Teaching in the Far-Right Lane

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the role of humanities faculty in the modern university and the impact of technology on that role.

Keywords: humanities, asset, market value, certification, education, technology, online instruction, understanding, plagiarism.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the changes underway in our university due to the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic by placing them in the context of trends and problems already well established and about which there is not as much agreement as perhaps there needs to be. The pandemic landed squarely on some of our weaknesses and continues to expose stresses and strains. The focus of this essay is not on technology but on the social context of how it works in the university. We need to know what we can keep after the emergency has faded and gone. Spoiler alert: interactive elements such as online conferences with Zoom are the keepers. Some of my colleagues are focused on weak student reading and writing, and these are important skills. But pandemic-induced isolation has interfered with student determination to improve those skills. Worse, the problem is unfolding in a culture where online humanities courses have already been discredited. We cannot just employ new delivery technologies. Online resources have kept the university open and accessible through these terrible times, but they have simultaneously increased the problems of isolation of student from professor and student from student. We need to use the technology to overcome that isolation.

Imagine the university as a four-lane highway, for example Interstate 80/94 through Gary and Hammond, Indiana. Entrance and exit is from the right. One hundred percent of the cars drive in the far-right lane, because that is the only way to get on and off the freeway. Seventy-five percent move over at least one lane to the left, 50% move over one more lane, and 25% make it to the far-left lane. In our thought experiment, cars in the two left lanes are driven by students who will graduate. An open admissions policy means more cars can get on the highway and presumably, more can get to the two fast lanes and graduate. Internet technology enables the open admissions policy by increasing access for students who have work and family commitments that might otherwise conflict with academic goals. However, just getting more students into the university does not guarantee that more of them will graduate. The far-right lane is now very crowded with students of different needs, backgrounds, capabilities, and goals, all of whom paid the same tuition. The faculty are obligated to help all of them. At the same time, we must avoid damaging the credibility of the university degree by simply passing people into the fast lanes. Students may enter a 4-year institution with a wide range of academic skills, but if a substantial number of them graduate at the low end of that same range, the value of all their degrees is correspondingly degraded.

In the traditional university, dating back to the fight in the University of Paris in the early 13th century, faculty (masters) won the right to decide who graduated and who did not. They also won the right to determine the curriculum, provided it did not actually contradict Church doctrine. There have been many changes in the structure and organization of the university in the intervening 800-odd years. Faculty who profess the specialty that the student is suing to join still decide which students have met their requirements. Nursing faculty decide who will be a professional nurse and history

faculty decide who will be a professional historian. Adding or expanding technology does not change this fundamental faculty role, only how it is performed.

However, in the modern university, faculty do not decide on those professional qualifications. Those are decided by various accrediting agencies, for example, the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology and the Higher Learning Commission. Faculty can only determine whether an individual student meets those qualifications. Furthermore, qualifications for graduation generally include a range of subjects in which the professors have not specialized. The nursing faculty all speak, read, and write English, but they do not teach it. They have turned over the qualifying process for English to the English Department faculty. Faculty are the human interface between the student and the institutional requirements. The success of the student's commitment rests on our decisions.

Where Does the Road Go?

According to the fundamental equation of accounting, the dollar value of an asset is equal to the sum of the borrowed funds and the owner's investment. Assets = Liabilities + Equity. The liabilities are the loans required to create the asset. A more realistic way to look at it is to rearrange the terms, then use the example of a house. The homeowner's share of the asset (equity) is equal to the dollar value of the asset on the housing market, minus the mortgage negotiated with the bank. The homeowner's liability is reduced as they make regular mortgage payments. However, this has no effect on market value. If, as happened during the collapse of the housing market in 2008, the value of the asset decreases, it will not matter what the homeowner has paid on their mortgage. Their equity will decrease.

The same equation sums up all efforts at wealth creation, including student investment in higher education. In this case, the market value of the asset is usually expressed as the anticipated lifetime earnings with the degree, and the graduate's share is found by subtracting the loans incurred. The economic benefit is sometimes expressed in anticipated salaries versus loan payments. The arithmetic works, but the impression is misleading. The cost of a college education is not comparable to the higher cost of a faster car or a better wardrobe. Those are operating costs. Investment in higher education is an investment in an uncertain future and an attempt to create ownership of future assets (oneself).

Many things can effect the market value of the degree. Degrees in some subjects are worth far more than degrees in other subjects. Degrees from some schools may be much more valuable than degrees from others in the same subject. Thus, a degree in a much sought-after specialty may be worth very little if it comes from a "party school" or a school with a reputation for passing students through. This does not depend on whether the institution is public or private. Degrees from the University of California and degrees from Stanford University have similar market values in similar subjects. Beyond the schools, race, gender, and geographic biases of the job market may have a pronounced effect. The universities are under pressure to implement diversity in their student body. The job market only faces the necessity of not getting caught breaking the law—as far as it goes.

All of these variations tend to mask one thing: The market value of any degree from any school depends directly on the confidence the market for that particular specialty has in that school's graduates. Properly maintained certification and consistent quality of education as exhibited by graduates directly impact market confidence in a university's degrees. Maintaining that confidence is one of the faculty's primary responsibilities. If our freshmen find college algebra or college English a challenge, that's one thing. The world is what it is. But if they have not improved their skill sets by graduation, that is quite another thing. The market may be no good at long-range predictions, but it is very good at evaluating investment.

Humanities Education and the Qualifying Process

In today's market, humanities degrees are generally not worth as much as engineering or science degrees. Increasingly, they are regarded as studies from another time when education was the province of the rich and leisured. However, the humanities are an important part of the value of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics degrees. Consider the following from a list of expectations for successful general education (gen ed) completion issued by the Provost's Office of Purdue University:

The ability to understand and reflect upon the complex issues raised by technological and scientific changes and its effects on society and the global world by making sense of, evaluating, and responding to present and future changes that shape individuals' work, public, and personal lives. ("Alignment of Indiana's statewide transfer general education core," n.d.)

"The ability to understand and reflect upon the complex issues" does not involve skill sets stressed in a typical chemistry laboratory. However, part of the value of a Purdue engineering or science degree—and they may be very valuable indeed, depending on the class rank of the graduate—is due to the confidence of employers that they are going to hire someone who knows what they are doing; who understands what effects their actions may have; and who can communicate that understanding to others in the organization.

But from the standpoint of many students, the humanities requirements are an obstacle to their academic progress. Humanities courses increase tuition and time commitments—liabilities—without a measurable increase in what students perceive as valuable about their future degree: the part that will get them a job. Nor is this viewpoint without support in sections of the academic community. All measurement is comparison to a standard. State and national standardized tests that rely heavily on multiple-choice questions are routinely given from kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12). They are also part of postgraduate professional certification. But they are not usually given at the completion of gen ed humanities courses. That pesky little word "understand" refers to something that may be challenging to quantify and thus to justify.

On the one hand, all teachers know the moment when the student's face changes, subtly but definitely. The student saw something, understood it. On the other hand, we can see when someone does not understand or is still groping. But that is precisely the problem. To assess understanding in the humanities, we need to interact with the student, but we also need to do it in a way that can be documented and one that clearly applies the same standards to all students. This means assessing student writing. While reliance on writing is far greater in online courses, it is essential in humanities courses regardless of delivery.

Since 2007, I have worked as a reader for Educational Testing Service (ETS), reading Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH) essays. Once a year, ETS brings together high school teachers and college professors from institutions throughout the United States to read and grade history essays. For most of that period, my job has been reading the document-based question, wherein the students are given a set of documents that may include excerpts of speeches, political cartoons, and sometimes tables of data. The students' job is to tell a story from those documents. Rubrics have become more rigorous over the years and the average essay has grown a little shorter. Some of the essays are little more than outlines with a hasty introduction slapped on the front. Debate among readers and table leaders (a sort of team leader) over whether a particular essay really communicated adequately or actually referred to the required documents in an appropriate way is fairly common. Perfection is predictably rare. However, one thing hasn't changed. It is possible, and sometimes it is easy, to tell when the writer knows what they are talking about, that is, understands their subject.

In one sense, there is nothing special about the APUSH essays. They are just student essays, like the essays most humanities professors encounter regularly and often in exams, term papers, and discussion board posts. We assess our sources, our textbooks, and our colleagues' work regularly; and it is part of all our jobs to quantify that assessment in the case of our students. However, the necessity to maintain objective criteria so that all our students are graded on the same curve makes the process difficult and stressful. Does this particular essay meet the requirements listed in the rubric? Does personal bias toward a particular point of view cloud our judgment? And, finally, can we clearly communicate that judgment to the student writer so that they may improve? These are presented as questions because there seems no permanent and perfect answer. We must keep answering the questions and making the judgments.

Discussing the market value of education in the humanities should not be taken as minimizing the intrinsic value of humanities education in the modern world. I enjoy telling students that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston University. It was not an honorary degree. The sense of inevitability that one often feels reading or listening to King's speeches does not come from passion, although there is plenty of that, but from the unfolding of well-constructed arguments. Market valuation of gen ed requirements is a kind of acknowledgment of that deeper value. We must acknowledge that our students will need to succeed in a competitive job market and their education needs to prepare them for that.

Ensuring the Requirements Are Met

Some years ago, it occurred to me that the expansion of online courses meant that sooner or later, someone's parrot would get a Ph.D. Unless the student, or someone, pays to have an online exam proctored, there is no way to determine competency in that particular subject for that particular student at that particular time. Confidence in the integrity of the exam is essential to market confidence in the competence of the graduates. As online courses exploded, certification of online courses became a challenge for institutions that wanted to maintain the credibility of their degrees. Most required at least one face-to-face encounter prior to graduation. Webcams and rigorous ID requirements coupled with tracking software are now routinely used for certification exams. Because of the additional expense, they are used less often for routine undergraduate work, at least in gen ed courses.

Confidence in online courses was further eroded when a Rutgers graduate named Dave Tomar, writing under the pseudonym of Ed Dante, published a description of his apparently quite lucrative career ghostwriting student essays in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Tomar, 2010). According to Tomar, he wrote essays at every level, up to and including at least one Ph.D. thesis. Tomar claimed to be able to craft a style suitable for a particular student and even to adjust the desired grade level. A student who had struggled to write an English sentence a month earlier might want a B essay—B as in believable. The scandal coincided with sagging confidence in the value of humanities courses, the most likely to rely on essays. Universities responded with enhanced plagiarism-checking software and increased classroom time devoted to discussions of how and when to use quotation marks. Of course, none of that would have helped catch an essay purchased from Tomar, or from any other competent writer. The problem for the humanities professor is that if someone else wrote the essay, then the student did not write the essay. Thus, the essay could not be used to assess either the student's writing skills or their understanding of the topic.

Online humanities courses rely on writing beyond the once-a-semester essay and this may actually make plagiarism easier to catch. A student that has been writing discussion board posts and asking questions in Messages has a more readily identifiable "voice" than a student who has been sitting in the back of the classroom doing their math homework. This moves rather than removes the

problem. Unfortunately, plagiarism is not uncommon on the discussion board. But, even in large online classes, the interaction gives the professor a chance to identify, reward, and/or sanction developing student work.

While Tomar did not specify that his clients were online students, the remoteness of the faculty from their students jumped out at many *Chronicle* readers. Could a professor really not tell that one of his graduate students had paid for someone else to write that thesis? Realistically, some students were buying essays for a long time before the internet made certain methods more convenient. But online students are physically remote and faculty may never know who wrote a particular essay. The role of the internet in marketing ghost-written essays, plus increasing suspicion of the integrity of online exams, did damage to the credibility of online degrees. One began to hear various versions of the comment that in 50 years, only the expensive private schools would have face-to-face classes. The rest would be online. Confidence in online degrees plummeted and remains low. Tomar's parrot rules the roost.

Equal Access and Unequal Outcomes

In an August 11, 2020 interview with *PBS NewsHour*, Scott Galloway, professor of marketing at New York University, summed up the parameters of the college experience that impact student success and market confidence: "[in] a university, the value is from three things, the certification, the education and the experience" (PBS NewsHour, 2020). Professor Galloway directed his comments toward competitive admissions universities. What value do they offer the incoming student that can justify the steady increase in tuition over the past two decades?

Most entering freshmen did not just sit down and pick the best return on their investment in dollar terms. Each prospective student has certain strengths, weaknesses, and personal goals that taken together make investment in some degrees more realistic than in others. The student's mobility may be limited by complicated family commitments. Well before the current pandemic, increasingly limited family finances sometimes forced students into community campuses whether or not campus resources matched student needs. Sadly, a recent study suggested that Pell Grant recipients were among the least well served students in the university community, with disturbingly low graduation rates (Whistle & Hiler, 2018). And finally, while a discussion of the effects of redlining on education is beyond the scope of this essay, variations in the cost and effectiveness of community K–12 schools may restrict student choices and thereby restrict the value of their subsequent educational assets.

While internet technology increases access on many different levels, it cannot enhance the social experience that Professor Galloway listed, at least not as a particular feature of the university. In fact, it tends to do the opposite. Students can relate to practically anybody in the world through social media, but it may be very difficult to relate to other students in the university while enrolled in online courses. This loss of social context has concrete consequences. The more difficult it is to ask a question, the fewer the students who will ask it.

The problem predates the COVID-increased reliance on distance learning, as illustrated by the following example. Looking out over the large classrooms of 40 or 50 that used to characterize fall enrollment, I increasingly saw students sitting as far apart from each other as possible, hoodies up, staring straight ahead at me or into their electronics. They looked like turtles on a dangerous beach. When I encountered a former student one day, I asked him why. He thought seriously for a moment, then replied that in his program courses, he made friends. In gen ed courses, he did not expect to see his classmates again. New relationships hardly seemed worth it.

The isolation of online students in gen ed courses is even more pronounced. I have been using Canvas, the learning management system (LMS), for several years, since the alpha version was first rolled out (it is much improved). Overall, it has enhanced the teaching experience. Canvas is a much

better record keeper than I am. It allows the use of online exams and other online assignment submissions, even for courses centered in the classroom. Exams can be available for more than 1 day, thus removing the necessity that the whole class turn up for the final. While this may be important on any campus where students have heavy course loads and need to juggle commitments, it is especially important on a commuter campus. Online submissions make open book/open note exams much easier to administer because the students have their resources at home with them, not perched on the arm of a classroom desk. The discussion board makes it possible to document class participation, which once had to rely on the professor's subjective impressions. It also allows the professor to become familiar with a student's verbal skill level before the student attempts to turn in a major assignment.

But any LMS increases the skills that the student needs to succeed. Before students can participate in a discussion, they need to master the available technology—and the technology is currently undergoing a dizzying series of market-driven changes. No LMS can accommodate all possible combinations of platforms, operating systems, internet browsers, and internet service providers that students may need to employ. Images and videos increase bandwidth requirements. An increasingly elaborate series of online help pages rapidly becomes part of the problem. Navigating a long list of FAQs or finding the right term for the search engine requires patience and practice.

The following incident from just before the university shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will help illustrate the depth of the problem. An older returning student from an online course asked to meet with me, stating that she could not find the instructions for an important assignment. I was concerned that she was trying to navigate Canvas on her smartphone, but she met me in the campus library with her laptop, opened it up, and logged into the course home page with no difficulty. She then turned the laptop toward me and asked, "Can you show me where to go from here?" I pointed to the scrollbar on the right-hand side and told her to scroll down. She did, and she discovered the link she needed with no further prompting. She was embarrassed but mature enough so that we could laugh together and talk in a friendly and productive way. That encounter scared me. I was fairly sure she was not the only student frustrated by the technology. She was the one who asked.

Even for students comfortable with the technology, the first few weeks of an online course can be challenging. Reading and writing are skills; they improve with practice. Students just beginning college work may not have had much practice. Many do not buy textbooks until they feel more secure about the course. Online readings and Canvas pages help with this but cannot solve it completely. For many classroom students, the first 2 weeks are a time when they look around and decide whether or not they fit in—or want to. Large classes preclude extended introductions. Online classes may reserve a discussion just for introductions, but they also require participation through written posts from the 1st week on.

On the discussion board, the backbone of any online humanities course, differences in skill sets are visible to both the professor and the other students. This is especially true when part of the discussion assignment includes a response to another student's post. For students who thought that online courses were supposed to be easy—droppings of Tomar's parrot—the reaction may be not to post, to post something that meets only part of the requirements, or to post so close to the final deadline that no one but the professor will see their work. In other words, they do not take the risk of participating in the discussion.

Because the discussion is graded, the professor is confronted by a dilemma. They cannot simply throw As and Bs at all the students, even to give encouragement to those whose skills need work. Ultimately, that would degrade the degrees of the academically prepared, while not really helping the truly clueless. On the other hand, if the bar is too high at the beginning of the semester, the less prepared students will not clear that bar and ultimately will not learn as much. Designing and grading discussion board topics is a particularly challenging problem, because even though students cannot

see each other's grades, they can see each other's assignment. The discussion board is a virtual room full of strangers, but if you say something stupid, they may all be looking at you.

When we pivoted to online classes in March 2020, some students were left high and dry. Although I routinely gave online assignments, I discovered too late that some classroom students had only committed to working on them after they could discuss them with their friends. When we stopped meeting on campus, they stopped meeting and stopped posting. Students who sign up for an online course are at least partially prepared for the isolation. To classroom students suddenly locked down it came as an unpleasant shock. In hindsight, I should have insisted on maintaining synchronicity on Zoom, or at least being a presence there myself. But initial attempts to schedule meetings ran into problems when students experienced increased family demands during classroom hours. To keep things moving, I increased discussion board requirements and made participation asynchronous. Eventually most returned, but only after mountains of emails and messages established new lines of communication.

As the lockdown persisted through the 2020 summer and fall terms, the problem of the "disappeared" became more acute, not less. This was despite the increase in online help services from University Information Technology Services (UITS), the library, and the Writing Center. Zoom conferences helped considerably. In fact, I had many more attendees for Zoom conferences than I ever did for in-person conferences in prior years. But the duration of the pandemic and the pernicious economic damage took a terrible toll on regular participation. The result was that for both hybrid and online courses, interaction with my students increasingly shifted to individual communications on Canvas messages and in emails. Increased willingness to interact with the professor is an important development, but I am suspicious about its ability to replace student social experience.

Unfortunately, the technology that has made it possible to keep the University going through the pandemic is one of the isolating forces that may keep students trapped in the far-right lane. Increased access has also increased the number of students who are isolated from the help they need, from their professors, from their peers, and from University services. Weak reading and writing skills are a problem that students may conquer with determination; social isolation tends to erode that determination. It thus directly impacts both skill development and a willingness to engage the course material beyond spitting back answers to multiple-choice questions. You won't see this again. It's not worth it.

Conclusion

Internet technology strengthens an open access university. It allows traditional students to participate in courses that might otherwise be challenging to schedule, and it increases access for nontraditional students with work and family commitments. The technology has gotten the university through the pandemic—so far—and despite social and economic distress, we have kept the road open for our students to meet their goals. But the same technology raises the bar for beginning students and for students with weak verbal skills. Simultaneously, it tends to increase student isolation, both from the professors and from each other. Isolation was already a problem in gen ed courses with large lecture halls. Asynchronous online courses exacerbate this problem with their reliance on written communication. Isolation makes it more difficult for students to ask for help with both course material and internet technology. Increasingly, students with weak verbal skills have difficulty getting the help they need and are trapped in the right-hand lane.

The pivot to online courses in the middle of term meant that many students were stuck by the side of the road. Unable to access normal support and social networks, they struggled to complete assignments. One lesson of the spring 2020 pivot and the following semesters is that we must increase

the use of interactive technology to improve remote access to support services such as the Writing Center and UITS.

Faculty have the dual role of education and of maintaining the credibility of the university degree in the job market. In the humanities, it is essential to be able to fairly assess student writing, both for skill level and for understanding. Because of writing's central role, plagiarism may become a serious problem, particularly in online courses. There is no automatic or technological fix for this, although familiarity with online resources can be very useful. Only interaction with the student will tell the professor when an unfamiliar voice turns up on the page.

Sometimes acquiring a degree, like buying a house, may have to be deferred. Neither the market value of the degree nor the intrinsic value of education may be affordable or even useful. James Baldwin never went to college. In "Letter From a Region in My Mind," he summed up why not. "I no longer had any illusions about what an education could do for me; I had already encountered too many college-graduate handymen" (Baldwin, 1962). If the society does not support the project of higher education, then fewer students will be able to afford it. Currently, our society is fending off a series of very tough challenges. Humanities education may no longer be very high on anybody's funding list.

But despite a national dip in enrollments, our students continue to exhibit determination to reach their goals, and their goals continue to include humanities courses. We have an obligation to figure out how to preserve the credibility of the university and to harness the technology to help them do that. Our best resource may be the interactive technologies that break the isolation.

Epilogue

The end of the Fall term showed a disturbing result: all the grade curves were flattened out and shifted slightly lower. A look at the gradebook revealed problem. Students who have completed work on their term project presentation may earn extra credit from reviewing other students' PowerPoints. I don't distribute extra credit until the very end of term, which gives the impression of student flying finishes. In the fall term, there were no flying finishes. Fewer students posted for extra credit and those who did completed fewer posts. I was reminded that fast runners seldom do a personal best against a slow field. All my courses appeared to have slowed down. This term, I am trying out Zoom study groups for major exams. This tactic is intended to help overcome both isolation and skill barriers for new students. I don't yet know if it will be enough.

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