

## On Making the Humanities Productive (in the Undergraduate Curriculum and Beyond)

When Steve Jobs released the second generation of the iPad, he announced: "it's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough; it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing. And nowhere is that more true than in these post-PC devices." To say it in other words, it is the aesthetic aspect of life that makes it livable. Indeed, a few years ago, a PC might have been the better "value" considering its technical abilities and its price. But how many of us bought Macs anyway. A necessity? No way. A luxury that granted us aesthetic pleasure. One can allude to Friedrich Nietzsche here, who has foreseen the dilemma of a radically scientific and exclusively rational worldview when writing in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified."

We scholars and teachers in the Humanities often feel the need to defend our work and we often see ourselves confronted with the understanding of the Humanities as a luxury rather than a necessity. To be clear, I don't think that this alternative is in any way adequate to capture what we are doing nor adequate to evaluate our contribution to the success of a university that considers itself an institution with a public mission. However, let's take this alternative seriously for a moment and as a starting point for a discussion of how the Humanities should contribute to our academic future. So, are the humanities a luxury or a necessity? We humanists like to argue that it is a necessity. We want administrators and politicians believe that we do a valuable job. We offer a number of skills that are productive, creative, critical, and even necessary to be successful in a job that otherwise has nothing to do with literature, art, theory, critique etc. When taking classes with us students are being trained in writing, in making arguments, they will acquire rhetorical skills, they will learn how to think, how to weigh different arguments, to form informed opinions and how to defend them, they will experience that the world is more complex than we wished it was, and they will acquire necessary skills to handle and to deal with these complexities. Our students become more familiar with the world whose global citizens they want to be and we want them to become. They learn about different cultures and thus will be able to take a fresh look at their own culture. One could easily go on to explain the advantages of a humanities and liberal arts education. The benefits are endless. And the conflicts of humanity in a globalized world with more and more conflicting cultures and values, more diversity, and the urgency to find solutions for rising inequalities on a global scale, further speak to the necessity of the humanities.

However, this is what we say to satisfy the demands of those who tend to evaluate our performance in credit hours and direct economic outcome and by means of necessities. I wonder how many of those decision-makers make decisions on a daily basis that are not based on necessity, but considered a luxury and an unnecessary pleasure.

To those who think in these terms it can be said that the Humanities are necessary precisely because they are a luxury. Something that a society and a world that we want to live in and that values life, and the good life in particular, must afford. And this concerns not only your Apple computer, your Hermes handbag, your daily Starbucks coffee on your way to your office, and your desire to enjoy reading literature after work, but luxury value items such as justice, respect, open-mindedness, diversity, equality, democracy, individuality, health, art, pleasure and equal access to all of these.

But how does this slightly polemic discussion translate into practical measures regarding the Humanities at CU Boulder? Well, first and foremost, it concerns the ways in which the Humanities should be evaluated. To measure our success in credit hours not only does not make any sense but is also completely counterproductive. It results, for example, in desperate and often ridiculous attempts to be popular and to meet students where we believe that they are or want to be. As if we had any clue of what drives our students and their particular cultural interest. It would be interesting to make a list of all the newly developed courses that try to increase enrollment by making reference to pop-cultural phenomena such as vampires, zombies, criminals, popular TV-formats etc. The lack of success that these courses often have should be evidence enough for how we underestimate our students who deserve to be taken seriously and treated like equals with a potential to take what we teach and research and make it productive for an understanding of their own culture and generation. This will foster an exchange in which we as Humanities scholars will again be learners and our own scholarship will profit from our conversations in the classroom, will be informed by the intellectual curiosity and cultural expertise of our students.

Too rarely do we think of our classrooms as a place of active intellectual exchange and we often take it as a place where we impart knowledge and entertain students for the purpose of collecting as many credit hours as possible for some kind of administrative statistic. We forget about one of the main foundations on which the university is built: the unity of teaching and research. However, to maintain the unity of teaching and research as a foundation of a university's success, the institution must provide the conditions. I was amazed of what it took to get approval for a new core course. It was certainly more challenging than getting my job at CU Boulder on an incredibly competitive market. The university should trust the scholars and teachers it hires. And if it does not, don't hire them.

To maintain the unity of teaching and research also means that course offerings must change on a regular basis. It is probably true that the professor who teaches the same lecture every semester will have more time to do research. But first, what does this mean for the course that will be taught in the same way over and over again and most likely with a continuing decrease of the teacher's interest, motivation, and enthusiasm? And second, what does this mean for our research that seems to be detached from our daily profession on campus and almost turns into a matter of private concern (and I heard colleagues say that it was precisely this)? We need more incentives to develop new courses, to make our research accessible to our students and to widen our horizons by listening to what our students have to contribute. Instead, the university incentivizes large lecture courses by reducing the teaching load of those who over and over again teach the same course.

To be fair, CU Boulder has taken some steps towards maintaining its status as one of the great public universities by introducing first-year seminars and by supporting a new PhD consortium in the Humanities. But these can only be considered first steps. To give us more freedom to teach what we research and to make scholarship the measure for evaluation also in regard to our teaching, will be necessary to make the Humanities as productive as we can be. Eventually this success would show in better retention rates and job placements.

To summarize by adding some bullet points:

- the conditions must be created that scholarship in the Humanities can inform our curriculum (undergraduate and graduate)
- incentivize teaching that fosters the exchange between scholarship and teaching
- make scholarship not credit hours the basis for evaluating the Humanities

- create more opportunities for undergraduate scholarship in the Humanities (UROP is a good start)
- lower the hurdle for creating and teaching new innovative courses
- include Assistant Professors in curriculum committees and let them bring new ideas to campus and make them productive