

Coming Down Out of the Ivory Tower: The State and Fate of the Humanities

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Abstract: *The study of Humanities, despite its ongoing importance, has been in decline for decades. Having been described as ‘myopic’, ‘rigid’, and its researchers being considered ‘in their ivory tower’, it is no wonder that the study of Humanities has fallen out of favor with mainstream society; and thus its potential student pool. Humanists have been considered out of touch with their students for so long, that the students no longer see the benefit of taking Humanities courses. Defining what constitutes the field of Humanities and the necessity for its study has also been a point of contention among scholars and students alike since its inception. As a lack of an agreed upon clear definition continues to be elusive and with the emergence of digital humanities, potential humanists are discouraged from entering the field because they cannot see how they can contribute. As the politicization of education increases, humanities courses have over time been relegated to ‘general education’ course the only status and have had their department funding cut. As necessary as Humanities are for the perpetuation of democracy and culture, it is of utmost importance to redefine and reclaim the field for layman and academic alike.*

Keywords: *academia, democracy, digital humanities, humanities, pedagogy*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of Humanities, despite its ongoing importance, has been in decline for decades. Studies analyzed by Holden (1985) [1] and studies conducted by Armitage et. al (2013) [2] both offer trends showing degrees within the field of Humanities reduced by half across 20 and 40 years, respectively. Having been described as ‘myopic’, ‘rigid’, and its researchers being considered stuck ‘in their ivory tower’, it is no wonder that the study of Humanities has fallen out of favor with mainstream society and its potential student pool. Humanists have been considered out of touch with their students for so long, that the students no longer see the benefit of taking Humanities courses. The students also feel that their opinions in regards to what would be the best way for them to learn and understand Humanities are going unheard (Sabirov, 2000) [3]. Defining what constitutes the field of Humanities and the necessity for its study has also been a point of contention among scholars and students alike since its inception. As a lack of an agreed upon clear definition continues to elude, potential humanists are discouraged from entering the field because they cannot see how they can contribute.

These issues are not completely the fault of humanists and their potential students. As the politicization of education increases, humanities courses have over time been relegated to ‘general education’ course the only status and have had their department funding cut. As the idea of education for national economic gain (Nussbaum 3) [4] spreads, fields such as Humanities face budget cuts while quantifiably profitable career fields and trades see budget increases. This work will look at what Humanities means, the impact of that definition (or lack thereof) on the state of its study, as well as other important factors that influence the current state of Humanities. It will also discuss the emergence of digital humanities and its contribution to the field. Finally, this author will offer their research and empirically based suggestions on what can be done to reignite interest in the study of humanities and the restoration of democracy in the humanities.

II. That Which Cannot be Named: The Fraught Task of Defining the Humanities

Carlos Leone (2006) [5] defines the Humanities within Kant’s definition in his work *The Contest of the Faculties*. Written during the Enlightenment, Kant divides the Humanities into fields of historical and rational knowledge. This included “Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts, Language Studies, Life Sciences, Exact Sciences, and so on... It constitutes the sum of knowledge available in a society...It is the model of an enlightened

society” (266). This Kantian model saw Humanities as the critical counterpart to the sciences, a keeper of tradition and culture while providing the humanist link between science and society. Leone also notes that Kant distinguished the Faculties between “those that are directly profitable to the government, and the one that is not as interesting to the political powers and, therefore, can deal with its interests more as it sees fit” (265). It is the freedom of Humanities that cannot be quantified that has contributed to its decline in interest among university administration.

Ullman (1946) [6] highlights the vagueness of the term ‘humanities’. Noting that there is such a vast array of connotations that one should preface their particular definition, he states: “It is all things to some men, and only a few things to others but these few things are priceless” (301). Ullman also calls attention to the synonymous use of humanities with liberal arts before settling on a definition of the “sum total of man’s activities” (302). Both Ullman and Leone refer to the disciplines considered part of Humanities as those essentially ‘left over’ from the other disciplines of the time, namely Law, Medicine, and some Social Sciences. These were English, foreign languages, philosophy, music, art, and history, according to Ullman (303).

Jay (2010) [7] also notes the disputed term. To him, it ranges from the classical liberal arts to the interdisciplinary study that occurs today. He is also the only author noted in the research other than Alford & Elden (2013) to broach the topic of marginalization of race, class, and gender by Humanities. Traditionally studying the ‘canon’ of white, elitist men, humanist scholars base their definition of what should be considered academic off of this lack of inclusion. Included in this more contemporary and inclusive definition, Jay points to this marginalization in addition to the increase in professional schools and science fields as a reason for the “...steady decline in institutional support and prestige...” (52).

As technology becomes more and more prevalent in everyday life, education has become accessible to a greater number of people. This has changed the definition of how the humanities are studied. Out of this has come the study of digital humanities, which has also had an effect on what it means to study Humanities. The next section discusses the intersection of humanities and digital humanities, and how it relates to the state of Humanities, as well as the overall state of the study of Humanities.

III. Out of the Ivory Towers and into Technology: The State of Humanities and the Emergence of Digital Humanities

As previously stated, degrees in the field of Humanities have decreased by about half over the last 40 years (Holden, 1985, Armitage et. al, 2013). The study conducted by Armitage et al was specific for Harvard University’s Humanities program, but the results are parallel to those at other universities across the country. They start by noting that from 1966-2010, completed Bachelor’s degrees in Humanities fell from 12% to 7%, most of this happening between 1966-1987 (7). It is worth mentioning here that this dramatic downfall coincides with the Civil Rights, Women’s, and Gay Rights movements. There is a strong possibility that due to the lack of clear definition of Humanities and its contribution back to society, people who would have entered the field instead entered sociological and social justice fields, which more concretely outlined their contribution to society. They also note a decline in Humanities concentrators in addition to a decline in enrollment in Humanities courses. These drops in enrollment are steeper when History is included (36-20% instead of 24-17%). This also caused a decline in enrollment in General Education classes, as a majority of Humanities classes are general education requirements.

When accounting for the overall decline, Harvard dismisses the notion that its financial aid or the need to find immediate job security upon graduation as reasons for the loss of what it calls “would be Humanists” (8). They cite the social sciences as the reason that many students are drawn away from Humanities, almost blaming them. Armitage et al. do note that student satisfaction is higher in the humanities concentration than it is in others and that once declared, students remain faithful to the major in impressive numbers (93% in 2011) (9). In their survey, they also found that “intellectual curiosity and opportunity to contribute positively to society are primary motivators” (9). This indicates a predisposition towards community engagement and civic mindedness in students that can be utilized in a community collaborative academic service learning environment.

Alford & Elden (2013) [8] discuss the role and state of Humanities in the community college curriculum, where “Workforce training has become the mantra of college presidents and politicians...” (81). They also state that this leads to “...advocates of technical education in the community colleges questioning the utility of courses in the humanities...” (79). Alford & Elden report the same experience of humanities enrollment declining for decades and cite the main issue being the lack of marginalized voices in the canon (79-80). They believe that by introducing these narratives in the classroom, they can prepare today’s students to understand and think critically about these groups and why they are oppressed (80). This is particularly

important, considering the student population attending community college are often marginalized themselves, whether it be for race, class, gender, ability, or age. The decrease in courses in humanities in favor of technical certifications and workforce training “curriculum in most community colleges is devolving toward an educational model of passivity and inequality” (81); the opposite of what Alford & Elden suggest for the future of Humanities.

The emergence of digital humanities has grown both out of the increased technological access and as a do-it-yourself solution to departmental budget cuts and changing needs for scholarly access and communication. This access has helped with the ‘elitist’ view of Humanities by emphasizing images and dialogue that can be taken or written by the common person. According to Liu (2010) [9], the digital humanities not only encompasses the older humanities disciplines, it also includes design, visual, and media arts (409). In this article, he examines the meaning of digital humanities within “the relation of the digital humanities to the humanities generally” (410). He equates them to “a shadow play for a future form of the humanities that wishes to include what contemporary society values about the digital without losing its soul to other domains of knowledge work that have gone digital...” (410). Liu discusses the tradition of non-collaboration in Humanities, positing that the digital humanities are a step forward in encouraging collaboration, which may help end the stagnation in the field. The contributors to *Hacking the Academy* [10] also highlight this instant sharing and collaboration as a means of jumpstarting the curriculum and moving it forward into the present. Throughout the book, the authors turn different contributing factors to the current down state of Humanities and turn them into do-it-yourself opportunities for instant feedback and communication in the field.

IV. Putting the ‘Human’ Back in Humanities: What Can be Done to Turn the Tide and Re-Engage Students

There are several key shifts that need to occur for the humanities to regain some traction in both the academic and public spheres and the interest of the students. One of the most important and first things that need to be done is that the field as a whole needs to reconsider its apprehension to change. This includes re-examining the canon of authoritative texts on the humanities. Stock [11] writes: “Humanities methods have been extraordinarily stable over something like five centuries; all attempts to introduce alternatives have been successfully rebuffed” (1762). Bradford [12], in his article, states: “However, we must turn to philosophy to understand the basic errors lurking behind the complaint that Classical studies are out of date” (100). He also notes it is useful to “offer some check upon the variety of the forms of pride that have led the disciplines away from their proper channels” (101). The lack of inclusive research on marginalized people in Humanities when writing this paper is also another signifier of the need for Humanities to broaden its horizons. Human existence in itself comes in a variety of forms, which makes for a variety of histories, art, expressions of language and writing, and or course, film, music, and other digital arts. Even philosophy is not a static field. As plastic as human existence is (Williams) [13], the field of Humanities should be just as transparent and malleable. Humanities have to apply its process of critical thinking about culture to its own culture.

The second factor is accessibility to learning humanities. Part of the reason for the decline of interest in Humanities is because of its elitism. Inherent in this issue is also classism. The origin of Humanities was created by elitist thinkers who also had the privilege to be able to obtain a higher education. This still persists today in both the public and private university atmosphere. Private universities, which tend to have larger Humanities programs, are also expensive to attend and are largely comprised of highly institutionally educated white professors teaching largely white upper middle-class students. Although there are more women attending these schools than there used to, there are not nearly as many ethnic, differently abled or queer students at these universities. Even in the public universities, where the ratios of diversity are a little higher, there are still a disproportionate amount of white middle-class students than poor, queer, and/or people of color.

The endeavor of educating the poor and people in prison in the humanities has been taken up and analyzed separately by Frank Cioffi [13] and Earl Shorris [14]. In his article, Cioffi shares his methodology of teaching humanities courses in prison. Sharing the similar issue of having to make the case for teaching Humanities in an environment where learning skills that have a greater marketability upon release are preferred and less costly (50). Considering the role of the college professor in prison as the “link between two worlds: the educated middle class and the largely lower-class, minority populated segment of society that makes up our prisons” (50), Cioffi shares his insight into balancing university classroom methods with methods necessary in such a restricted environment. In his book, which was inspired by a conversation with an inmate in a women’s prison during a visit to conduct research, Shorris writes about his experience and methodology designing and implementing Humanities programs in poor areas all over the world.

The third is the incorporation of service learning into the program, which can actually enhance the accessibility factor in reaching potential students. Jay notes: “Many faculty and students have testified to the excitement of such collaborative projects and the prospect they offer for rejuvenating humanities education and salvaging the reputation of the humanities with the public” (55). One person Jay interviewed for his article stated: “...the outreach model reinforces conventional academic and public conceptions about the legitimate production and ownership of knowledge. A vital practice of the humanities, we believe, depends upon the breakdown of this hierarchy and this conception.” (55). Believing in this methodology as a means of bridging the rest of society with the ‘ivory tower’ university academic, Jay recognizes the setbacks that may prevent a professor from wanting or having the budget to create a service learning course. Admitting these programs are “among the first targets for budget cuts” (57), he then makes the argument for and provides solutions to common beliefs and outdated opinions about academic service learning and scholarship. He argues that “Successful community engagement requires critical reflection on gender, sexuality, diversity, and multiculturalism” (58), and that these courses create community collaboration, allowing for originally underserved youth to see they have access and purpose in higher education (58).

Sandy (2013) [16], in her article, writes: “This participation addresses community defined needs; integrates local and expert knowledge; includes academic texts, reflection and hands-on work; and may include explicit goals for citizenship and character development as well as aspirations for social justice” (308). A former community organizer, she has a solid perspective on why service learning should be integrated into the Humanities curriculum. She discusses the Sophist history of the humanities and its effect on the further development of humanities during the Enlightenment. She notes the shift in the study of Humanities during this time, in which it became integrated more with science, set the stage for academic service learning to flourish in the field. By bringing in a new “*public, pragmatic philosopher’s paradigm*” (313), Humanists opened the door to community collaboration.

Another key emerging factor is the issue of acceptance of the growing field of digital humanities within traditional humanities. All of the aforementioned suggestions to improve the field are present here. The digital humanities are more inclusive than traditional humanities, are more accessible, and can be incorporated into a service learning curriculum. In his article, Jeff Rice [17] outlines how the field of digital humanities can improve itself as it continues to emerge, and shows traditional humanities scholars how they fit into the picture. He notes that humanities scholars can help those in the digital humanities by: “...showing coded meaning in various digital texts so that experience is better understood” (361). The contributors to *Hacking the Academy* iterate the idea that education is everywhere, and as society evolves, it is necessary to evolve the idea of what is considered academic. Throughout the book, the writers discuss publishing articles online instantly instead of waiting months for a response from an academic journal. The articles, they argue, are peer-reviewed right away, in an ever-evolving discourse and exchange that is at the heart of the reason people enter the field. By utilizing the digital environment, researchers are also able to take a do-it-yourself approach to the dissemination of information and communication in the field. This inclusive nature of accessibility and flexibility breaks down hierarchies by leveling the academic playing field of who has access to being published. It also allows work to be read by a wider audience, spreading ideas even further than the standard conference/publication format.

V. Conclusion

The humanities are just as important now as they have ever been, perhaps even more so with the current political environment being one that stifles democracy and the arts. It has been shown throughout this writing that the humanities are necessary to teach empathy and critical thinking skills, both of which are required tools for a democratic society. Holden notes in her article: “...they are a body of knowledge and a means of inquiry that conveys serious truths, defensible judgments, and significant ideas” (150). In addition, despite the disagreement in the definition(s) of what the humanities are across the articles used for this research, all authors referenced agreed that critical thinking and empathy were key lessons learned in Humanities. These skills allow for a constructive exchange of ideas through the ability to see the viewpoint of another, which leads to more peaceful settling of conflicts, challenging the status quo, and strengthening our democracy. With the rising interest and popularity of the digital humanities as both an alternative and enhancement to the field of Humanities, this process has the potential to simultaneously be easier for those outside of the academy and to expand the field exponentially.

It is important to iterate the other, political reasons that contribute to the continuing decline of interest in Humanities. Nussbaum points this out in her book, noting the shift toward education for profit over education for democracy. As career programs that provide economic growth for the nation are heavily funded, those that do not produce an immediate tangible effect are cut, including Humanities and Social Sciences. The fallout from this, as Nussbaum points out, is that: “Nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful

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machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves...” (2). Considering the suppression of democracy that occurs from cutting the departments that teach critical thinking, it is necessary for humanists to re-think what it means to study the humanities. It’s time to climb down out of the ivory tower, and into the streets and onto the computers to show the powers that be that being a ‘citizen of the world’ is still important and that it includes ALL citizens, not just the elite that can afford a college education. Humanities have the opportunity to make resurgence in popularity, as well as show society that it does have a clear role in contributing back in a way that positively affects social change. If the research is any indication, Humanities are necessary for a continuing and thriving society. Given the anti-intellectualism that is insidiously infiltrating both the academy and the streets, the time to revive the important study of our culture is now.

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