Is Linking Thinking?  
Addressing and Assessing Scholarship in a Digital Era

Our analog world is being replaced with a digital one that at times replicates the features and functions of its predecessor and at other times completely turns the past on its head. Pixar made award-winning movies without calling into question the notion of what it means to be a Hollywood film. Netflix eviscerated the video-rental store. It is within this uneven and bewildering moment that those of us in higher education need to consider our approach to this new thing called digital scholarship.

The words we choose to frame this question are fraught. Digital scholarship? Digital humanities? Whose agenda are we supporting when we choose one turn of phrase instead of another? What happens to the “regular” humanities curriculum if it is replaced by a digital humanities curriculum? Will the story of digital humanities prove to be the story of Pixar or Netflix?

Here are some tricky questions that tenure committees may need to answer in the coming semesters:

- Can a blog count as scholarship?
- Is open peer review as valid as double-blind peer review?
- Does scholarship that can be read only onscreen count as scholarship?
- Do the terms of evaluation for “born digital” require a whole new vocabulary, or can new forms of scholarship be evaluated effectively within existing frameworks?

Evaluative frameworks are still in development within organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association and have not yet been fully tested in tenure cases on most campuses. These new frameworks will shape an institution’s faculty, its curriculum, and ultimately the campus library and technology needs. In the end, avoiding these questions will be difficult as a campus develops its digital scholarship strategy. Some of these questions may seem like threats. Others will take the form of opportunity.

**Threats.** Just a decade ago, humanities scholarship was relatively inexpensive to support. Give the English and History Departments an Internet connection, a word processor, and a subscription to JSTOR and the MLA bibliography, and they were all set. In contrast, today’s digital humanities scholars can be as expensive to support as the hard scientists. Now it’s not just the chemist or the computer scientist but also the English professor who is clamoring for more storage, more computer cycles, more help with compiling programs, and sustainable data-management schemes. These start-ups have not yet been factored into most operating budgets. Combine that with the general skepticism about the long-term prospects for humanities of any sort, and the prospects for this new form of scholarship seem bleak at best.

**Opportunities.** The U.S. Department of Labor projects that 65 percent of the U.S. children in kindergarten today will be employed in jobs that currently do not exist. As a nation and as an increasingly interconnected global society, we face massive challenges: climate change, globalization, the collapse of the social contract between employer and employee. How do we make sense of these transformations? How do we develop sensible, humane, and sustainable answers to these daunting changes that have life-altering implications for us and our children? For students, there may be short-term advantages to acquiring very specific and employable skills during a college career. However, in the long-term, students are likely better served by acquiring the general capabilities needed to navigate a rapidly changing future that demands a complex set of skills extending beyond the “merely” technical. Is there an answer to be found in a form of education and scholarship that powerfully combines a technical capability with foundational questions about identity, society, and culture? Some argue that digital scholarship can show why the humanities and the liberal arts matter more than they ever have. Others argue that the humanities and the liberal arts can be taught effectively without all of this expensive technology.

In the debate around digital scholarship, we have the perfect storm. On the one hand, we have the conservatism in the culture of most higher education institutions. On the other, we have board-level anxieties arising from the upstart challenges posed by the world of MOOCs, badges, and other emerging forms of external competition. As Clayton Christensen has taught us, disruptive innovations from outside can blind us from seeing new forms of competition for what they really are. Much as the American steel industry failed to understand the threat posed by the rebar produced by the Japanese mini-mill platform, so too higher education may be unable to see the siege from these new interlopers. But let’s make sure this crisis doesn’t push us to place the emphasis on the wrong questions. As we consider the
impact that the innovations that will follow MOOCs will have on our institutions, we need to think long and hard about how we, within our institutions and our various professional guilds, will adapt to the threats to our livelihoods and our institutions posed by these disaggregating technologies that disrupt every single means of production. The plight of digital scholarship may seem small in the grand scheme of the future of higher education. Yet this story could serve as the canary in the coalmine— as a harbinger of things to come, another market opportunity we may unwittingly cede to disruptive innovation from outside our walls.

The world of digital scholarship is a world of both promise and peril. Most schools have not yet significantly invested in this area. Are such investments merely life-support for a dying patient, or are they strategic in an existential fight for the soul of the university? The choices, the conversations, and the debates all connect in an integral way to the future of scholarship, scholarly communication, and classroom instruction.

Just as Pixar brought to the movie screen an experience previously unattainable using the traditional techniques of animation, so too there are promises associated with the transformation of scholarship enabled by the expressive and computational power of technology. We can ask new questions of large bodies of texts; we can visualize ancient ruins; we can perform pattern recognition across large bodies of visual materials to reveal underlying themes; we can embed rich media—audio, video, animation—within the very texts of our arguments, all while making scholarship more public and accessible than ever before. These new modes of argumentation and representation may allow us to re-enliven the discussion around humanities, may allow for new forms of collaboration across disciplines and among institutions that in turn could serve as a catalyst for important new working relationships necessary for the continued relevance of our institutions in the 21st century. While there is some urgency to deciding on how one chooses to approach the bewildering and accelerating change that is coming from outside, there are also difficult choices to make: is it the humanities and liberal arts or the digital humanities and the digital liberal arts that will prepare our students for a world of globalization, climate change, and all of the attendant challenges?

Notes
4. For an excellent analysis of the challenges of evaluating born digital scholarship, and of the threats and opportunities that new forms of peer review pose for our systems of evaluation, see Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s blog “Planned Obsolescence”: http://www.plannedobsolescence.net/about/.
5. See the work of Anvil Academic (http://www.anvilacademic.org), a digital-only press that is grappling with this vexing question of how to provide authority and legibility to these new forms.
7. See, for example, the Modern Language Association’s “Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media,” January 2012, http://www.mla.org/guidelines_evaluation_digital.
8. For a provocative proposal that would address the current crisis in the humanities, see Toby Miller, Blow Up the Humanities (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

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