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Could Flipping the Curriculum Lead to More Jobs and Better Educated Students?

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By Claire Potter

Another school year ends, and the MOOC people are happily planting stories in the media about a teaching model that, if it succeeds, is likely to kill off full time work in the liberal arts forever. How do we fight this, and the concurrent view that liberal arts BAs are simply a thing of the past?

Here's my idea: let's flip the curriculum. Kill the survey courses and start teaching history as applied knowledge, and as a set of skills that can tangibly enhance the careers that most of our students will actually have.

As a profession, we have, to date, mounted few successful counter-arguments to those who wish to shift resources away from teaching, and jobs, in the humanities and social sciences. One of the reasons that MOOCs may be doing so well is that they represent practically the only big idea that the academy has had in the past several decades. Many of our colleagues in the humanities have played defense for so long it's hard to know what a good, solid curricular reform would look like.

The song goes like this: liberal arts BAs are valuable in and of themselves. They don't need to be justified in concrete, practical terms — and in fact, those of us who work in private education may think it is beneath us to explain why centuries of art, literature and culture are critical to an education. Sound familiar? Well, it's a losing argument, not because the liberal arts don't have transcendent value, but because we have been unable to make a case that is compelling enough to stop the loss of full-time jobs, much less get back the positions that have been lost since the 1970s. In a time of high tuitions and stagnating middle-income jobs, our critics, those who urge students to simply get trained for work and get cultural enrichment on [iTunesU](#), appear to be more responsive to conditions on the ground than we who imagine ourselves as dedicated to producing lifetime learners.

And yet, in a moment when flexibility and innovation is being called for, if we look at all but the top-tier, four-year colleges, what do we see in a history curriculum? Survey after survey. They are a basic curricular staple, the courses one must take before having access to anything relevant. They are the courses anyone can teach (there is a whole army of people out there who will teach any survey offered, regardless of their own training.) The survey becomes more and more prominent as we move down the ladder of prestige to the two-year colleges, where generic curricula make it possible to hire and fire part-time faculty without worrying about losing “coverage.”

Surveys are, of course, the easiest way to process large numbers of students: administrators love them for this, even though they don't want to pay more than a pittance to have them taught. For scholars, the survey fetish lies in two dated (dated to about 1880, in fact) and unproven beliefs. One is that students need to acquire general knowledge as a prerequisite to assimilating specialized knowledge; the second is that students who are not going to pursue a liberal arts major need to be force-fed cultural capital, however disconnected from their present and future the course materials are. Our bias towards the survey feeds the ongoing process of adjunctification: such courses make it easy to hire the cheapest, most generically trained labor, and allow employers to invest nothing in further professional development. Current forecasts are that the ideal academic laborer of the future may not even need a Ph.D., since s/he will not teach, but simply help to manage, enormous courses packaged and sold by Ivy League ~~for~~ non-profits. Employees' work will be Taylorized by companies like [Turnitin.com](#), which currently offers drag-and-drop comments as part of its [GradeMark option](#).

Getting rid of the survey will not mean rejecting technology; rather we will have to run toward technology, new media, old media and the digital. This will cause all of us to think in counterfactual ways, to embrace futures that we cannot be certain of. This will require facing the nature of our ambivalence about the relationship between scholarship and progress. For example: we admire technology, but we do not understand it well enough to use it well, and we fear the speedup and proletarianization it seems to facilitate. We are sentimental about the intellectual traditions that made us who we are, the masterful lectures delivered by world-class scholars, but we know that these forms of learning aren't working for students any more. We yearn for a more embracing vision of what our discipline can do for today's

students and a good argument for why real faculty in real classrooms should do it — but we are unwilling to risk our professional prestige by trying out hands-on pedagogy that prioritizes civically engaged and community scholarship over the big national questions that make us star lecturers.

Dumping the survey course would be a huge step towards reimagining a curriculum for the 21st century that could employ more, and better professionalized, scholars. But many of us don't even know how to get started with making change at the most basic level: ourselves, and our own courses. So if you are one of those people who wants to try something new, here are some sample ideas as you plan your next teaching year.

Organize a class around hands-on work in a local archive. I did it this year, and I will warn you of one thing: it's hard. Peter Knupfer's "Consultants in the Classroom: Student/Teacher Collaborations in Community History" (*Journal of American History*, v. 99 no. 4, March 2013) gives you a little hint as to the rewards and the difficulties of this kind of teaching. I had the good luck of partnering with the New York Public Library, which was an awesome experience for me, for the students and (as I understand it) for the librarians we worked with. Here's the trick: you ditch general knowledge altogether. You begin with the archival work, rather than secondary reading in the field, and because students have no other choice, the research questions emerge from the archive itself. If you can, hold at least a third of the class sessions *in the archive*, so that you can actually go from student to student answering basic questions and talking to them about what they are finding. Going on site has the added advantage of demonstrating that public archives are for public use, rather than a special resource for majors, honors students, or elite undergraduates.

Knupfer had all his students working on a single collection; my students chose their own collections, which was a tad more chaotic. But the result, I would argue, is the same: students learn the skills associated with archival research, and they learn how any project they might be interested in pursuing — whether activist, media-oriented, artistic, business-related, or professional — can be enhanced researching and activating its history.

Show students that popular culture and history are intertwined fields. If you are interested in incorporating performance or media in your teaching of history, or vice versa, consider contacting actor/writer/director [Adam Lazarre-White](#) of Los Angeles. Lazarre-White, who has a BA in Government from Harvard and is living proof that a liberal arts education can be transferred successfully to other fields, can teach your students how good narrative history can make powerful arguments to big audiences. For a small fee, he can come to your campus to do a workshop organized around his short film, "200 years" (and before you start saying that there is no money, how many consultants did your administration hire last year?) The film, which is organized around a descendant of enslaved Africans purchasing the plantation upon which his ancestors labored, raises a number of powerful themes about the institution of North American slavery, most importantly the links between literacy and social power.

Instead of a general survey, imagine teaching college students the history or literature of what they plan

to do. As I was lying in the hospital, I was cared for by numerous kind and skilled people, nearly all of whom were immigrants and nearly all of whom had entered the US higher education system through a community college. 100% of them said that although they regretted not having made more of their liberal arts credits, that the courses offered had little to do with their primary goal: graduate and get into advanced training or the workforce. Increasingly, this is true of students doing four-year degrees as well. As students disidentify with survey courses, the true purpose of MOOCs becomes clear: allowing large public systems **to shift the burden of required, generic courses that no one wants to take or pay for on-line**. Students can log these (unwanted but necessary) credits at a low, low cost to the taxpayers, and to themselves, while these systems cut even more jobs in the humanities and social sciences.

And yet, the only reason MOOCs are an alternative at all is because of the vast number of schools who are all teaching the same survey courses. Why aren't faculty becoming more creative about how liberal arts credits can be fulfilled, and doing it in a way that makes our courses difficult to replace with online versions? If we believe that the purpose of the liberal arts requirement is to teach everyone the rudiments of critical thinking, would it not be a good idea to ask students preparing for a professional career to take a topical course in, say, the History of Medicine, the History of the Office, the History of Finance, The History of the Oil Industry — rather than what we currently offer: comprehensive histories of the United States sliced in half at 1865, Western Civilization surveys and whatnot? If you must have the Civil War, what about different sections of the course that speak to different aspirations: nursing, military strategy, social work, the law and accounting?

Sure, these courses can be replicated as MOOCs too. But if faculty made an effort to revisit their curricula every 4-7 years to make sure that it was still relevant to the work non-majors were interested in, MOOCs would begin to lose their profitability because they would have to be revised too frequently.

Readers, what interventions and curricular reforms do you have planned for 2013-14?

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