

Introduction: Restructuring the Humanities

David Palumbo-Liu

AT LEAST SINCE THE 1950S, there seem always to be crises in the humanities. More than anything else, the famous Snow-Leavis exchange, which first remarked upon the divide between the humanities and the sciences, has directly or indirectly colored the various “crises” since. Basically, the argument regarded whether or not the humanities should be involved in solving real-world problems. We might see then the beginning of the modern connection between the humanities and practical value. In our contemporary version of this debate, the humanities are especially judged by weighing their value not only as “applied” disciplines but also as disciplines that can lead to employment. At times of scarcity and specifically the need for jobs, which disciplines are worth retaining, and which are worthy of elimination? Which new disciplines or interdisciplinary projects should we support with private, public, state funding? Attached to that issue—what should students get for their tuition dollars? And what “outcomes” attest to whether their money was well spent or not?

The first volume on a “crisis in the humanities” so named is J. H. Plumb’s edited volume, published in 1964.¹ Plumb, a reader in modern English history at Cambridge, gathered together such luminaries as Ernest Gellner, Graham Hough, Quentin Bell, and others to contribute essays on the fields of history, philosophy, religious studies, literary education, the fine arts, sociology, and economics. In each case, authors were asked to address two things: the role of the humanities in the contemporary British world and what kinds of structural or, shall we say, attitudinal

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¹ J. H. Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1964).



changes would be necessary for the humanities to fulfill that role and, in so doing, become relevant and useful and remain alive. In his introduction, Plumb does not mince words:

Alas, the rising tide of scientific and industrial societies, combined with the battering of the two world wars, has shattered the confidence of humanists in their capacity to lead or instruct. Uncertain of their social function their practitioners have taken refuge into desperate courses—both suicidal. Either they blindly cling to the traditional attitudes and pretend their function is what it was and that all will be well so long as change is repelled, or they retreat into their own private professional world and deny any social function to the subject. And so the humanities are at a crossroads, at a crisis in their existence: they must either change the image they present, adapt themselves to the needs of society dominated by science and technology, or retreat to social triviality. (7–8)

This sentiment is found as well in the closing essay, Ian Lister’s “The Teaching of the Humanities in the Schools”:

Basically, we must appreciate that the 19th-century classifications of knowledge are not always appropriate to our own day, and we must see the dangers of projecting those divisions of learning—necessary at a high level of scholarship and research—down to the lower levels in the schools, where they often become artificial, obsolete, and harmful. We must realize the limitations of an educational system in which we tend to abstract out of life instead of contracting into it. We must acknowledge that the very liberty, flexibility, and variety of the educational structure have ensured that experiment should be limited and isolated, and have often encouraged tribalism in educational organization and staunch conservatism in educational practice. We must postulate that we live in an industrial, scientific society: and that the aim of teaching humanities in the schools should be not only to develop people as individuals but also help us understand and improve the world in which we live. (165)

Our current “crisis” has many of the same features, but with an important difference: the global financial disaster of 2008 had a huge effect on educational institutions worldwide and pressed the issue of the usefulness of the humanities even more urgently, not only in terms of funding vis-à-vis other fields but also in terms of student enrollments and career choices. In Britain, the Browne Review of 2010, also known as the “Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance,” recommended enormous changes in the funding structures and priorities of institutions of higher education. Claire Callender, a professor of higher education and the codirector of the Birkbeck Institute of Lifelong Learning, asserted, “According to Browne, the government should only fund ‘courses that . . . provide skills and knowledge currently in shortage’ such as science, technology, medicine, nursing, healthcare and ‘strategically important’ languages. What does this say about how society values the arts, humanities and social sciences?”²

That same year, in Canada, the University of Toronto decided to close down its venerable Centre for Comparative Literature, as well as its newly established Centre for Ethics, and drastically reorganize standing departments:

² “Browne Review: How Britain Has Reacted,” *Times Higher Education*, October 7, 2010, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/413870.article>.

The end of the centre, and other changes that are quietly being unveiled by the Faculty of Arts and Science, are part of a strategic review aimed at trimming a growing debt of \$55-million from the country's largest faculty. It represents yet another symptom of the financial squeeze in higher education that is leaving students across the country with fewer options.

Also included in the planned changes are the closing of the university's Centre for Ethics, the newly created Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, and the Centre for International Studies, which will have its research folded into the new Munk School of Global Affairs. Five departments—Italian, German, East Asian Studies, Slavic languages and Spanish and Portuguese—will be combined with the Centre for Comparative Literature in the proposed school. The university will no longer grant graduate degrees in comparative literature under the proposal and faculty will no longer be appointed to the discipline.³

Perhaps the most dramatic case in the United States was that of the State University of New York's Albany campus. The administration there, citing the need to cut \$640 million from its budget, announced the suspension of five humanities programs: French, Italian, Russian, classics, and theater. By way of consolation, one administrator said that in the future students will be able to drive to get the offerings they want at other campuses in the system.

One common problem with each of these cuts was that there was no transparency in terms of the financial figures that drove these decisions. In at least the case of the University of Toronto, faced with massive protests from around the world, the administration backpedaled and discovered there were other ways to address their budgetary issues. It appears that such issues were used to cut programs that had, in the minds of administrators, already been marked for elimination based on long-standing prejudices and assumptions.

As Michael Meranze and Christopher Newfield note:

Budget shortfalls are now frequently being used to justify decisions that clearly undermine educational goals. In most cases, as in that of the SUNY-Albany suspension of five humanities departments, the few figures given do not offer specific evidence of the stated budgetary need. In the case of the Browne Report that threatens to cut Britain's public funding for university teaching by 80%, the mayhem is prompted by a polemical metaphor at the start of a section on page 47—public funding is a “hidden blanket subsidy to institutions”—and anchored by one entirely unexplained number for “minimum investment”—700 million pounds per year. The tone of this report is one of blithe immunity from counterargument, and it is superficial in a way that is possible only for a small, appointed committee that does not feel the need to make a serious case for the millions of practitioners of the professions on which it passes judgment.⁴

Several skeptics ran the numbers and found that, rather than being a drain on university budgets, a strong case could be made that the humanities in fact are value positive. Robert N. Watson of the University of California at Los Angeles reported:

According to a spreadsheet calculation done at my request by Reem Hanna-Harell, assistant dean of the humanities at the University of California at Los Angeles, based on the latest

³ “U of T Plans to Shut Down Centre for Comparative Literature,” *Globe and Mail*, July 13, 2010, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/u-of-t-plans-to-shut-down-centre-for-comparative-literature/article1637740/>.

⁴ “Humanities Cuts of Choice,” <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2010/10/humanities-cuts-of-choice.html>.

annual student-credit hours, fee levels, and total general-fund expenditures, the humanities there generate over \$59 million in student fees, while spending only \$53.5 million (unlike the physical sciences, which came up several million dollars short in that category). The entire teaching staff of Writing Programs, which is absolutely essential to UCLA's educational mission, has been sent firing notices, even though the spreadsheet shows that program generating \$4.3 million in fee revenue, at a cost of only \$2.4 million.

So the answer to “who’s going to pay the salary of the English department?” is that the English department at UCLA earns its own salary and more, through the fees paid by its students—profits that will only grow with the increase in student fees.

That isn’t an eccentric calculation. Of the 21 units at the University of Washington, humanities and, to a lesser degree, the social sciences are the only ones that generate more tuition income than 100% of the total expenditure. Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University professors, recently cited a University of Illinois report showing that a large humanities department like English produces substantial net profit, whereas units such as engineering and agriculture run at a loss. The widely respected Delaware Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity shows the same pattern.

Because that evidence runs up against the widespread myth that the other units and departments subsidize the humanities, and up against such well-entrenched forces within the university, it is regularly ignored or even suppressed.⁵

I would argue that we have come full circle back to the “crisis” articulated in the mid-twentieth century. But rather than being prompted by fears about world hunger or thermonuclear warfare or the “space race” or Communism, the current crisis in the humanities is produced by the combination of real budget crises and long-standing antipathy toward the humanities. It is debatable whether the recommendations for relevance and practical value that Plumb puts forward would have, if made actual, had any real effect. It would appear that the humanities were ripe for characterization as luxury goods at a time of austerity. As Randy Martin puts it:

The crisis of the public university has been made acute in the recent financial meltdown. There is purportedly no money for higher education, no future for students but one of mounting debt, and no purpose for studies that cannot demonstrate their value in the marketplace. We have witnessed the spectacle of enormous sums of taxpayer money (more than \$9 trillion of the \$11 trillion set aside for economic assistance) being made available to bail out private institutions like American Insurance Group (\$182 billion), Citigroup (\$245 billion), Bank of America (\$125 billion), or General Motors (which received \$60 billion of the \$110 billion set aside for the automobile industry). Meanwhile, the material integuments of the public, the very institutions and efforts through which something like a common humanity is imagined, sink, shrivel, and shrink. Surely this demonstration of which institutions need to be saved and which sacrificed has proven disorienting to the very idea of “public” to which a higher education available to all was in service. In the rush to make the values on display in present decisions self-evident and necessary, the humanities especially are treated as an extravagant attention to obscure

⁵ Robert N. Watson, “The Humanities Really Do Produce a Profit,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 21, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Really-Do/64740/>.

traditions that are no longer affordable, rather than as an investment in the future we cannot live without.⁶

I would simply add that private colleges and universities are certainly not immune from this vision of the humanities. One particular concern of this issue of *Occasion* is that the seeming logic of balanced budgets (selectively applied) sped past attempts both to seriously rethink the value of the humanities as part of a liberal education and to find more creative ways to restructure, short of cobbling unwilling partners into an ad hoc community.

One of the first, and most dramatic, attempts at downsizing and even closing humanities departments and centers occurred in 2010 at the University of Toronto.⁷ This move sent a shock wave across the humanities internationally. In “Moving around the Furniture: Restructuring the Humanities in Challenging Times,” one of the primary participants in the debates that followed, Linda Hutcheon, looks beyond the particular case of Toronto. She “examine[s] views about the humanities in general that led to the original decision” and “the broader implications of such thinking internationally in order to propose yet another way to move around the furniture in the humanities” and asks, “Can we use this consciousness-raising, money-driven crisis to rethink not only what comparative literature, in particular, but what the humanities, in general, might look like in the twenty-first century?” Opening up an inquiry that several other contributors also pursue, Hutcheon sees these unsettling cuts as potentially enabling new possibilities, possibilities perhaps unthinkable when business continues as usual: “What if, instead of administrators ‘moving around the furniture *a bit*’ in the house of the humanities, we (as the intellectual stakeholders) considered the possibility of moving it around *a lot*?”

In “Reorganizing Humanities Departments: A View from the Office of the Chair of the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages,” Gabriella Safran gives a concrete example of “moving the furniture around a lot” that Hutcheon proposes, with “intellectual stakeholders” stepping up to the task. Safran writes as chair of the entity that emerged out of a decanal mandate at Stanford to reorganize a group of foreign language and literature units as well as comparative literature. What the deans wanted, they said, was a simpler organizational structure; what Safran describes are the negotiations and the outcome of those discussions. The results so far have been encouraging, but we are still pressing the boundaries and possibilities.⁸

One already well-established development that academics often cite as a first good attempt at moving furniture is of course interdisciplinary work. Most of the contributors to this issue refer to it in one way or another, but each with a different vision of interdisciplinary work than has been promoted heretofore. Karen Bassi’s “Euphemisms, Efficiencies, Interdisciplines” asks, critically, if interdisciplinarity as currently understood does not obscure the real issues at hand—perhaps it is not as radical as it might appear, and not enough to both revitalize the humanities and also give them institutional strength. James Clifford argues that there already exists a viable and vibrant kind of cross-disciplinary work going on in what he calls the “Greater Humanities,” a consortium of disciplines cutting across the university’s departments and divisions. He uses the term to point

⁶ Randy Martin, “Taking an Administrative Turn: Derivative Logics for a Recharged Humanities,” in “The Humanities and the Crisis of the Public University,” special issue, *Representations* 116, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 156.

⁷ At the time of this writing, budget-cutting endeavors persist. See “Bad Investments, Good Investments,” *McGill Daily*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2013/02/bad-investments-good-investments/>.

⁸ For a dynamic representation of our current research and teaching interests, see Mike Widner’s “Visualizing Networks of Faculty,” <http://hastac.org/blogs/michael-widner/2013/05/24/visualizing-networks-faculty>.

to “an already-existing reality—overlapping assumptions, epistemologies, and methods that add up to a sprawling configuration of knowledge practices. These dynamic, deeply rooted ways of thinking and working cannot be contained by more narrowly defined disciplinary traditions.”

Roddey Reid’s contribution, “The Crisis of the Humanities and the Public Research Universities: University of California, San Diego, as a Case Study,” also takes up the idea of interdisciplinarity but again, like Bassi and Clifford, he reimagines what this might be, this time paying attention to the classroom and linking it to the political and financial contexts in which it will operate. Reid begins with the peculiar history of his own department and then extends his focus to the wider context of US and British academe and, finally, contemporary responses by humanists to the crisis. He proposes a reimagined and revamped classroom within which “the deep craft culture of the humanities—its attention to the contours and effects of language and rhetoric, cultural specificity, historical change, logical argument, complex causality, narratives of imagined worlds, subjective experience, and the aesthetic power of form—will provide literature, history, and philosophy with the bridge they require to the project-based world of active learning where analysis and interpretation are embodied in a craft culture of making,” entailing “a new form of interdisciplinarity.”

Continuing this focus on pedagogical practices, in “Humanities Creativity in the Age of Online” Christopher Newfield tackles the idea of the undergraduate curriculum and describes how he has rethought the role and practices of being an academic adviser. Instead of working from the premise of prefabricated major requirements, in his advising of students Newfield asks each the same question: “what is your *intellectual interest* as it has emerged from the courses that you have taken?” He notes, “I didn’t ask them what intellectual interest had guided their selection of courses, since that had been constrained by (diminishing) course availability at any given time. I asked them to think about a significant question that their college studies would provide the means to answer. Their coursework could then be structured both retroactively and prospectively as the acquisition of the knowledge and the skills that would enable them to investigate that question. . . . I was introducing ‘research learning’—a process that is simultaneously ‘student centered’ and defines work toward a bachelor’s degree as a related set of inquiries into a few broad topics that college-level skills would allow the student to investigate.” In this sense, “restructuring the humanities” occurs in the interplay between faculty adviser and student, creating a meaningful and rich “structure” from the ground up, so to speak, and within a process of learning in itself.

Turning to the situation in the United Kingdom, in “Operationalizing Hope: The Neoliberalization of British Universities in Historico-Philosophical Perspective” Regenia Gagnier describes the immediate political situation of higher education there and then situates it in a much longer time period and philosophical context. She concludes “with some tentative answers to the perennial humanistic question, what is to be done?” Drawing out Randy Martin’s provocative essay “Taking an Administrative Turn: Derivative Logics for a Recharged Humanities,”⁹ Gagnier describes the work she and her colleagues are doing that not only emphatically reaches into the digital humanities and the sciences but also explicitly carries with it an ethical charge. Just as Martin’s essay argues that faculty and administrators should see themselves as mutually imbricated within a system of value and compensation both more implicit and more global, and therefore should find common cause and advance not only a “recharged humanities” but also a reinvigorated educational system, Gagnier claims that the projects she points to “are

⁹ Martin, “Taking an Administrative Turn,” 156–76.

our derivatives, the leveraged but positive ways that we have inserted our own research and teaching goals (collaboration rather than competitive individualism, respect for diversity, environmental sustainability) into a repulsive system.”

In a very similar spirit, drawing from his background as an intellectual and administrator in both Europe and Asia, in “Tomorrow’s Humanities? Head in the Clouds, Back to the Future, Across the World,” Gregory Lee argues, first, that “what is good for the world—by which I mean society and the environment or, more grandiosely, the whole planet, including humankind—must also be good for the university and, by logical extension, for the humanities” and, second, “that we need to arrive at a way of running the planet and world society that enables us to found a new culture. By that I do not mean an unheard-of culture but the kind of a holistic culture that humankind has already known.” He directs our attention to a “holistic, yet diverse culture [that] would embrace not only creativity and artistic practices but also ways of understanding and observing the world that have hitherto been described as ‘science.’” This seems to get us back to the kinds of proposals Plumb and his colleagues put forward, but with a distinctly political charge that exceeds the idea that the humanities should simply be more relevant, more in tune with the times and more purposeful. The increased financial constraints we find ourselves working within should, we propose, not result merely in our restructuring the humanities so as to fall within those constraints but should also spur us to rethink how we do the humanities so that we can understand better the historical condition we find ourselves in and from that knowledge imagine and put into action a different kind of future.

Reflecting on my own teaching, I would hope that the various new currents (and indeed forces) of higher education would accommodate both older and newer forms of teaching. Like Clifford, I think we should embrace the “Greater Humanities” in an explicit manner, and with Gagnier and Lee, I want to extend our efforts into precise interactions with the sciences. But in every case we should exploit a multiplicity of possibilities and modalities—not simply switch out one model for another, especially if we do not assume that newer is not only better but best.

Right now my courses every year include a community-based learning course that combines teaching Asian American history on-campus with off-campus work with community organizations, an undergraduate course on ethnicity and literature that emphasizes expository writing, and a graduate course of some sort.¹⁰ Recognizing the enormous publicity surrounding online education and particularly MOOCs (massive open online courses), this year I will teach a course open to both advanced undergraduates and graduate students. In “Histories and Futures of Humanistic Education: Books and MOOCs,” we will not only look at but also debate certain features of online education specifically as they relate to the humanities and the various residual and emergent “visions” of the humanities that inform our sense of what they are and what they might be. This course will examine earlier discussions about education and culture (e.g., Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*) and then work through a key moment in the mid-twentieth century whose premises still have influence—C. P. Snow’s famous “Two Cultures” lecture and F. R. Leavis’s rebuttal. We will next delve into the radical responses to educational reform in France and the United States in the late 1960s and, finally, consider the changing state of funding, value, and assessment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We will approach today’s discussions about online education from several angles: education, funding, pedagogy, the idea

¹⁰ For a description of one of these community-based learning courses, see my essay “Embedded Lives: The House of Fiction, the House of History,” *Profession*, November 2011, 13–22.

of the “public good,” and the relation between education and a democratic society. To see and experiment with what online, collaborative education might be, the class will use six sessions of a Coursera course taught by Professor Cathy Davidson at Duke University and then collaborate with her and her students in their face-to-face course.¹¹

There seems to be no end in sight to the budgetary crises affecting the world in general and our educational institutions in particular. The situation is indeed volatile. Recent news reports have California and other states actually running large surpluses, after many years of draconian cuts; however, what states actually do, or do not do, with these surpluses is a matter of intense debate.¹² California’s governor, Jerry Brown, is an outspoken proponent of MOOCs and has persuaded his legislature to feel the same. The consequences for the humanities—not only in terms of the way we teach but also precisely who teaches and at what level of compensation, loss of income, or profit—are going to be enormous, and *Occasion* will likely mount a special issue on this topic. Meanwhile, I am hopeful that my course and others like it will engage students not as consumers and not just as “collaborators” (though that is of course important) but also as committed critics of how knowledge is produced, the social, cultural, and historical nature of values and investments in the present and the future, and as lively participants in these debates. Along with that course, I will keep on teaching small, intense courses in literature employing close reading and also courses that take students out of the classroom and off their laptops and into the neighborhoods and community centers where their knowledge and skills are particularly needed. My hope is of course that the university not only will always make each of these opportunities available to students and teachers but will also always value and support them. In this sense all the contributors to this issue have thought deeply and carefully about all these matters and have suggested their own visions of a revitalized humanities. A

¹¹ Davidson describes her effort in “Are MOOCs Really the Future of the University?,” *Edsurge*, https://www.edsurge.com/n/2013-05-21-opinion-are-moocs-really-the-future-of-the-university#_=_.

¹² See “California Budget Surplus Creates Unlikely Dilemma,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2013. Reprinted in *Boston Globe*, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2013/05/25/large-budget-surplus-poses-problems-for-california/THDjldkdBetoHrlOJGKKdO/story.html>.