Tenets of the Liberal Arts: Complex Thinking in the Digital Age

In January 1993, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) released Mosaic, the web browser that led to the Internet boom of the 1990s. Within a couple of months, one of this article’s co-authors, Elliott Shore, started to teach a series of continuing-education workshops at the Rutgers School of Information and Library Science to help introduce web-searching to librarians. There was something eerie about those sessions: the librarians—and the faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where workshops were also conducted—seemed to forget everything they had once known about information. These were people who had been trained in searching techniques, who understood the way research was conducted, and who could decipher what worked and what didn’t, what was relevant and what wasn’t, what was of good and what was of dubious quality. As they looked at the screens that Mosaic offered up, the fascination with this revolutionary browsing capacity seemed to wipe away their critical sense.

Twenty-one years later, the current debate about technology upending the liberal arts tradition entails a kind of collective amnesia similar to that evident at the dawn of the digital revolution. We seem to have forgotten what we already knew: that we need to bring all of our critical capacities to the promise of linked information technologies and we need to bring the liberal arts methods and rigor to the digital environment.

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One aspect of the debate is the insistence that the form is the content, that the method of delivery is the chief ingredient, physical parts: boxes of sorts that more naturally lend a helping conceptual hand to deconstructing the (usually “leafy,” “manicured,” and “isolated”) campus and reassembling it virtually. Another aspect of the debate is the insistence that the form is the content, that the method of delivery is the chief mode in which an idea can be understood. The promise of the digital is not in its contradistinction to and distancing from the non-digital but, rather, in its extending and complicating the digital.

Another reason for the ongoing debate that pits digital technology against the liberal arts tradition is the concomitant persistence in defining “the college” by virtue of its component, physical parts: boxes of sorts that more naturally lend a helping conceptual hand to deconstructing the (usually “leafy,” “manicured,” and “isolated”) campus and reassembling it virtually. Another aspect of the debate is the insistence that the form is the content, that the method of delivery is the chief mode in which an idea can be understood. The promise of the digital is not in its contradistinction to and distancing from the non-digital but, rather, in its extending and complicating the digital. This is also something we already know but seem to be forgetting as we enjoy or vilify what is on the screen.

One of the more prominent and passionate discussions involves MOOCs, online courses that can enroll more than 100,000 students at a time. Isn’t this an improvement on the traditional model, and won’t it disrupt that model to, perhaps, a breaking point? The honest answer is “possibly,” but the assumptions driving MOOCs are conservatively rooted in older precepts of space and time. The “classroom” is just that: a room, a bounded space. A MOOC allows for much less bounded parameters between student and teacher and between student and student. In the liberal arts, whether practiced in a small college or a large university, the classroom—which can be a combination of desks and chairs and also online discussion groups and spaces to interact outside the bricks-and-mortar institution—is a framing notion. The transcendent aspects of a course well taught lie in the interplay of minds within this space.

Salient aspects of a liberal arts education include the following:

- The ability to hold different, sometime conflicting thoughts in the pursuit of understanding a phenomenon
- A rigorous engagement with ideas, one that will not settle for soft platitudes, keywords, catchphrases, or labels
- An ability to work between and among different disciplines and the lenses through which they organize the world
- A willingness to tackle big problems
- A level of comfort in knowing that to fail is often the rarest of beneficial experiences
- An articulate and informed means of communicating
- An almost intemperate willingness to learn through life

An idealistic set of presumptions? No, these are qualities of character and engagement that build on the pursuit of learning and discovery within and beyond the campus. Most MOOCs, with varying degrees of efficiency and effectiveness, package known information and pass it along to an astonishing number of otherwise disadvantaged students. Though admirable, this is a reductive appropriation of a liberal arts classroom and does not approximate the intention of the original. The space is the least of it: reformulation of self within the world is closer to the point.

Another liberal arts commodity that has been appropriated as a target of the disruptive potential of the new technologies is the library. Its fate has been decreed for decades, most often not ending well in the sense that it will be replaced by digital collections, a formulaic swap of physical to virtual that also misses a critical tenet, at least one that needs to be more forcefully stated: Who, really, wants a digital version of a 20th-century library?

We are awash in millions of books and journals, with a high degree of redundancy across academic institutions. Perhaps justified in the non-digital environment that reaches back to Babylon, this expensive, competitive circumstance is indefensible in a digital ecology. In addition to the vast array of printed matter, we continue to proliferate projects that create digital content but that are often siloed and uncommunicative. Further, we pay exorbitant fees to lease content from providers,
We are twenty-plus years into the digital revolution, a period of time often used as the marker of a generation. This is the typical amount of time that it takes for us to see the contours of the possible, the radical, and the potential of that in which we are engaged—to weigh, consider, and evaluate as we imagine a more coherent future, in this case a future based on a rollicking journey of digital innovation. We can see now what we could not see a generation ago.

In the EDUCAUSE Review 2014 E-Content columns, several important projects were introduced: the Digital Public Library of America, Unizin, SHARE, and the HathiTrust. These projects represent key facets of the academic cycle of knowledge: preservation, a secure research space, an open library with links to potentially hundreds of millions of objects of our cultural heritage, and consortially managed cloud-based services to improve teaching and learning. As projects, they are all compelling. As interrelated aspects of a new digital ecology in service to higher education, they collectively represent a new, bold venture that could have transformative value for future generations of students—and here “students” refers to all of us.

Instead of thinking of the web as woefully inadequate, we can then begin to focus on how to prepare and position students and faculty to navigate and learn from the web, facilitating the formation of collectives through which everyone can learn.

But if such an environment is to be built, we must remember what we already know. It must be framed by the tenets and methods of the liberal arts, becoming an extension of our finest traditions of inculcating curiosity and rigor, elegantly passing human understanding from one generation to the next, and acknowledging that each generation will contribute to, and possibly upend, that knowledge.

Note

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