but, while we can and do discuss cultural and intercultural interplay, we have been mute when we try to grasp the value of the humanities *independently* of any particular inquiry. Is a humanities practitioner simply a generalist, drawing from these other disciplines as necessary? Are the humanities one example of what we usually call

⁶ And conceivably for good reason. In *Digital Scholarship in the Tenure, Promotion and Review Process*, Deborah Lines Andersen looks at the nature of digital scholarship and concludes that “the nature of these different disciplines -- their research products and modes of communication -- makes an enormous difference in the kinds of technologies scholars might use.” While the sciences and social sciences have largely embraced digital tools for research and scholarship, and by extension for teaching, “the humanities have been the most resistant to digital endeavors.” In her view, the media that humanists work with -- largely print, or some other variety of artistic expression (paint, sculpture) -- as well as the nature of the analysis humanities scholars engage in argues against digitization. Scientific research leads naturally to the collection and analysis of data; humanists create, investigate, and think critically about the work in something like the way artists do, or look at the similar creations of others, “studying documents and artistic expressions to create interpretation and meaning.” Anderson, D. L. (2004) *Digital Scholarship in the Tenure, Promotion and Review Process*, M. E. Sharpe Publishing: Armonk, New York.

critical thinking, working in particular ways with literary, artistic, or other cultural artifacts? Or is there something unique about the humanities, as distinct from whatever tools they may borrow from other disciplines? The answers to these and related questions may vary significantly within a single department, much less within a university, a city, a culture; one person's truth is another's oppressor, and that there may be truths beyond any single approach to truth seems more than ever like a mirage. If we then ask the relatively modest question about digital technologies in the humanities classroom we are immediately enmeshed in the cultural, political, socioeconomic and intellectual underbrush: whose technology, for what ends, serving what purposes, benefiting whom, on the basis of what, and why?

Faced with such questions, pity the poor IT administrator who, we imagine, could only throw up her hands in dismay. If these humanities instructors cannot unequivocally say what they need or want, find me someone who can!

However, there is a second problem, we think, regarding the use of web-based technologies in the humanities classroom, and here that IT administrator may not be so innocently blameless. It is that the culture of IT departments varies significantly from those they serve, in theory, which can prevent the two cultures from communicating effectively.

Edward L Ayers has put the problem succinctly: "From the viewpoint of a professor... I understand some of the more obvious reasons for this resistance: shortages of time, money, and energy. In addition, I see more systemic reasons, ones that we might call "cultural": deeply patterned, deeply entrenched habits of thoughts and behavior. The problem is that the academic culture and the IT culture simply do not mix together well."⁷ As David G. Brown and Sally Jackson had observed earlier,

...because the IT culture is attuned to the integrated functioning of the whole organization, it is much more inclined to recognize the need for some organizationally legitimized decision making. In a world where choices are virtually infinite, technological innovators understand the importance of focus and of decisions that concentrate resources and effort.

Faculty culture, by contrast, is highly balkanized, a cacophony of specialized languages, with each faculty member speaking and thinking in idioms that relate more to the work of his or her discipline than to the general culture. Academics trust others who understand and speak their language. They live in a culture of local autonomy with each disciplinary subculture free to make its own choices about the value of any new idea.⁸

Ayers, as well as Brown and Jackson, specify faculty in general, not merely humanities faculty; and all three advocate careful listening as well as various cooperative strategies to overcome this gap. But since, as we have just noticed, the current state of the humanities works against any unproblematic agreement regarding first principles, academics in the humanities are unlikely to agree among themselves regarding IT issues, much less with IT departments; thoughtful listening on the part of all concerned, therefore, can have produced only the modest results we have seen thus

⁷ "The Academic Culture and the IT Culture: Their Effect on Teaching and Scholarship." *Educause Review*, November/December 2004, p. 51.

⁸ "Creating a Context for Consensus." *Educause Review*, July/August 2001, p. 50.

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3 Where to Now?

The values of the liberal West, that is-- respectful conversation, appreciating the other person's point of view, a careful review of one's own-- have not borne fruit-- if by "fruit" we mean significant integrations of digital technologies in, and lasting changes to, the humanities classroom. Which is why we would like to propose another way: to reexamine the humanities classroom from the ground up, and only *afterwards* inquire whether there are digital technologies that might be useful there.

Given contemporary doubts regarding foundations, we must remember that generalizations about the humanities are more than usually open to exception. On the other hand, we have to start somewhere, which is why an informal group of faculty and students at the University of San Diego, currently organized as CHAT (The Center for Humanities and Technology, <http://www.sandiego.edu/chat/>) has begun working on a kind of preliminary taxonomy of the humanities, with a view towards understanding what do, why we do it, and how digital technologies might (or might not) help. Despite the vexed state of the humanities, we argue that, in broad outline, it is possible to say enough about the goals and purposes of the humanities to ascertain whether digital technologies can be effectively used in the classroom. We can say, for example, that the humanities are, and always have been, about foundations; that "foundations" may be problematic, nonexistent or have wildly different interpretations lessens our capacity to talk about them not at all. By "foundations" we understand the social, philosophical, epistemological, artistic and intellectual taproots that mark any given culture, which leads us to our second claim: that the humanities are about *cultures* above all; how they encode themselves, understand themselves, express themselves, reveal themselves. We understand too that in studying cultures we are ourselves members of one (or more); that our understanding therefore will be imperfect, will change over time, will be challenged and will someday be obsolete, as our own cultures and those we study metamorphose over time. And we place our trust, finally, in what we actually do call critical thinking, for the sake of which we try to rid ourselves of preconceptions, biases, unconscious assumptions even if we know they must be there; even if, for example, our goal is to deconstruct some realization of some culture somewhere—including our own—what we rely upon is the method, the honesty, the skepticism, the phrasing as close to intention as we can make it and the truth as nearly as we can apprehend it.

It may well be that in making these claims we are describing the humanities in *Western* culture; if so, we hope members of other cultures will join us in the debate. In the meantime we put forward a simple claim: that these characterizations of the goals, purposes and intellectual methods of the humanities are sufficient to ask an equally simple question: if these characterizations are accurate, what would a (Western) humanities classroom look like?

Our first response is that nothing about the modern lecture hall, the smaller classroom or the seminar room follows from these considerations. They may follow from others—institutional needs, convenience, expense—but they do not follow from first principles.

In that case, what would?

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If we study foundational issues and/or conflicts within cultures...then we should do all we can to bring those cultures and those issues to life in the classroom. To an extent, of course, we already do this. The course readings are a start, but other documentary, visual and aural evidence is routinely available. But if we were to transform the classroom space *itself* into a realization of the culture under study...such that, while students study a culture they also *inhabit* it, using large scale digital displays to recreate the sights and sounds of that culture at the moment under study...

Andre J. Milne, first of all, has remarked what the availability of new, large-scale display areas might mean for the classroom:

“Many new technological devices that increase interaction take the form of peripherals augmenting conventional computing platforms. Of these, several are designed to accommodate group interactions and are implemented at “room-scale.” Some of the higher-priority considerations involve video displays, information capture, and spaces with memory...A number of interface systems allow direct interaction with large-format videodisplay screens through the use of pens or direct touch, while smaller-format touch tablets and tablet PCs can be projected onto larger displays to provide indirect opportunities. Interaction with large displays has typically been extended to the student’s desktop by using remote desktop applications or software packages that enable written annotation overlays.⁹

Putting this kind of technology into the humanities classroom has, in principle, the capacity to address the concerns of the humanities in a very direct and powerful way; and if he is right, it would also foster greater student interaction with the environment and thus with the concerns of the humanities. Notable experiments have already been undertaken with such systems; at the University of Sussex

...16 projectors...can be set up to create a 360 degree projected panorama - creating an immersive Imax-type environment. Tables fold down from the walls to create workshop areas, curtains can slide across to subdivide the area to create intimate group working spaces and coloured lights...create ambient mood settings. It's kind of like learning in a theatre environment. We...use the power of AV and other digital technologies that are used in museums, galleries and theatre spaces to create experiences that stimulate learners into engaging with the learning...The learning isn't just contained within a plasma screen at one end of the classroom, [students] are actually surrounded on all four sides by video projection and plasma screens, by surround sound, and coloured light.¹⁰

⁹ Milne, Andre J. “Entering the Interaction Age: Implementing a Future Vision for Campus Learning Spaces...Today.” *Educause Review* January/February 2007, 13-31.

¹⁰ JISC InfoNet. University of Sussex and University of Brighton/InQbate: The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Creativity. *Planning and Designing Technology-Rich Learning Spaces*, available at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/learning-space-design/more/case-studies/sussex-and-brighton/index_html/view

And William Dittoe has described a similar kind of experimental space at the University of Dayton.

The second floor of a new residence hall was set aside for additional classrooms. It became a test bed for an educational model involving intense student-faculty interaction, interdisciplinary teaching, and redefined "seat time." A new space model combined the studio concept with other teaming, seminar, and assembly areas. Pathways—spaces that normally function as hallways—were expanded to support continued learning opportunities, promote impromptu gatherings, and provide individual places for quiet reflection...the professor normally didn't lecture, but today she had prepared a series of photos, film clips, and cuts to Web sites that sprang up on the plasma screens.¹¹

Neither of these two projects—two among, now, many—focus exclusively on the humanities (to our knowledge, no such project yet exists) and both are, obviously, very expensive. But we can give one example of how these technologies might be used in the humanities classroom. The CHAT group is developing, based on work done at these two institutions as well as the FlatWorld project being developed at the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California (<http://ict.usc.edu/projects/flatworld/>), a proposal entitled "The Jazz Age: New York City 1925-1935." Taking advantage of the rich archive (visual, aural, and textual, largely in the public domain and available on the Web) we would construct portable (initially) screens, sound systems and large-scale interactive to surround students with the sights, sounds and textures of that place at that time. Depending on the instructor's goals, material would be displayed involving The Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance, and the various faces of Modernism (musical, architectural, visual and textual), and, using either laptops or those large-scale interactive displays, allow students, on assignment or on their own, to access additional material available on the web or even, conceivably, to assemble digital packages based on their own interests and the goals of the course. The material is inherently interdisciplinary and could be used in English, history, art, sociology or social psychology classes at the very least; in any case the point would be to create a profoundly visceral (because life-sized and immediate) experience of that culture at that moment, given that we would have, in effect, one or more habitable web pages, together with the ability, given access to the web, to access others or to construct one or more in response. And equipping existing classrooms with portable large scale displays as envisioned here would be much less expensive (though less capable) than the complete arrays described above. We would emphasize, moreover, that

(1) display technology is or soon will be capable of creating room-sized environments at increasingly affordable prices, possibly including, eventually, 3D display technologies;

(2) the web itself can be used to provide content, reducing the need for the instructor and/or IT personnel to produce it locally;

¹¹ Dittoe, William (2006). "Seriously Cool Places: The Future of Learner-Centered Built Environments," in Oblinger, Diana G, ed. *Learning Spaces*, available at <http://www.educause.edu/learningspaces>.

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(3) the content can be additive, with each class making its contribution, so that the course databases increases in size with each iteration;

(4) the content can readily be shared with other courses, departments or institutions, whether or not room-sized displays are available;

(5) though the content used in humanities classes would be used initially in humanities classes, the hardware need not be, allowing any discipline that so chooses to use the same equipment for different purposes.

This at least is the project we are working on (seeking grants for!) It is of course only one among potentially very many, but we put it forward not simply because we think the project is exciting in itself; it arises naturally from our (still developing) understanding of what the humanities exist to do. Whether it is doable or not in just this form, whether it will turn out to be affordable, and whether it is in fact what the humanities seek from digital technologies remains, of course, to be seen; but we are confident that we have at least developed these ideas in the right way in arguing from first principles.