THE HUMANITIES “CRISIS” AND THE FUTURE OF LITERARY STUDIES

Paul Jay

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humanities, exist alongside the humanities’ traditional commitment to teaching core texts and ideas central to humanism. If the humanities are to be central to a twenty-first-century education they will have to move away from a narrow, one-size-fits-all approach, embracing the variety of subjects and skills I have been reviewing throughout this book, and even more importantly, engaging the humanities in a public way with the world beyond the ivory tower.

**Conclusion: The Humanities and the Public Sphere in the Age of the Internet**

Throughout this book I have been arguing that if the humanities are in a state of crisis the way out is forward, not backward. The last thing that will save the humanities is a return to some traditional core humanities practice. Why? Because there has never been a traditional core humanities practice. For the humanities to remain vital in the twenty-first century they need to do what they have always done best: change. The question now is not should the humanities change, but how should they change? Returning to some traditional notion of the humanities will not do the trick, because such a return would require reverting to a narrow, outdated, and arbitrarily truncated version of humanism, as well as to an outmoded set of methodologies with which to study things such as literature, history, philosophy, and theology. Nor will it do to blame professionalization for the challenges now faced by disciplines like my own or by the humanities in general. Indeed, the humanities need more professionalization, not less. The argument that humanities professors ought to leave their specializations outside the door of their undergraduate classrooms—along with the theories and methodologies that inform their scholarly practice—is antithetical to the whole aim of higher education. Indeed, as I have been arguing throughout this book, specialization and the increased theoretical and methodological rigor of college and university classes is precisely what put the higher in higher education in the first place. That is the case in the natural and social sciences, and it ought to be the case in the humanities as well. Like the sciences, the humanities must continue to find a balance between a general and a specialized education for its students. To argue that the humanities ought to eschew specialization and professional rigor and stick to making sure students simply read great books and talk about the meaning of life threatens to impoverish the humanities for both students and faculty. We don’t need a two-tiered system in which
specialization and methodological rigor are a hallmark of the natural and social sciences while the humanities provide a kind of service function, a space where students can simply talk loosely about big ideas and great books.

For the disciplines of the humanities to remain central to higher education they need to sustain the kind of theoretical and methodological rigor they have developed over the last four decades, not turn away from those theories and methods. But they must also find better, more effective ways to explain to the general public what they are and why they matter. This means pushing back against critics who argue professionalization is a problem in the humanities, insisting on the link between professing and professionalization in the undergraduate as well as the graduate classroom. To profess, of course, is to make a set of claims, claims not only about the importance and value of what you are saying, but to make claims as well about the skills you use in the production and the critique of knowledge. As we have seen, the skills humanists utilize in their professional scholarship directly intersect with the skills they teach their students. The practical expertise I've argued students gain in the humanities, the ones that are of keen interest to employers in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors of our economy, are directly related to the professional expertise research scholars hone as they work to produce specialized knowledge. This is certainly the case, as we have seen, in literary studies. Calls for a return to literature itself, linked as they often are to fears that professionalization, theory, and criticism have spoiled literary studies too often ignore the fact that when we teach students "literature" we are teaching them to think theoretically and write critically, which means they need more, not less theory, more, not less training in critical approaches to contextualizing and writing about literature.

In addition to defending professionalization and theory, I have also been arguing that attention to political issues in the humanities—what critics dismiss as "political correctness"—is something that should be defended, not lamented. We saw earlier that the idea that there is something wrong with thinking about humanism in terms of power and politics is profoundly unhistorical, since humanism has always been about politics and power. From this point of view, paying attention to the social, historical, and political context of literary texts, works of art, or philosophical debates, exploring how they are engaged with questions regarding power and social justice, how they reflect—and reflect on—a complicated set of ideologies, ought to be seen as thoroughly orthodox. The odd thing is to try to remove literature, art, philosophy, or history from their critical, social, political, and even ideological embeddedness, to treat them as abstract, ahistorical objects containing a timeless set of universal meanings. For as we have seen, the so-called political turn in the humanities actually marks the return to a set of questions about power and agency that were central to the tradition of humanism all along. In literary studies, of course, it was largely the intervention of the New Criticism, which attempted to bracket off the social, historical, and political in a largely ideological reaction of modernization, that disrupted this focus. Theory and historical, cultural, and political forms of scholarship have actually served to put traditional questions about power and agency and social justice back on the front burner where they belong.

For all of these reasons, the humanities in the twenty-first century ought, more than ever, to rely on—and teach—professional approaches to critical thinking grounded in disciplinary and interdisciplinary theories and methodologies, and to stay focused on connecting the texts, authors, and ideas it teaches to broad questions about power, agency, and social justice, and to do it all in a global context. This does not mean the humanities have to abandon the curatorial responsibility they have. There is no reason why a more diverse set of readings in the disciplines of the humanities has to relegate canonical texts (and works of art) to the historical trash heap. On the contrary, one of the best things about the introduction of formerly marginalized writers, artists, and their works into the humanities curriculum is that they create just the kind of dialogue humanists need to facilitate real critical thinking. Having students read both Ernest Hemingway and Zora Neale Hurston insures critical thinking about what American literature is, who writes it, and why those questions matter. This kind of juxtaposition confronts students with radically different versions of American identity and experience, foregrounding how gender, race, and class operate in literature, literary studies, and the larger social world. We shouldn't be embarrassed by those topics, or to see them as "politicizing" something that isn't in fact already political. And there is no reason in the world why these topics have to cancel out attention to the aesthetic quality of literary works, and to the forms of aesthetic experience they facilitate.

**Toward an Engaged and Public Humanities**

Throughout this book I have highlighted what I think is a debilitating standoff among humanists and their supporters, a standoff that complicates our ability to make a case for the value of the humanities
in general, and for literary studies in particular. How do we set about creating a balance between the various positions I've been discussing? First of all, by moving beyond the counterproductive claims and counter claims of traditional and progressive humanists that have helped structure the humanities crisis from the very beginning. As we have seen, the debate here is all too familiar. From the traditionalist's point of view the humanities are supposed to carve out a space for students to escape the world of the utilitarian and the practical, where they can be free to read the great canonical texts in literature, philosophy, history, religion, and the classics for their own sake. Hopefully they will also learn to read carefully and write well, but the main imperative is to have students read the great texts—and familiarize themselves with the great ideas—of a canonical tradition of writers, thinkers, and artists. Liberal or progressive humanists, on the other hand, insist the humanities ought to be a place where these same canonical texts can be subject to constructive critique. From this perspective, the value of the humanities has less to do with fostering cultural literacy defined in terms of knowing a great tradition of Western texts, and more to do with fostering a skeptical, critical, and even oppositional relationship to the ideologies many of them embody. Here too, learning how to read carefully and write well is important, but reading in cultures of dissent is paramount. Both these positions tend to put the teaching of useful skills in a relatively negative light. The traditionalist's insistence that the value of studying great humanistic texts shouldn't be measured in terms of practical, utilitarian skills that will credentialize students for a vocation gets turned by revisionist or progressive humanists into outright, monolithic resistance to the utilitarianism of an increasingly corporate culture. One model sees the humanities as a rarefied refuge from the world of practical concerns and vocational goals, while the other sees the humanities as openly hostile to the utilitarian values of the world of business, a place in which to develop concrete opposition to those values. The longer both sides continue to reject the idea the humanities have anything in the way of practical, transferable skills to offer the world outside academia, the easier it is for conservative critics and politicians who want to defund higher education to justify their efforts by arguing the humanities have nothing useful to offer at all.

The divide between traditionalists and progressives has for too long blocked constructive change, and such change won't get real traction until it's overcome. As long as humanists remain caught in this twentieth-century divide they are going to have a tough time creating a consensus about how to reconfigure the humanities as a valuable twenty-first-century enterprise. To create such a consensus humanists need to acknowledge that the humanities have to be plural, inclusive, integrative, and open-ended; able to embrace a range of different approaches to knowledge, analysis, and critique; be tolerant of opposing views; and committed to multiple, and at times conflicting goals. There is no reason why an emphasis on the vocational opportunities study in the humanities affords has to push aside the valuable work of both traditionalists and revisionists. Indeed, humanists ought to emphasize both how these competing models usefully and productively contest one another, and explore ways in which they can be integrated so as to ensure that students develop the specific proficiencies they need for whatever vocational choice they make. We ought to see calls for a stronger stress on writing, analytical, and critical skills as connected to—not a break from—the dramatic increase in theoretical and methodological sophistication we have witnessed in the humanities over the last four decades. Emphasizing the transferable skills a humanities education affords, and tackling the tough structural problems facing higher education today, should not be construed as a call to turn away from those developments. On the contrary, we ought to reject the idea that what gets dismissed as "theory," "political correctness," and "multiculturalism" has ruined the humanities, for as we have seen that is simply a false claim.

So, a key requirement moving forward ought to be that humanists let go of this shopworn, culture-war-era posturing once and for all. One can observe an unfortunate, corrosive stridency on both sides of the divide, on the part of an overtly politicized humanities that sometimes has come off as overly dogmatic, even hectoring about the correctness of its politics, and on the part of traditionalists who have reacted with caricature and high-minded hand-wringing about what they claim is nothing less than the demise of Western culture. But the fact of the matter is that the humanities today are immensely more engaged, vital, and meaningful than they have ever been. Humanists have not abandoned their commitment to traditional texts and forms of knowledge, yet they have dramatically increased the theoretical and critical sophistication of their work, expanded the range of texts, problems, and issues they study with their students, and created a humanities not simply in pursuit of knowledge for its own sake but knowledge that can help make the world more just, more respectful of—and responsive to—differences that were hardly acknowledged before the so-called theory revolution.

The recent turn to concrete discussions by organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Society...
about the jobs crisis in the humanities, in which too many PhDs compete for too few jobs, emphasizing the particular proficiencies humanities students develop, reforming graduate studies, tackling the problems of student debt, and attending to the woefully deteriorating conditions of academic labor, suggests humanists are moving beyond the old political debates I’ve been discussing.

To be truly productive, these changes must lead to a more democratic, tolerant version of the humanities. A truly plural, integrated humanities has to embrace a responsibility to preserve and explore key texts in the Western tradition, and a commitment to think critically about ways to improve, resist, or change dominant and oppressive economic, political, social, and cultural constructs, while at the same time tackling structural problems in the humanities. There is no reason why the humanities cannot accommodate the work of traditionalists and revisionists while also helping students capitalize on the skills the humanities foster as they seek employment in the corporate or not-for-profit worlds. These three pursuits need to be seen as integrated, not separate.

While both sides have blamed the other for the crisis in the humanities, I have been arguing that this crisis was largely a product of that blame game and the paralysis it produced. One of the reasons why the humanities have begun to focus on these structural problems is that financial pressures, the dysfunction of graduate education, the jobs crisis, the corporatization of the university, and the increasing popularity of a largely nonideological digital humanities have displaced, and even marginalized, the paralyzing ideological debates I’ve been discussing. The humanities will never again be the bastion of a narrow, monocultural elite. Nor can the humanities simply set itself up monolithically as the opposition party, the seat of resistance to all things corporate, scientific, and technological. Focusing on the structural problems I’ve been discussing gives humanists an opportunity to work together across their intellectual differences, which in the final analysis transcend both positions. The challenging question is how humanists can tackle these problems in a way that does not marginalize or distract them from a historical responsibility to conduct research in specialized areas, produce knowledge, increase theoretical and critical sophistication, and honor the plural, democratic character of the humanities. This kind of pluralistic approach can go a long way toward insuring that a renewed focus on skills will not produce students who simply want to be well-behaved cogs in the corporate wheel. Valuing the humanities means valuing its inherent pluralism, finding ways to accommodate and to feature its various enterprises and commitments. People do not simply study the humanities. People use the humanities. They can be used not only to enjoy and learn from traditional texts and works of art for their own sake, but also to think critically about how those same texts and works of art have been either complicit with or resisted injustice. But out of this use should come the development of reading, writing, analytical, critical, and interpretive abilities that, while central to academic work, are also applicable outside it in a multiplicity of workplaces in our society.

In spite of the standoff between the positions I have been discussing, there are a number of encouraging developments in the humanities that suggest this logjam might be beginning to break up. These developments are focused on both articulating and implementing a more public, engaged role for the humanities in American society, which include finding ways to place humanities students, those with the BA, but also the MA and the PhD, in nonteaching jobs within academia, and jobs outside academia as well. These developments are not aimed at replacing classroom learning, nor are they meant to undermine the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, or the discussion of general ideas that might seem to have little in the way of practical application. They are meant to both supplement and enrich classroom work, to help add a new, more socially engaged dimension to study in the humanities. And they involve producing institutional structures that link students and their teachers to the public sphere, creating alliances that flow two ways, from the university into the community, and from the community back to the university.

These developments are taking place under the umbrella of what has come to be termed the public humanities. Academic programs in the public humanities train humanities students at the postgraduate level for work outside academia—in museums, historical associations and preservation leagues, cultural heritage groups, federal and state humanities councils, arts and performance groups, oral history projects, and a variety of other not-for-profit or for-profit cultural organizations. Some of these programs offer certificates in the public humanities to graduate students already enrolled in PhD programs in traditional humanities departments. Public Humanities at Yale, for example, offers a Masters of Arts degree in Public Humanities to students already enrolled in Yale’s PhD Program in American studies. This program supplements their conventional academic training with preparation “for public intellectual work such as museum and gallery installation, documentary film and photography, and oral/community history,” preparation aimed at “building bridges” between its PhD students and “a wide range of local and regional
intuitions and their respective publics.” A similar program at Brown University’s John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage offers an MA in public humanities. The program, according to its website, which can be completed en route to a traditional PhD or as a terminal program, “offers a dynamic interdisciplinary opportunity for students interested in careers in museums, historical societies, cultural planning agencies, heritage tourism, historic preservation, and community arts programs.” The University of Washington also offers a Certificate in Public Scholarship to both graduate students and faculty from across the university. The program hopes to foster “public scholarship that engages in cultural practice and inquiry,” generating “campus-community partnerships across all sectors of higher education” engaged with “digital and multimedia publication, exhibitions, performance, and other innovative modes of disseminating scholarship.”

These new humanities programs have developed out of recognition that humanities students have transferable skills that can be utilized in a variety of ways in jobs across the spectrum of arts and humanities programs and institutions outside academia. They recognize that humanities students are uniquely positioned to draw on their specialized knowledge of history, literature, philosophy, and the arts, and on their particular skills in writing for both old and new media to help forge a bridge between scholarship and society. All the skills I have been discussing in this book—close reading, the ability to summarize, analyze, and interpret texts and data, to think critically and construct persuasive narratives—can be applied in a wide range of vocations, but they are particularly crucial for jobs in the public humanities. With the academic job market shrinking for students who seek teaching positions (especially at research intensive universitites) the public humanities offer a range of alternative career options that deserve to be worked into the fabric of postgraduate programs, which ought to be training graduate students for both academic and nonacademic jobs. Professional groups in the humanities are beginning to recognize this fact, and they are paying increasing attention to what is now called “Alt-ac,” alternative careers to those in academia.

In addition to these innovative degree-granting programs in the public humanities are a new, expanding range of exciting interdisciplinary practices involving the intersection of the humanities, medicine, and science. One example that has fascinating implications for the future of literary studies is the field of narrative medicine. According to one of its key founders, Dr. Rita Charon, narrative medicine is based on the idea that “the effective practice of medicine requires narrative competence, that is, the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others.” (2006, 15). Charon, who earned a PhD in English from Columbia in 1999 (on top of a 1978 MD from Harvard Medical School), helped pioneer the idea that “adopting methods such as close reading of literature and reflective writing allows narrative medicine to examine and illuminate 4 of medicine’s central narrative situations: physician and patient, physician and self, physician and colleagues, and physician and society.” By incorporating the idea of “narrative competence” from literary studies, Charon insists physicians can bridge the divide that separates “physicians from patients, themselves, colleagues, and society.” While narrative medicine connects to the humanities by acknowledging that the practice of medicine is in part the practice of an art, that it has a broadly humane dimension that ought not to get lost in the technical and scientific side of its practice, it is defined very specifically in terms of a practical skill. Narrative competence adds to the other practical competencies of the physician. The ability to carefully read, analyze and think critically about the range of narratives about illnesses (from patients, their families, nurses, other doctors, etc.) they encounter, and to develop their own narratives about illness—indeed, to read illnesses as narratives, becomes part of the skill-set of physicians and thus dramatizes the extent to which the literary skills of close reading and analysis are transferable to a wide range of practices and vocations. Indeed, degree programs in narrative medicine, such as those in the public humanities, are now available at a variety of medical schools including Columbia University and the University of Florida.

Another emerging area of academic work that links the humanities and sciences is field philosophy. Field philosophy, according to Robert Frodeman, is based on a distinction “between lab science and field science” (Frodeman, 2010). “Getting out in the field” means leaving the book-lined study to work with scientists, engineers and decision makers on specific social challenges,” so that instead of trying to understand in the abstract “traditional philosophic problems like the old chestnut of ‘free will,’” or “seeking to identify general philosophic principles,” field philosophers “begin with the problems of non-philosophers, drawing out specific, underappreciated, philosophic dimensions of societal problems.” Philosophers have of course for years worked with ethics boards at hospitals, Frodeman points out, but newer work in field philosophy involves “embedding” philosophers in fields including environmental science and nanotechnology (examples he cites include the US Geological Survey, the food
industry, the National Science Foundation, and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission). Philosophers embedded in these fields can advise on the ethical, epistemological, ontological, or even metaphysical aspects of scientific work in labs and in the field, but they can also help contribute to the development of narratives that explain the relationship between various disciplines, including chemistry, geology, anthropology, public policy, and economics. Here field philosophy, of course, intersects with narrative medicine, for as Frodeman points out, “such narratives can provide us with something that is sorely lacking today: a sense of the whole.”

Crucially, field philosophy is not top-down but bottom-up. It does not begin in theory but “with the needs of stakeholders…drawing out philosophical insights after the work is completed.” This means adapting philosophizing to the practical demands and real time of workers in a field, which in turn means adapting the traditional protocols of scientific research and publishing to philosophical work. Field philosophers, Frodeman explains, have to balance the traditional demands for rigor in academic publishing with the real-time demands in the field for concise, accessible, and useful narratives. It does not “reject traditional standards of philosophic excellence,” but it does seek to “master the political arts of working on an interdisciplinary team,” balancing the “field rigor of writing grants and framing insights for scientists and engineers” with the expectations of traditional philosophical research practices. Frodeman and his colleagues see their work in the general context of the “industry of knowledge production” rather than in the narrow context of academic philosophizing for the sheer sake of philosophizing. And they see the value of this work in terms of its accountability. Both philosophers and scientists, now more than ever, are being pressed to demonstrate the social relevance of their work, to “justify our existence,” as Frodeman puts it, in terms of the “direct impacts” of their work on society.

Narrative medicine and field philosophy are both excellent examples of what is often called the engaged humanities. The term “engaged humanities” refers to humanities work that is involved with broad public and community needs, work, as Gregory Jay puts it in “The Engaged Humanities: Principles and Practices for Public Scholarship and Teaching,” that is based “on the organized implementation of project-based engaged learning and scholarship” that intersects with the “continued advancement of digital and new media learning and scholarship” (51). Much of this work, as Jay points out, involves “collaborative cultural development work with a social justice orientation” (54). One of his examples is the “Imagining America Curriculum Project,” which documents examples of such work. Much of it involves the kind of hands-on fieldwork Frodeman endorses for philosophers, projects that “go beyond public performance to public engagement.” They “advance community cultural development, enrich democratic dialogue, create exciting aesthetic advances, and fashion meaningful collaborations among diverse partners” in the academic, cultural, and corporate sectors of the public sphere (54).

Building on the traditional practice of service learning, an engaged humanities attempts to be much more collaborative, adopting the kind of “bottom-up” model characteristic of field philosophy. Jay cites a range of dramatic new initiatives at the University of Texas; the University of Washington, Stanford; and his own Cultures and Communities Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. All of the programs I’ve been discussing embody forms of engagement and outreach that connect a humanities education—and the competencies it teaches—to the public sphere and a host of vocations that sorely needs them. There are two challenges in sustaining and expanding endeavors such as these. One is the challenge of mainstreaming humanities competencies, finding a way to emphasize the value of the skills taught in humanities courses, moving beyond the kind of embarrassment felt by too many people about the instrumental value of a humanities education (without reducing the value of the humanities to purely instrumental measures). The other challenge is to build career planning for undergraduate humanities students into the undergraduate humanities experience. One place where this is being done is at Brigham Young University's (BYU) Humanities+ program. This program, designed for humanities undergraduates at BYU, is aimed at taking advantage of “the evidence for the marketability of humanities skills” by developing institutional resources for preparing, advising, and strategizing with students about their career goals.8 Recognizing that the humanities offer “excellent preparation not only for teaching but for other professional schools” including law, medicine, library science, and business administration, the Humanities+ program is also designed to help students prepare and plan for employment at government agencies, NGOs, and other places where their “foreign-language and intercultural expertise, their leadership abilities, communication skills…and intellectual flexibility and creativity” can be put to use. Faculty in the program work closely with students to help them think early and creatively about a career that will utilize their capabilities, and the program’s website has a rich offering of careers strategies, which in turn is supported by a detailed blog with news and articles about careers in the humanities. These
engaged, public, field-oriented approaches to a humanities education promise to help revitalize the humanities, making a humanities education relevant for twenty-first-century students who need exposure to both the subjects and competencies it is uniquely positioned to offer. They should not be seen as marginalizing or replacing the humanities’ traditional classroom focus on the study and discussion of key literary, philosophical, and historical texts—and works of art—central to both a Western and global intellectual tradition, but as a component that expands the relevance and application of such study.

THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Finally, one of the most significant new developments in the humanities, indeed, one that promises perhaps more than any other to remake them, is the emergence of the Digital Humanities, a field that is becoming particularly fertile in literary studies programs around the country. As I briefly noted in my Introduction, the Digital Humanities are increasingly bridging the traditional divide between the humanities and science, introducing into the humanities training in a broad range of computer skills directly applicable across a variety of vocations in both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors of the economy. At their core, the digital humanities explore new technologies for embodying, transmitting, and studying texts and works of art traditionally central to a humanities education. But they are also engaged with the digital production of new humanities texts and tools for study—creative texts and educational tools that are “born digital”—and this promises an even more dramatic revolution in the humanities in general, and the study of literary texts in particular. Every facet of a humanities education, from the texts students study to the classrooms they meet in and the research tools they utilize, are being dramatically transformed by the digitization of knowledge. These developments, in turn, offer new professional opportunities to humanities students, from writing computer programs to text encoding and text editing, electronic publishing, interface design, and archive construction.

Where did the idea of the Digital Humanities come from? The concept of a digital humanities grew out of the older, less formal field of humanities computing, the use of computers for research, data collection, writing, and publishing in the humanities. To a significant degree, the digital humanities are about the organization of knowledge and the adapting of computational skills to the management of humanities materials. In this sense, they provide a new infrastructure of services for humanities scholars. Seen from this angle, it is not hard to imagine how the digital humanities may offer a way not so much to solve but even to transcend many of the vexing questions about humanities study I have been tracing in this book. Why? Because, at least on the surface, the digital humanities seem largely to operate outside debates about great books and the canon, about critical theory and the politicization of the humanities. Since the digital humanities do not constitute a critical approach to humanistic study such as formalist, psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, or queer forms of criticism, they do not seem to be weighted-down by the kinds of arguments about theory and ideology I have been discussing in this book. Indeed, the digital humanities seem to promise that the whole debate about the politicizing of humanities study can be put on the back burner—or will disappear altogether. In the age of a truly digital humanities, students will learn how to write code for digitized humanities resources, not how to overthrow patriarchy.

However, this thoroughly instrumentalist vision of the digital humanities is increasingly being contested and debated by digital humanities scholars themselves. Indeed, the division between scholars who want to define the digital humanities narrowly in terms of using technology to write code and build things, and those who insist on a big tent that includes critical and cultural theory deployed to think critically about digital culture and instrumentality itself, replicates the larger debates within the humanities I have been discussing throughout this book. Beyond the general tension we can observe here between defining the humanities in terms of particular subjects and specific objects of knowledge (canonical texts, authors, works of art, etc.) students ought to know, and defining the humanities in terms of practical skills it teaches, we can also observe the specific tension between the curatorial and critical functions of the humanities I discussed earlier. If the digital humanities are about technologies and methods of organizing knowledge, then they are facilitating the humanities’ curatorial function. If, however, they are about fostering critical thinking about technology and instrumentality, then they are facilitating the critical function of the humanities. Another way to look at this division is in terms of whether or not the digital humanities perform a service function for other disciplines or is itself a subject area or discipline with a critical function of its own. How the relationships between these different ways of thinking about the digital humanities get worked out will, to a significant degree, determine the impact this digital turn will have on the humanities in general, and on cultural and literary studies in particular.
The technical, methodological, computational, knowledge-organization vision of the digital humanities has its roots, of course, in the science of computing. From this perspective the main value of digital technology for the humanities, as Johanna Drucker has pointed out, “resides in the creation, migration, or preservation of cultural materials” (85). The emphasis here was initially on tasks such as “creating metadata, doing markup, and making classification schemes or information architectures,” and “the terms of production were, necessarily, set by technological restraints,” and of course with such work “quantitative, engineering, and computational sensibilities prevail” (85). This meant that the largely interpretive orientation of humanities work was replaced by the positivist orientation of computation. The result is that the protocols for information visualization, data mining, geospatial representation, and other research instruments have been absorbed from disciplines whose epistemological foundations and fundamental values are at odds with, or even hostile to, the humanities. Positivistic, strictly quantitative, mechanistic, reductive and literal, these visualization and processing techniques preclude humanistic methods from their operations because of the very assumptions on which they are designed: that objects of knowledge can be understood as self-identical, self-evident, ahistorical, and autonomous. (85–86)

For all of these reasons, in the late 1990s, according to Drucker, “getting the work done” in the digital humanities meant “humanists came into” the “conversations as relativists and left as positivists out of pragmatic recognition that certain tenets of critical theory could not be sustained in that environment” (88). There were debates about theory and its role in the digital humanities, to be sure, but mostly “scholars shrugged and went back to coding” (88), for “to play in the digital sandbox one had to follow the rules of computation” (88).

The problem, of course, is that in the late 1990s the humanities had just finished systematically critiquing all of the assumptions about reality, knowledge, and truth associated with the very positivism that seemed to form the foundation of the digital humanities and its practices. Seen through “a humanistic critical frame,” Drucker points out, all of the precepts of positivism associated with computation, data mining, and the forms of knowledge they produce ought to look suspect (86). The very “platforms and protocols” associated with a digital humanities defined in terms of computation and building were “created by disciplines whose methodological premises are often at odds with—even hostile to—humanistic values and thought” (86). For this reason Drucker insists that “the ideology” of something as innocent as “information visualization” may be “anathema to humanistic thought,” even “antipathetic to its aims and values” (86). She worries that “the persuasive and seductive rhetorical force of visualization performs such a powerful reification of information that graphics such as Google Maps are taken to be simply a presentation of ‘what is,’ as if all critical thought had been precipitously and completely jettisoned” (86). In this scenario, theory’s insistence on the contingent, historical construction of knowledge seems to go right out the window.13

Anyone who has read this far will see that we are right back where we started. The digital humanities, thought by many to be the next big thing, an enterprise perhaps poised to even save the humanities, embodies the central contradiction that has dogged the humanities all along. The digital humanities seem to be replaying all over again the larger “theory crisis” that plagued the humanities in general from the late-1970s through the mid-1990s. For, as Drucker reminds us, “the intellectual traditions of aesthetics, hermeneutics, and interpretative practices (critical editing, textual studies, historical research) are core to the humanities” (86), but even these practices became subject to a “systematic critique” from “poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and deconstruction,” which have “altered our understanding of notions of meaning, truth, authorship, identity, subjectivity, power relations, bodies, minds, nations, intelligence, nature and almost any other ontological category of cultural thought” (87). For the digital humanities, this raises two problems. The first is that an overly technological and positivist practice threatens to displace at least three decades of theoretical and critical work in the humanities, something that is awfully displeasing to many mainstream humanists trained in critical and cultural theory and with only a vague understanding of what the digital humanities entail. The second problem is that the digital humanities threaten to further nudge the humanities toward a largely service function.

A number of scholars want to tackle this problem by finding a way to reconfigure the digital humanities as a specifically humanities practice, one that values theory and produces cultural criticism. Drucker herself, for example, looks forward to a “new phase in DH” that would “synthesize method and theory,” and she calls “for more work that will “theorize humanities approaches to digital scholarship” (87). The phrasing here is intriguing. While the phrase “digital humanities” puts the emphasis on digitalizing humanities materials and on the uses of digital materials for humanities study, the phrase
in the provocatively titled, “There Are No Digital Humanities,” to what extent “the take up of practical techniques and approaches from computing science” is simply “providing some areas of the humanities with a means of defending (and refreshing) themselves in an era of global economic crisis and severe cuts to higher education, through the transformation of their knowledge and learning into quantities of information— deliverables?” He worries that narrowly computational digital humanities will simply feed a “movement away from what remains resistant to a general culture of measurement and calculation and toward a concern to legitimate power and control by optimizing the system’s efficiency.”

The questions Hall poses push the digital humanities toward thinking critically about their own orientation and practices, and thus associates them with the kind of cultural criticism Alan Liu insists the digital humanities have to take up in an essay that asks, “Where is the Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” (2012). Liu shares two linked concerns with Drucker and Hall. The first is his worry that the digital humanities remain too heavily weighted toward the instrumental and computational, toward code writing and building; and the second is that while they might save the humanities, they might simply save them as a service enterprise. In Liu’s view this orientation toward service and instrumentalism feed one another. “Within the digital humanities, to start with, we observe that service and instrumentalism are part of a tangle of related concepts—including functionalism, toolbased, and (as I earlier deployed the term) practice—about which the field is deeply insecure” (498). Liu points out a paradox in all this, for some digital humanists worry “their field is too instrumental” (498), dominated as it is by “industrialization, purely technical concerns, implementation, standards,” and so on (498), while others worry it is not instrumental enough, especially when compared to fields such as engineering, where “prestige” comes from innovation and building things (499). On the extreme end of this position, Liu cites Stephen Ramsay’s paper at the 2011 Modern Language Association (“Who’s In and Who’s Out”), which included the following remarks about what it takes to be a digital humanist: “Do you have to know how to code? I say ‘yes.’ … Digital Humanities is about building things…. If you are not making anything, you are not … a digital humanist” (499).

Ramsay’s is an extreme position, of course, but it helps to make clear where the lines are being drawn. The main concern here, as Liu puts it, is that the instrumentalist, service function of the digital humanities is poised to overwhelm its critical function, and more
importantly, its ability to perform cultural criticism. "I believe that the service function of the digital humanities," he writes, "as literal as running the actual servers, if need be—can convert into leadership if such service can be extended beyond facilitating research in the academy... to assisting in advocacy outside the academy in the humanities' present hour of social, economic, and political need." (495). Here Liu touches on exactly the debate about the humanities I've been discussing throughout this book: "On the one hand, the humanities...struggle against the perception that they are primarily instrumental because their assigned role is to provide students with a skill set needed for future life and work" (500), a vision of the humanities weighted far too heavily for most on the practical skills and service side. "On the other hand, the humanities suffer even more from seeming to be noninstrumental to the point of uselessness" (500). Liu sees in this the same "catch-22" I identified in the opening chapter of this book, for the more noninstrumental the humanities look, in Liu's view, "the more cut off they seem from practical use" (500). The way to thread the needle, he insists, is to make sure that the digital humanities become a space for cultural criticism as well as instrumentality. "The contribution that the digital humanities can make to cultural criticism at the present time is to use the tools, paradigms, and concepts of digital technologies to help rethink the idea of instrumentality," to "think critically about metadata," and to "enter into fuller dialogue with the adjacent fields of media studies and media archaeology so as to extend reflection on core instrumental technologies in cultural and historical directions" (500). Doing so would mean that "standard issues in the digital humanities...could be enlarged with sociocultural meaning" (500). Configured this way, the digital humanities both grapple with technological infrastructures and use critical and cultural theory to deal in new ways with pressing social issues inside and outside of the academy.\(^{18}\)

Liu insists that "to be an equal partner—rather than, again, just a servant—at the table, digital humanists will need to find ways to show that thinking critically about metadata, for instance, scales into thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world." The digital humanities may be "poised to make the jump from a niche field to a field-of-fields," he observes, "but joining the mainstream," for Liu, means that the digital humanities must "show that it can also take a leadership role" for "the cause of the humanities" in an age when they "are being systematically or catastrophically defunded by nations, states, and universities." There are two related issues being raised here when it comes to the place of cultural criticism in the digital humanities. One has to do with what role, if any, cultural criticism plays inside the work of digital humanities scholars. To what extent, for example, do they draw on the whole panoply of close reading, textual and visual analysis, and aesthetic and ideological criticism, in a specifically social and cultural critique of digital culture? This kind of interpretive work, of course, would link the digital humanities to the engagement of the humanities per se with critical thinking about cultural and social issues. The second issue has to do with the role the digital humanities can play in advocating for the critical value of the humanities in the culture at large, something the 4Humanities site is dedicated to. This kind of work promises to engage the digital humanities in defending the humanities, something it seems to me it is particularly well-situated to do since it has a commitment to twenty-first-century technologies and their real-world practical application, and a commitment to sustaining and preserving for future generations the documents and works of art central to the tradition of humanism.

Can all of these various responsibilities be reconciled in a single digital humanities practice? Perhaps. Chris Forster (2010), for example, has put together a very reasonable and forward-looking proposal regarding what the digital humanities ought to cover, one that seeks to reconcile some of the differences I've been discussing. Forster breaks the digital humanities down into four related areas: (1) Direct, Practical, Uses of Computational Methods for Research, (2) Media Studies folks studying "New" Media, (3) Using Technology in the Classroom, and (4) The way new technology is reshaping research and the profession. The first involves "statistically grounded," "computer-enabled" research products, "data-mining," and so on, the kind of work most dramatically distinguished from a "theoretically" grounded humanities with an interest in "ideology" critique. The second, however, does involve the use of critical theory in the "political critique" of digital media, so here the kind of thing Liu worries over promises to get concentrated, sustained attention. The third and fourth, obviously, have to do with the role technology plays relative to pedagogy and the spaces (literal and virtual) in which teachers teach and students learn, and the new, increasingly open-access ways in which scholars publish their research. In many ways the digital humanities represent a paradigm shift, one that is beginning to dramatically affect the material and institutional ways in which people in the humanities perform their work in every sector—teaching, research, and even service. In this sense it is not hard to see how the technical infrastructure of everything from the production, collection, display,
and study of data of all kinds to the literal and virtual configuration of learning environments is going to change dramatically. It is a little more difficult to see, however, how the balance between curation and criticism in a newly digitalized humanities will shake out. Specialists in the field, as I write, are currently debating this balance, and they are doing so with the sense of urgency dramatized in Liu's concern about the need for digital humanists to find their voice when it comes to defending and valuing the humanities. It may be that the digital humanities can save the humanities, but it remains a little unclear what it will save them for—and even where it will save them to.

All of the movements I have been discussing—the public humanities, the engaged humanities, and the digital humanities—seek to reconcile the tension between seeing the humanities as a place set apart for reflection and critique, and as a place in which students learn practical skills transferable to, and applicable in, the world of work in the public sphere. The emphasis is clearly on adapting academic competencies to the world outside academia, putting the expertise students develop in the humanities to work solving real social, cultural, economic, environmental, and even political problems. And, as we have seen, it is a two-way street. An engaged, public humanities tends to take a bottom-up approach in which problems outside of academia drive approaches to solving problems inside of academia. And of course the digital humanities are integral to all of the projects I have been discussing, since work in the engaged, public humanities is increasingly technological and digitalized, so that the skills digital humanities students learn are going to be particularly crucial to the work they do in jobs in the larger public sphere of the humanities.

The Humanities Classroom

All of the forces I have been discussing in this book—shrinking budgets, the digitalization of knowledge, the new stress on teaching practical skills, and an emphasis on engaged learning—have produced dramatic new institutional initiatives that threaten to transform the traditional humanities classroom. Distance learning, virtual classrooms, massive open online courses (or MOOCs), and the increasing presence of for-profit higher education, all seem to threaten the very existence of the brick-and-mortar classroom. But the demise of the traditional classroom for humanities learning would be a shame, for the conventional classroom does things none of these other classrooms can do, and when right-sized it allows for the teaching of the range of capabilities I have been discussing in this book in a way that other formats cannot. I want to close by insisting that while online educational formats certainly have their place in the future of higher education, they are not particularly well-equipped to do what the humanities do best, and that is to put students and their teachers in face-to-face dialogue with one another in structured but ultimately spontaneous discussions that are not always focused on solving specific problems, but rather deal conceptually and critically with abstract ideas, exploring a range of diverse interpretations where the stress is often on ambiguity, contingency, and the development of what the poet John Keats called "negative capability," the capacity to live with uncertainty. In a world increasingly dominated by technology, and an educational ethic committed to an engaged, public humanities grappling with real social problems, it is imperative that we make room for the kind of free-form exchange humanities classes have always been known for, and for the kind of substantive feedback on critical writing that is key to developing the skills humanities students learn. This kind of feedback simply cannot be done via distance learning or in a MOOC, and, as Academically Adrift reminds us, student writing is the most important factor in higher education learning.

One of the biggest challenges facing the humanities today is how to manage the industrialization of higher education. Colleges and universities today are increasingly turning to the massive, assembly line processing of students in order to maximize resources and revenue flows, a trend that is particularly unsuitable for an education in the humanities. This is especially the case when it comes to for-profit higher education, but it can be observed as well in the move of traditional universities into the world of online education. What started out innocently enough as distance learning—students taking courses online for credit through their local college or university—has morphed into the huge—and highly controversial—business of online, for-profit higher education. Most of the evidence to date suggests these institutions are more about profit than education. 19 According to a 2012 article in The New York Times, three-quarters of the students enrolled in for-profit colleges and universities are studying in institutions owned by large publicly traded companies and private equity firms. 20 And the profits they make come directly out of the pockets of US taxpayers. Over 80 percent of the tuition and fees paid to nonprofits by students comes from federal aid in the form of Pell Grants and Stafford loans. These institutions are long on recruiters but short on faculty. Educational oversight is lax, and the dropout rate extraordinarily high when compared to traditional brick-and-mortar colleges and universities. A two-year US Senate study chaired by Senator Tom
Harkin, the Iowa Democrat, recently issued a scathing criticism of both the business practices and poor learning outcomes of for-profit institutions of higher education such as Kaplan University and the University of Phoenix. As Harkin notes, the report contains “overwhelming documentation of exorbitant tuition, aggressive recruiting practices, abysmal student outcomes, taxpayer dollars spent on marketing and pocketed as profit, and regulatory evasion and manipulation” (quoted in Lewin, “Senate Committee Report”).

It was perhaps in part due to the scandal surrounding for-profit online institutions that the roll out in 2012 of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) became the story in higher education. Under the MOOC model, classrooms themselves, along with the traditional forms of interaction between students and their professors that take place there, largely disappear. MOOC consortia such as Udacity, edX, and Coursera emerged with great fanfare in early 2012, and on November 12 of that year The New York Times declared it “the year of the MOOC.” For developers and their supporters, MOOCs seemed like a perfect solution to the bleak economic plight of higher education, a low-cost way to produce and disseminate high quality courses taught by faculty in a range of disciplines at elite institutions to disadvantaged students around the world. Freed from having to pay tuition at brick-and-mortar institutions, students can enroll at little or no cost in courses they may take in their own homes whenever they want to take them. Videotaped lectures and other course material can be streamed to thousands of students taking the same course everywhere. Free initially, these courses would eventually be monetized, forming a new revenue stream for brick-and-mortar institutions, which could eventually begin to grant degrees, based on the completion of required MOOC courses. The university would become, in effect, one big iTunes store. Students win, universities win, the economic crisis of higher education gets solved, and a nineteenth-century model of education gets transformed into a twenty-first-century engine of innovation and efficiency.

However, two years after the roll out of MOOCs their initial promise seems largely to have evaporated. What happened? First of all, educators themselves became highly skeptical of both the educational quality and the financial viability of MOOCs. Universities are of course in the business of education, but it seemed to many that in the case of MOOCs education was being trumped by business. Faculty skepticism about MOOCs crystallized in May 2013 when the philosophy department at San Jose State University refused to use a course developed by edX and taught by the eminent Harvard philosopher, Michael Sandel. The department published an open letter to Sandel explaining their position on May 2, 2013, in The Chronicle of Higher Education. It begins by pointing out that the course does not solve a single “pedagogical problem” in the philosophy department, since they have no “shortage of faculty capable of teaching” the material Professor Sandel’s course would cover. They go on to point out that at a time when the lecture format is under fire on a number of fronts as an outdated and ineffective system for educating students, it is ironic that edX proposed replacing live courses with recorded lectures. “After all the rhetoric questioning the effectiveness of the antiquated method of lecturing and note taking,” they observed, “it is telling to discover that the core of edX’s JusticeX (the title of Sandel’s course) is a series of video-taped lectures that include excerpts of Harvard students making comments and taking notes.” Instead, San Jose State’s philosophy department believes that “having a scholar teach and engage his or her own students in person is far superior to having those students watch a video of another scholar engaging his or her students.” They also expressed concern about the packaged homogeneity of philosophy courses using edX’s model. “The thought of the exact same social justice course,” they wrote, “being taught in various philosophy departments across the country is downright scary—something out of a dystopian novel.... Diversity in classrooms of thought and plurality of points of view are at the heart of liberal education.”

San Jose State’s philosophy faculty were also deeply concerned that MOOCs were part of an economic movement to “replace professors, dismantle departments, and provide a diminished education for students in public universities.” They worry that “should one-size-fits-all vendor-designed courses become the norm...two classes of universities will be created: one, well-funded colleges and universities in which privileged students get their own real professor; the other, financially stressed private and public universities in which students watch a bunch of video-taped lectures.” This concern led another prominent advocate of MOOCs to abandon his own course. Princeton sociologist Mitchell Duneier stopped teaching his introductory sociology course on Coursera after the company asked his permission to license his course so other colleges and universities could use its contents in a blended format of online and face-to-face instruction. The rationale was that this would save institutions a lot of money, but he declined. Why? “I’ve said no, because I think that it’s an excuse for state legislatures to cut funding to state universities,” Mr. Duneier says. “And I guess that I’m really uncomfortable being part of a movement that’s
going to get its revenue in that way. And I also have serious doubts about whether or not using a course like mine in that way would be pedagogically effective."

On the heels of faculty skepticism such as this came studies raising serious questions about just how beneficial MOOCs are for the students who enroll in them. Among students who enrolled in for-credit courses through Udacity at San Jose State in the spring of 2013, for example, the pass rates were much lower than for conventional courses. In February 2013, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported technical and logistical failures at Georgia Tech so serious that they required the suspension of some MOOCs there. Perhaps most significantly, the "Alliance for Higher Education & Democracy at Penn GSE" analyzed the movement of a million users through 16 Coursera courses offered by the University of Pennsylvania from June 2012 to June 2013 and found that "massive open online courses (MOOCs) have relatively few active users, that user 'engagement' falls off dramatically—especially after the first 1–2 weeks of a course—and that few users persist to the course end." Furthermore, "course completion rates are very low, averaging 4% across all courses and ranging from 2% to 14% depending on the course and measurement of completion." Worse still for a platform touted as having the potential to democratize higher education, the study found that the majority of users were well-off white men with a college degree. Penn GSE reported that "the 'educational disparity is particularly stark' in Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, where almost 80% of MOOC students came from the wealthiest 6% of the population. Across the board, Penn's MOOC students had already far exceeded the educational standards found among the general population in their countries." According to the study's author, Ezekiel J. Emanuel, "far from realizing the high ideals of their advocates, MOOCs seem to be reinforcing the advantages of the 'haves' rather than educating the 'have-nots.'"

As if all these negative reports were not enough, 2013 ended with the CEO of Udacity, Sebastian Thrun, a MOOC pioneer, declaring that the MOOC experiment had largely turned out to be a failure. Thrun, analyzing the kind of data I've just been reviewing, realized the huge gap between the hype about MOOCs and their reality. As he told Max Chaikin of Tech Forecast, "We were on the front pages of newspapers and magazines, and at the same time, I was realizing, we don't educate people as others wished, or as I wished. We have a lousy product." Thrun for now seems to have given up altogether on developing MOOCs as a replacement for the classroom and is instead focusing his attention on transforming Udacity into a tool for corporate training.

Given what looks at this writing to be the collapse of the MOOC experiment, at least in its current iteration, it is hard to see how MOOCs are going to save higher education, especially when it comes to humanities courses, where teaching both knowledge and skills requires face-to-face discussion and the time-consuming reading and grading of student essays by professors or teaching assistants, complete with opportunities for revision. The possibilities and pitfalls of the MOOC model are nicely summed up in a recent exchange between Cathy Davidson and Ian Bogost. Davidson is wary of MOOCs but she points to the inability of the conventional brick-and-mortar institution to handle contemporary educational demands. "Let's start with the numbers," she writes:

4.1: That's the grade point average of a high school student entering the University of California, Irvine this year. 450,000: students on the waiting list for community colleges in California alone. 74%: the percentage of students from the richest quartile of households enrolled at the top 150 colleges in the US—even though high-income students make up only a third of high-achieving high school graduates. While the G.I. Bill and the Great Society were founded on the principle of higher education as the ladder to the middle class, in 2013 state schools are so starved of funds, and private ones so expensive, that higher education is becoming the province of the high achieving and the wealthy global 1%.

"It is in this context," she explains, "that I find MOOCs a useful goal toward educational experimentation that may lead to methods for educating more students and in ways more responsive to the connected world they inhabit everywhere except in school." However, she concludes "given the history of for-profits in the education arena, professors at brick-and-mortar institutions have reason to worry that MOOCs are being hyped by venture capitalists who have no real interest in learning. I share that fear. However, our justifiable worry about the future of the professorate doesn't help those students being excluded from higher education today."

Bogost takes a much more skeptical approach than Davidson, even questioning whether MOOCs ought to be thought of as courses at all. He writes, "Even if MOOCs do sometimes function as courses (or as textbooks), a minority of their effects arises from their status as educational experiences. Other, less obvious aspects of MOOCs exert far more influence on contemporary life." You can think of MOOCs as
courses if you like, according to Bogost, but doing so runs the risk of missing the other forms they actually take. These include MOOCs as a type of “marketing,” MOOCs as “a financial policy for higher education,” MOOCs as “an academic labor policy,” MOOCs as “speculative financial instruments,” MOOCs as “an expression of Silicon Valley values,” and MOOCs as “kind of entertainment media.” From this point of view MOOCs can be linked to what Naomi Klein has called “disaster capitalism.” First you systematically defund higher education, then you call the lack of funds a crisis, then you farm out education to third-party Internet platforms. As a labor policy, Bogost worries that MOOCs simply feed the casualization of academic labor, adding a new layer to the army of adjuncts and part-timers who are taking over the education of our children from full-time tenured and tenure-track professors. In this sense they are a part of the rampant corporatization of higher education I have referred to throughout this book. While it seems to me that Davidson is right that we face a crisis in terms of figuring out how to manage the education of our children, I think Bogost makes a convincing case that MOOCs are a poor substitute for committing more funds to real education, face-to-face, in brick-and-mortar classrooms. Worse still, they threaten to contribute to the very industrializing and technologizing of our culture the humanities traditionally—and usefully—help keep in check.

So while the Internet may seem like a dramatic, exciting new delivery system for higher education, the two dominant models at this point look awfully problematic. For-profits have been roundly condemned for putting profit ahead of education, soaking students of their taxpayer loans, and providing a poor educational product in institutions with high dropout rates. MOOCs, on the other hand, are giving away the same courses that students on campus pay thousands of dollars to take, offer no credit, and no degrees, and their track record to date is not very impressive. It’s hard to see how MOOCs can provide a model for stabilizing the faltering budgets of established colleges and universities, and harder still to see how they can have anything but a negative effect on the humanities, since MOOCs are ill-suited for the educational needs of humanities students. The strength of enterprises such as Coursera—“our technology enables the best professors to teach tens or hundreds of thousands of students”—is also its weakness, for there is no way for one professor to teach a hundred thousand students enrolled online in her Introduction to Philosophy or Romantic Poetry course to develop and then fine-tune their analytical, interpretive, critical, argumentative, and writing skills. MOOCs can do a respectable job delivering subject matter to thousands of students, but they cannot pay much attention at all to honing the practical skills humanities students learn and that I have been arguing is a central value in their education. Indeed, the mass-produced, industrialized form of education MOOCs represent seems designed to short-circuit the teaching of such skills, reducing a humanities education to the delivery and memorization of content. They cannot replicate the kind of spontaneous, face-to-face exploratory exchanges and debates professors can facilitate in a classroom setting in which 15–30 students are together and engaged with one another, nor can they allow faculty to read student writing and provide the kind of feedback they need to hone their analytical, interpretive, argumentative, and writing skills. At the very moment when communication and interpersonal skills are in demand by employers everywhere, higher education ought to be wary about moving to new formats that make it impossible to teach them. Here it is important to recall that, according to Academically Adrift, the only students who register significant learning gains while in college are liberal arts students who are assigned at least 40 pages of reading a week and at least 20 pages of writing a semester. MOOCs and other high enrollment online courses simply do not provide teachers the time to provide feedback on writing to students in meaningful ways that will enhance their writing abilities. In my courses, for example (35 students per course) I usually require at least 30 pages of writing divided over three papers. Students receive detailed editorial comments on each page. It typically takes an hour to read and comment on each paper, and I often require students to revise at least one of their papers for a higher grade. Try doing that with 100 or 200 online students, let alone 2,000.

Perhaps MOOCs will lead to a blended system of education on and off campuses that will save money and help facilitate the kind of learning I have been advocating in this book. But in the meantime I believe the future of the humanities remains connected to the kind of hands-on, face-to-face engagement between students and their professors that has served higher education in America so well for so long. Blending such encounters with online delivery systems and digitized access to educational materials should not be done merely to save money or make up for budget shortfalls due to government defunding of higher education, but rather, to enhance both the range of knowledge and the sophistication of skills humanities students will need to be successful as twenty-first-century citizens and workers. As I have argued throughout this book, this means valuing—and continuing to enhance—the rigor of a humanities education by making sure that students are trained in the forms of professional expertise
their professors use in their own scholarly work. The subjects and competencies at the center of a humanities education are taught best by professors steeped in historical knowledge of their discipline and trained to think critically about that knowledge. Their professionalism ought to be seen as central to what they teach, not as an impediment to it. For, as we have seen, there is no honest way to separate the subjects humanities professors teach from the theories and methodologies they use to construct those subjects in the first place. Students should not be protected from those theories and methodologies or lulled into thinking that knowledge just naturally occurs. Instead, they should be trained to think theoretically and to apply disciplinary methodologies to analyze and help solve social and cultural problems. The ability to read closely and carefully, to analyze and think critically about the arguments others make, to summarize and synthesize positions, and to develop orally and in writing their own arguments are keys to success that cannot be taught in virtual classrooms or MOOCs in which thousands of students are being fed prepackaged video lectures and quizzed with scant supervision. It is clear that little serious reading and analysis gets done in such contexts, and, worse still, it is impossible in such venues to give student writing the time and attention it deserves.

All of this is particularly important for the future of literary studies. The rise of the digital humanities, to be sure, holds great promise for both transforming and expanding work in the disciplines of English and Comparative literatures. But, as we have already seen, that promise would be squandered if the digitalization of literary studies unfolds in a narrowly technical way that ends up marginalizing the close reading, interpretation, and social and cultural analysis of literary texts by students and their professors. As I noted earlier, one of the attractions of the digital humanities is that they seem of offer a sheenily technical, objective, and practical focus for literary studies that solves what some see as the twin problems of too much theory and the politicizing of literary studies. The digitalizing of literary and cultural studies may well involve teaching students how to write code and develop computerized infrastructures for the presentation and analysis of literary and cultural texts, but it ought to push as well beyond a narrow instrumentalism to serve as a locus for the study of digital culture itself. Here I think Liu is right, that the digital humanities, especially as it unfolds in the context of literary studies, has to have a critical as well as an instrumentalist orientation. For this is what the humanities have always done best: explore the human dimension of our interface with the rational, the technical, the industrial, and the pragmatic.

It is no accident that the most trenchant critique of MOOCs came from a philosophy department. Philosophers, historians, and literary critics are trained to think constructively but skeptically about social, cultural, institutional, and economic reform, to raise questions about their human value. Literary analysis for the sheer sake of literary analysis—formalist and aesthetic criticism—has a profound value we ought to protect, but it is not its only value. Literary studies in the twenty-first century ought to tap into the potential of digitalization at the same time that it critiques digitalization, and it will serve its students best if it supplements a knowledge of historically important texts and authors with the teaching of transferable skills that will make them more productive, innovative, critically aware citizens. For the foreseeable future that kind of education will not come cheaply, nor will it be the product of mass-produced, prepackaged, online courses in which thousands of students are supervised by a single instructor or a group of teaching assistants. It will cost money and take place in actual classrooms where students and their professors are engaged, face-to-face with one another, classrooms in which extensive writing and training in revision is central. The humanities are not threatened by irrelevancy because of the subject areas they cover, but rather, by the systematic defunding of higher education, and the substitution of quick fix, industrialized, online vocational training for embodied, active, engaged learning.
author was thinking, how to take in evidence from a page” (1985, 140). See also Klein, who in the October 2010 issue of PMLA, insists that the future of literary criticism ought to follow Jacques Derrida’s approach to close reading.

14. For a comprehensive discussion of literal, surface, and symptomatic reading see Best and Marcus. On distance, hyper, and machine reading see Hayles.

15. Of course, as we have seen throughout this study, many traditionalists would argue that literature itself is the sacred icon of literary studies. The split between these two positions is related to the division I’ve been discussing throughout this book between seeing literary studies as the transmission of knowledge about a particular set of texts, and as the teaching of a set of skills linked to close reading. As we have seen, both Hayles and Gallop are strong advocates of the latter position.


17. For another discussion of the possibilities here see McGill and Parker.


1. It is encouraging, for example, to see professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association and American Historical Association begin to rethink the structure of graduate education and the perpetual crisis in the academic job market, and to observe the emergence across the country of engaged and public humanities programs like those I discuss in this chapter.

2. [http://www.yale.edu/amstud/publichumanities/index.html](http://www.yale.edu/amstud/publichumanities/index.html).


5. As Charon puts it, narrative medicine does not aim to develop “a civilizing veneer—how cute, a doctor who writes poetry—but is a very practical field. Skills are offered that will allow for more efficacy” (quoted in Thernstrom).


7. For another example, see Cathy Davidson’s description of Duke University’s Haiti Lab in “Why Flip the Classroom When We Can Make It Do Cartwheels?”

8. [http://humanities.byu.edu/humanities_plus/](http://humanities.byu.edu/humanities_plus/).

9. For introductory overviews of the rise of the Digital Humanities with particular emphasis on their place in English departments and literary studies see Kirschenbaum and Jones.

10. Gary Hall observes that the digital humanities may provide a degree of “relief in having escaped the culture wars of the 1980s” into “the space of methodological work” (“Has Critical Theory Run out of Time?” 128).

11. For a somewhat different view on the relationship between the digital humanities and literary criticism, see Parry.

12. See Svenson for a review of debates about this topic.

13. For a counterargument see Scheinfeldt, who argues it is time to drop ideology critique (thinking “about our world in terms of ideologies and our work in terms of theories”) in favor of a simple concern with “organizing knowledge,” which he links back to philology, lexicology, and especially bibliography “in late 19th/20th centuries” (124).

14. Gary Hall succinctly describes the danger in leaving critical theory out of the digital humanities equation: “Positioning their own work as being either pre- or posttheory in this way in effect gives them permission to continue with their preferred techniques and methodologies for studying culture relatively uncontested (rather than having to ask rigorous, critical and self-reflexive questions about their practices and their justifications for them). Placed in this wider context, far from helping to keep the question concerning the use of digital tools and data-led methodologies in the humanities open (or having anything particularly interesting to say about theory), the rejection of critical-theoretical ideas as untimely can be seen as both moralizing and conservative” (“Has Critical Theory Run Out of Time?” 130).

15. This volume is indispensabel for anyone who wants to become familiar with the digital humanities and current debates about the field.


17. For a discussion of the historical tension between the digital humanities and media studies, and proposals regarding connecting the two fields, see McPherson (2009).

18. For a similar argument see Bianco who argues digital humanists must “work in and teach the serious know-how of code and critique, computation and cultural studies, collaboration and multimodal composing as so many literacies, capacities, and expressivities attuned to our moment and to the contexts and conditions in which we find ourselves. Let’s take up the imperatives of a relational ethics in discussion and in practices and methods through composing creative critical media” (109).
19. For a lengthy analysis of this problem, see Parker. As Fain reports, the GAO released in 2011 a very negative study of for-profits.


22. So-called blended courses aim to keep the classroom experience intact while relying on MOOC technology.

23. For example, see Friedman (2013, 2014), a particularly enthusiastic, and to my mind, naive enthusiastic for the revolutionary potential of MOOCs.


26. Reported in Fowler, “Survey: MOOC Students Are Elite, Young and Male,” November 20, 2013. As Susan Adams pointed out in an article about the Penn GSE report in Forbes (December 11, 2013), the 35 thousand students from two hundred countries surveyed in the report came from the richest 6% of the population, casting more doubt on the democratizing potential of MOOCs.

27. Quoted in Fowler, “Survey: MOOC Students Are Elite, Young and Male.”


30. “The purpose of an educational institution is to educate,” he writes, “but the purpose of a startup is to convert itself into a financial instrument. The two major MOOC providers, Udacity and Coursera, are venture capital-funded startups, and therefore they are beholden to high leverage, rapid growth with an interest in a fast flip to a larger technology company or the financial market. The concepts of ‘disruption’ and ‘innovation,’ so commonly applied to MOOCs, come from the world of business. As for EdX, the MOOC consortium started by Harvard and MIT, it’s a nonprofit operating under the logic of speculation rather than as a public service. If anything, it will help the for-profits succeed even more by evangelizing their vision as compatible with elite nonprofit educational ideals.” For another very recent critical discussion of MOOCs see Brady.