Experimental Humanities and the Future of Higher Education

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The spectre of crisis is always looming over those of us who work in the humanities. Whether it's dropping student enrolment rates in fields like English and History, ever-tightening budgets and staff cutbacks, or public dismissals of humanities subjects as unlucrative and frivolous, it can sometimes be hard to see how we will survive – let alone how we can make a difference in a world plagued by runaway inequality, rapidly advancing climate change, and crumbling faith in democratic institutions. But my work founding and running the Center for Experimental Humanities at Bard College has given me a glimpse of the transformative possibilities that open up when institutions support their staff and students' efforts to chart creative, inclusive, and technologically diverse pathways through the humanities. Far from being relics of another time, the humanities can become fertile ground for seeding meaningful change in the world when we are empowered to: a) carve out spaces for experimentation in teaching, research, and public projects that draw on an array of media and methods; b) redefine what we mean by 'the humanities' to include a much wider cross-section of human interests and histories than is commonly associated with that term; and c) gather in interdisciplinary teams to imagine alternative futures together.

Inspired by images selected from the various courses and projects offered by EH Bard.
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When I started at Bard in 2010, I was still in my 20s and completing my DPhil in English. Because of the concerns I've noted above, I didn't know if academia was the right place for me. But I was lucky to land at a small institution with big social justice goals, a passionate commitment to the arts and humanities, and incredible flexibility in what its faculty could teach and build – as long as we didn't require much of a budget! Within two years, my colleagues and I were launching the first courses and projects in our new initiative. We saw the moment's enthusiasm for integrating digital methods into education as a chance to do more than adopt new tech. Instead, it seemed the ideal opportunity to rethink the print-based material conditions that we often take for granted in the humanities, and to reconsider which texts, cultures, and disciplinary practices we put at the centre of our work. So rather than a Digital Humanities programme, we built an Experimental Humanities programme. Not wanting to throw thousands of years of humanistic baby out with the bathwater, we gathered a

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team of scholars from fields like Africana Studies, Asian Studies, Anthropology, Art History, Computer Science, Film and Electronic Arts, Gender and Sexuality Studies, History, Literature, Media Studies, Medieval Studies, Philosophy, Theater and Performance Studies, and more to discuss what courses, projects, subjects, and teaching methods we would dream of developing together. We based our ideas on the triple pillars of history, theory, and practice, keeping always in mind this central question: 'How does technology mediate what it means to be human?'.

Now in our eighth year, Experimental Humanities (EH) offers up to 22 affiliated courses per semester, many of which integrate collaborative, hands-on methods with old and new technologies: from building a room-sized camera obscura as part of studying early modern vision and image-making to hand-coding 90s-style HTML pages while discussing cyberpunk and the rise of the early web; or, in one course, running a Wikipedia editing project to correct for missing and faulty local Native American history alongside work on the college farm with Indigenous 'Three Sisters' crop-growing methods. We received a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2014 that boosted our growth into a fully-fledged humanities centre, and we now run an array of community-based projects including out of our Digital History, Immersive Media Arts, and Art + Technology + Ecology Labs. The Center for EH also nurtures new collaborative, interdisciplinary initiatives through topic-based faculty research clusters such as Archives, Attention, Food, Health and Medicine, Space and Politics, and Sound. Our courses, public projects, and clusters feed into and strengthen one another, bringing urgent questions about the present into conversation with rich knowledge of the past.

We also look ahead to imagine different kinds of futures from the one we are told inevitably lies before us: ever more individualistic, competitive, and dehumanisingly data-driven. We find ourselves considering alternative organisations of the future, like the Food cluster's mission, which asks: 'How can we build healthier, more equitable, and culturally just food systems?' In that case, cutting-edge microbiology techniques meet Indigenous foodways and traditional fermentation methods in the classroom, and extend to campus-wide events and community projects that decentre industrialised Western approaches and narratives. Scientists, humanities scholars, farmers, chefs, and food justice activists join in much-needed conversations to map out alternatives to agribusiness practices that destroy the environment, perpetuate the oppression of low-income and minority communities, and make food less healthy for us all.

We also think about what roles universities and the humanities can play in ushering in a more equitable future; for example, our Digital History Lab (DHL) has been working to answer this question: 'How can communities and universities collaborate to produce mutually beneficial knowledge?' Members of the DHL and Hudson Valley partners have together digitised local family archives and taken oral histories for projects like our public-facing website about regional apple farming. In another project, students and staff worked with locals to recover the lost cemetery of a progressive retirement home for the poor; they photographed, mapped, digitised, and filled in as much genealogical data as possible for each grave site, making visible an obscured piece of history and helping families locate the resting places of long-lost relatives. One EH undergraduate created a virtual reality tour of a nearby mill town based on historical drawings of working-class buildings and homes, part of a project that advocates for the importance of remembering and studying everyday people, not just the rich and powerful. Projects like these suggest how we have been tackling another important question: 'How can we help students not just learn about inequality, but take part in combating it through rigorous scholarship while also learning technological skills?'

Experimental Humanities is proud to be one of the inaugural programs in the new $1 billion Open Society University Network, and excited to work alongside international partners to rethink what the humanities, universities, and our collective global futures can be. To tackle such big questions we need all the perspectives we can get – which is why reaching across traditional boundaries to learn from each other is essential. But so is the willingness to experiment, in senses associated with both the arts and sciences: working in ways that integrate hands-on practice with a range of media forms, forming collegial teams with diverse areas of expertise, and maintaining an open-minded spirit of possibility, including the possibility of failure. I am grateful to work with passionate, brilliant collaborators from an array of backgrounds; only a small proportion of the projects I've mentioned here are ones that I have led personally. My main efforts have gone towards building community and clearing room for others to gather, share, experiment, and flourish. Such spaces are crucial to building better systems of higher education, and better futures for us all.

A mentor once described the arts and humanities as engaged with what makes life worth living, not just what keeps us alive. I love this way of looking at what we do, but increasingly, I believe that the humanities can be the hub for action in the world that meaningfully brings these two goals – thriving *and* surviving – together.

You can find out more about the Center for Experimental Humanities at http://eh.bard.edu

The Center for Experimental Humanities hosts an e-waste screen repair workshop and the Patagonia Worn Wear Wagon during Bard College's Community Sustainability Exhibition in 2019 (photograph by Krista Caballero)

3D printed sound waves of students saying 'Experimental Humanities', from Whitney Slaten's 'Sound Studies and Critical Listening' course (photograph by Michelle Mandoki)