



Can the Humanities survive distance learning?

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Introduction

By way of preface to my observations about the humanities and distance learning, let me make an important qualification. Scholars in the humanities have long benefited from digitalization and computer technology, and nothing I say is intended to downplay the value of digital archives of secondary and primary sources. Humanists use digital data bases to locate articles on cuckoldry in Shakespeare's late plays, they use digital text archives to gain access to variants of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, and they use email to communicate with scholars all over the world. In these ways, digitalization has enhanced research in the humanities, and I have no reason to doubt that this will continue to be the case.

The concern that lies behind my title does not reflect on these uses of the new technology. Instead, I am worried about two quite different matters. I am concerned, first, that if universities try to divide "the humanities" into "basic" and "advanced" skills so that the first can be taught in a distance format, then the very nature of the knowledge that the humanities can claim to produce will be undermined. This concern is related, but not identical, to a worry that, if humanities skills are divided into two, then the value accorded to skills considered "advanced" will decline. Even if the humanities survive distance learning, in other words, the humanities that will remain may differ in crucial ways from the work we now associate with this mode of inquiry.



Humanities in the medieval scriptorium

My second concern is that, if universities devote resources to developing distance units (in continuing education, for example, or professional studies), they will inevitably begin to promote subjects that can be conveyed in this format. In most cases, these subjects will be disciplines or professional subjects where "information" is transmitted and in which a student's success can be judged in quantifiable terms. If universities develop distance units, in other words, they will need to develop and market courses that are appropriate to distance instruction. Even if the revenue obtained from distance units is initially used to underwrite the less lucrative, more costly, in-class instruction that I think essential to the humanities, in the long run, institutional inertia will tend to privilege the revenue-generating unit over its more costly counterpart. Thus my concerns are two-fold: first, I fear that, if brought into humanities instruction, the pedagogical methods best suited to distance learning will undermine the premises upon which this mode of inquiry is based; and second, I worry that if universities promote distance learning ventures—even at the periphery of the liberal arts core—then the momentum of the university as a whole will gradually shift to those disciplines that are amenable to distance instruction.

I'll take up these worries one at a time, but, first, I need to clarify what I mean by "the humanities." For the purposes of this discussion, I'm not simply referring to the traditional humanities disciplines: literary studies,



language studies, history, philosophy, and art and music history. I don't want simply to define "the humanities" as a certain group of disciplines because some of these disciplines are moving away from the mode of inquiry I associate with the humanities (analytic philosophy, for example), while other disciplines are suspended between a scientific and a humanities paradigm of knowledge-production (anthropology and linguistics come to mind). Instead of simply invoking the university division of the humanities, I want to emphasize a certain mode of inquiry that has historically been associated with these disciplines. The work associated with this mode of inquiry includes conserving, analyzing, appreciating, interrogating, and interpreting cultural materials from all periods and cultures. I want to argue that this work does produce knowledge as well as conserve culture. Unlike the knowledge generated by scientific and social scientific disciplines, however, the knowledge produced in humanities disciplines is not progressive or even, necessarily, cumulative. The knowledge produced through a humanities mode of inquiry, moreover, does not claim to be exclusively object-centered, as scientific knowledge purports to be. Instead, humanities knowledge is partly about the subject who conserves, analyzes, appreciates, interrogates, and interprets cultural objects. More precisely, humanities knowledge is about the relationship between the subject who conserves and interprets and the objects that are being conserved or interpreted. Thus, humanities knowledge is inter-subjective knowledge; it is about the relationship between the present and the past, for example; and it can challenge the binary opposition between subject and object in ways that scientific knowledge can (or at least will) not.

Because the mode of inquiry I am associating with the humanities is inter-subjective, it entails self-consciousness on the part of the knowledge-producer. The work necessary to produce this kind of knowledge is not limited to the collection and transmission of information, nor can it be tested in ways that yield quantifiable results. Students learn how to reflect on themselves and their relation to cultural materials partly by reading examples of such inter-subjective, self-conscious interactions with culture and partly by participating in conversations that promote self-awareness and critical insight. What psychoanalysts call transference is an important component of student participation in such learning projects because the kind of work I am describing entails risk—not so much the risk of being wrong as the risk of self-revelation. In such conversations, a good teacher will not only promote transference as an aid to risk-taking (the student reveals herself because she desires the teacher's love); in such an encounter, the good teacher will also control the student's transference, so that the projection that enables self-reflection does not ricochet into its paranoid or self-critical counterpart.

2. Distance learning and the Humanities

Anyone who has fallen in love with an email correspondent will know that the technology of distance learning does nothing to curtail transference, of course, and I have tried to imagine a learning situation in which electronic cathexis would enhance humanities knowledge-production. But humanities work is only partly about eliciting emotion from the student-subject. More importantly, humanities work entails disciplining that emotion into a studied, studious engagement with cultural materials, and this requires someone who can direct inquiry, ask questions, call on others in the class, manage and redirect individual emotion so that it becomes impersonal, or, as I have already suggested, intersubjective. When it is conceptualized as an intersubjective project, in other words, humanities work requires a teacher—at least until the point at which the student learns how to be her own teacher, and how to make cultural materials her classmates and interlocutors. When I think about the dynamics of email, which entail both temporal deferral and a false impression of intimacy, I cannot imagine how a distance-teacher could elicit emotion in such a way as to direct and manage it. I cannot imagine how the student could feel sufficiently engaged to want to take the necessary risk. Is she does become engaged, I cannot imagine how a teacher could manage that engagement sight unseen. In short, I cannot imagine how a distance teacher could do anything except correct errors in the information the student supplies.

The obvious response to my worries is to say that the kind of work I have described cultivates and requires "advanced" humanities skills, which would never be the business of teaching in a distance format. Just as the "basic" skill necessary to solve problem sets in calculus could be taught more efficiently in a distance format, this argument goes, so the basic skills that are preliminary to such inter-subjective analysis could be taught through digital technology. Such a division of labor would free the literature professor, for example, from having to teach basic writing. Such a division of labor would free the professor of history from having to recite dates and test her students about famous names. If humanities professors could assume that students had acquired basic writing skills and mastered certain data before they entered the classroom, wouldn't that mean that the kind of inter-subjectivity I have described would be easier to cultivate, since language skills and facts would already be at every student's command?



Even though this is a tempting picture of humanities work liberated from the shackles of basic instruction, I don't think it should seduce us with false promises. I am willing to entertain the possibility that one could teach "basic" writing skills through a distance format, even though the conventions of acceptable word usage and grammar are constantly changing. I am also willing to accept that one could compile bodies of information that might be considered essential to the various humanities disciplines and that one could convey this information in a format that could be tested in a distance learning mode. What I am not willing to entertain, much less accept, is that subdividing the humanities disciplines into two kinds of skills—basic and advanced—would preserve the mode of inquiry I have described. In other words, to argue that one language skill—the basic language skill—simply follows rules and conveys information, while another language skill—the advanced use of language—expresses an inter-subjective relationship between the desire of the speaker and the discipline of grammar sets up a false dichotomy that undermines the epistemological claims inherent in the mode of humanities inquiry. If we divide language use into two skills that differ in kind, in other words, then we imply that some language acts (the "basic" ones) defy the principle of inter-subjectivity that I have associated with the humanities. We have no theoretical account of language that allows us to make this claim, nor can we defend its corollary: if we divide language use into two skills, we are implying that some kinds of knowledge-production are not about the subject-who-writes but only about the object being described. The same principle holds in the case of the argument about information. If we agree that it is possible to compile a body of facts that are not interpretive or the products of interpretation, then we are assuming that inter-subjective interpretation is not essential to humanities knowledge-production but secondary or optional. As I've already said, we could (and often do) entertain such ideas, but when we do, we start down the slippery slope that would eventually assimilate knowledge-production in the humanities to its scientific counterpart. (Everything I've said about inter-subjective knowledge in the humanities could be said about scientific knowledge, but, at this point, few scientists are willing to acknowledge this epistemology. This means that theorists in the humanities pose the only challenge to the objectivism that currently governs other knowledge projects in the university.)



The pleasure of reading

Let me be clear about what I am saying. I am arguing, on the one hand, that what is often called "basic writing" is inseparable from the work I've associated with the humanities. On the other hand, I'm also arguing that the humanistic activities of conserving, appreciating, interrogating, and interpreting cultural materials is inseparable from writing, which is never simply "basic" but always already interpretive and expressive. One simply can't conserve, analyze, appreciate, interrogate or interpret anything without a medium that links one subject to another. In the humanities, the medium of expression is language and all language is expressive. One's ability to think in language, and to marshal language that negotiates desire, is therefore inseparable from one's ability to do humanistic work. Language use that is simply "correct" (as in grammatically correct) is not so much the basis upon which more sophisticated work is founded but part of the process by which one learns to shape and discipline inquiry inter-subjectively.

If we begin to use a technology that leads us to conceptualize some languages uses as "basic," then we are in danger of imagining that only explicitly interpretive or expressive language uses engage inter-subjectively with others. Accepting this false dichotomy is the first step toward relegating what may initially seem like "advanced" language skills and knowledge projects to the dustheap of the purely subjective—that is, to what is



now thought of as worthless because tainted by subjective desire. The mode of inquiry and the theory of knowledge I have associated with the humanities provide the only bases for a defense of a conceptualization of knowledge that links the knowing subject to the objects she seeks to know. If we allow the mode of inquiry deployed by the humanities to be subdivided, so that its “basic” components can be taught by rote, we risk losing the only credible alternative to an objectivist epistemology (and everything that follows from it).

If basic writing is separated from other uses of language, moreover, then students will have little incentive to cultivate more sophisticated skills—unless, of course, they elect to enroll in advanced humanities courses. The tendency to devalue humanistic inquiry and sophisticated language use might well intensify as learning ventures are further subdivided—into campus-based education, where classroom interaction and advanced humanities classes would still be possible, and distance learning, where students would have their grammar corrected and their fact-retention tested. Following the paradoxical logic of scarcity, of course, it might well be the case that, as increasing numbers of students received their education through distance-learning venues, the social status of all campus-learning ventures (including advanced humanities work) would initially increase (relative to “mass” education). In the long run, however, the value of advanced humanities work would not necessarily be enhanced, despite its relative scarcity, for, on campuses, humanities work would continue to compete with the sciences, whose ability to attract government and corporate funding virtually guarantees its continuing prestige. Thus, I can imagine a situation in which even though advanced humanities work was available to a smaller proportion of the educational community, its value would continue to decline—because, having jettisoned its connection to basic skills, it would seem like a frivolous luxury whose knowledge claims could not rival those of the sciences.

3. A question of prestige

My second worry is related to this picture, in which the prestige of the humanities plummets as universities meet their funding shortfalls by developing revenue-generating distance-learning units that privilege “basic” skills and information-based, typically professional subjects. As we all know, NYU has just launched such a venture in the School of Continuing Education. NYUonline is a for-profit educational subsidiary that initially offers non-credit courses, marketed primarily to “corporate universities,” other corporate training programs, and individuals who are seeking specific credentials. Beginning in spring 2000 (that’s now), NYUonline is offering courses that can lead to a Certificate in Management Training. The offerings are expected to expand in the near future, to include courses in nursing, accounting, finance, marketing, real estate, and an array of advanced courses in information technology, e-commerce, and internet security.



Presential class

In the short term, as I have already suggested, and if an administration decides to redistribute profits, a university like NYU can use the revenues generated by such units to underwrite cash-poor educational divisions, like the humanities. For this reason, and because the kind of block budgeting and overhead cost agreements typical of government support for higher education are things of the past, we should be happy about our for-profit distance units. As a student of the history of administration and bookkeeping, however, I am worried that, in the long run, the tail of distance learning will wag the dog of liberal education. Even if administrators are willing to redistribute profits to units that cannot generate revenue, I worry that university officials will generalize the cost-basis mode of analysis typically used to evaluate productivity in distance learning units to other units of the university, where scholarly productivity and teaching have traditionally provided the measures of achievement. I worry that, because of the distance-learning unit’s ability to generate



revenue, universities will have to direct more resources to developing and distributing courses appropriate for the distance learning format. I worry that, as these programs proliferate, it will be tempting to conceptualize education tout court as a series of administrable components, which can be provided by separate, specialized, and most-often part-time laborers. Outsourcing components of the educational “product,” like grading or answering student questions, is not far behind breaking the educational process into discrete components. In fact, CUNY is already toying with the idea of outsourcing its remedial (or “basic”) writing work; and distance learning ventures like NextU.com depend on subcontracting facets of the educational process in order to turn a profit.

I don't want to stray too far into this dystopic vision of the virtual university, because my topic is more narrowly the impact such transformations might have on the humanities. Nor do I want to give the impressions that I am a technological Luddite or that I am blind to the implications of decreasing federal and state funding for higher education. I simply want to register the fears that developments within institutions like this one have their own inertia, and that technology-based innovations (like distance learning), as well as administrative procedures (like management and assessment), have their own logics too. It is certainly possible to resist the logic that would convert every facet of educational work into activities amenable to subdivision and cost-basis analysis, just as it is possible to resist the bifurcation of the humanities into “basic” and “advanced” skills. To resist these developments, however, we must be critical; we must conserve what is valuable about our heritage, interpret the implications of the technologies we deploy, and be self-conscious about the values we want a university education to promote. The thought I want to leave you with is that the mode of inquiry associated with the humanities may be the only practice capable of cultivating this critical attentiveness to the implications of the bases of our own technological and financial success. The question we might want to ask now, as this university enters its for-profit distance learning future, is not whether the humanities can survive distance learning, but whether the university can survive the demise of the humanities, which an uncritical embrace of distance learning might inadvertently hasten.

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