

## The End of the Curriculum

ELIZABETH RENKER

*Professor of English*

College of Humanities

---

*Editor's Note: This essay was originally delivered as Professor Renker's Inaugural Lecture on November 3, 2008 to mark her promotion to full professor. Some of the marks of the occasion have been retained in order to preserve the full spirit of her lecture.*

After the title of my talk was announced, a colleague contacted me to ask if I'd like to serve on some curriculum committees at various levels of university governance. My answer to this question was, no thank you—the only committee I should serve on is the “End the Curriculum” committee.

I don't mean this as a joke, nor do I mean it to denigrate the labor of those who serve on such committees. I myself served on the College of Humanities Curriculum Committee for three years, so I'm intimately familiar with just how complex, backbreaking, and thankless they can be, how much manpower they consume, and how much seriousness and good faith faculty put into them. My point, rather, is that they are bureaucratic machines that no longer serve student interests. As my title indicates, I believe that the whole enterprise of the curriculum as we have known it as students and teachers in our lifetimes is reaching its historical end.

At present, the term “curriculum,” as well as curricular decisions and practices in higher education, are in a state of transition and confusion. Let's start with the denotation of the word. For assistance I'll turn to two of the most authoritative sources in our culture: dictionary.com and Wikipedia. Both stress two core meanings of “curriculum”:

1. a regular or particular course of study
2. the aggregate of all courses offered in a school

These definitions are at odds with one another; the first implies selection in the form of particularity, while the second simply includes everything. This signifying muddle makes crystal-clear historical sense. The first

meaning, curriculum as a school's "regular course of study," was the model that undergirded the antebellum college in the United States, in the form of the classical curriculum of Greek and Latin that simply defined what it meant to go to college at that time. This curricular model of regularity was overthrown after 1870 by the elective system. That was a time of upheaval, of threatening dramatic changes, when educational conservatives defended the classics and educational moderns embraced a new model of variety. As universities afforded students more choice, the classics fell into steep decline. Meanwhile, opponents shredded the elective system in the way that traditionalists generally oppose change: as threatening to the whole enterprise of education. As one critic put it, if you're going to offer classes in swimming, why not classes in bathing? At Ohio State, Joseph Denney, after whom Denney Hall is named, at one point scathingly noted in a memo that he found a proposed class called "Conversation" to be a terrifying prospect.

*We have not seen this seismic a change in the knowledge model at the heart of the university since the job class of the professor was invented in the late nineteenth century.*

My recent book, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History*, argues that we're now at the cusp of an equally transformative change. The curricular model in which we have all studied and worked, in which a core curriculum of required classes somehow balances an elective component, will become an artifact of the twentieth century, just as the classical curriculum became an artifact of the nineteenth century.

Let's return to the two denotations of "curriculum" and the present situation. For bureaucratic reasons and historical reasons, we in higher education routinely make curricular decisions that gesture *at* curricular regularity without actually providing it. Universities don't explain to students or to their parents that the model is riddled with contradictions. The theory behind general education classes, for example, is ostensibly to ensure that all students receive broad training in core areas that will supplement the major area of specialization. Such core training would, in theory, create intellectual community among students and foster cultural literacy, the way that students a century ago could all recite sections of

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or *As You Like It*. Actual curricular practices are such that it is more typical to find the situation we see at Ohio State, where so many courses fulfill GEC requirements that the idea of "general education" does not provide students with ballast but instead with scattered incoherence—and I say this having served on the College Curriculum Committee while it was hashing through the GEC, which, in my view, does not serve undergraduates. I would guess that those of you who have discussed the GEC courses with students know what I'm talking about.

Another local instance of an analogous curricular situation is the English Department's periodic discussion about focus areas. Undergraduates were at one time required to choose a group of three related courses within the English major as a kind of subspecialty. Then we dispensed with that requirement. Now we are bringing focus areas back, this time as optional, trying to balance prescription and choice, an instance of what I would call "gesturing at regularity."

My title, "The End of the Curriculum," is meant to indicate what I see as an historic shift to what I call the "post-curricular university." My notion is that the post-curricular university will gradually cede the ideology of a core (whether real or imagined) and move toward a menu of subjects and classes whose contents are at all points, and by definition, wholly variable.

A number of forces are driving this dramatic change in models, including the increasing corporatization of higher education and the related casualization of academic labor, both of which Frank Donoghue has analyzed in his recent book *The Last Professors*. My focus today, however, is a different force pushing the university to adapt to a new knowledge model, and that is the increasing share of curricular power falling to undergraduates. While administrators and professors have always had to contend at some level with undergraduate preferences and behaviors, the current situation is historically unique in that the vector of curricular power is now shifting to undergraduates and away from professors. We have not seen this seismic a change in the knowledge model at the heart of the university since the job class of the professor was invented in the late nineteenth century. The "age of the professor"

began at that time, inaugurated by The Johns Hopkins University and its invention of the American Ph.D.; now the “age of the professor” is nearing its historical close.

My book concluded by calling attention to bottom-up trends shaping the ascendant post-curricular university. Among them I included:

1. changes in student literacy as a result of digital culture
2. transformations in student ideas about authorship
3. the inauguration of the age of participation
4. the rise of the amateur as a new authority

Quick shorthand for a phenomenon that could simultaneously represent all of these trends would be the student’s reference work of choice, Wikipedia.

The conclusions in my book about the shifting vector of power in the knowledge model, from professors to students, drew some alarm from readers. Some asked what kind of practical advice I would offer to professors wondering how to adapt. One senior professor at another university was particularly horrified by the detail I quoted indicating that undergraduates now construe email as a technology “for communicating with old people.”

I thought I would simply provide a local example today of one of my own curricular experiments meant to respond to the transformative energy of the present moment. Two years ago, while I was completing my book and mulling over its implications for the classroom, I began teaching a new upper-division class under the heading “Special Topics in Poetry.” I called it “Poetry/Alternative: The History of English Poetry and Alternative Music.”

It’s a common formulation among those of us who love poetry to hear that Byron was the rock star of his age. Instead of teaching Byron as the rock star of his age, I wanted to teach current rock stars as the Byrons of our age.

My premise for the class was that music today occupies the cultural position that poetry once occupied, a popularity it has lost as it has become an increasingly highbrow genre. The poetry of contemporary

lyrics would also give me a doorway with students through which to teach the history of English poetry that might initially seem more remote to them.

Such a class would also allow me to combine three of my primary scholarly interests: the history of the canon; the history of higher education; and the genre of poetry—in a new context that would have to draw its vitality from undergraduate life.

Working with the trend I've been tracing in which amateurs are the new experts, this was also going to be a class in which, by definition, one of the challenges for me as teacher was to cede at least half my power of expertise. The indie canon is theirs to adjudicate, not mine. Although I open the class with the Talking Heads song "Psycho Killer" as an autobiographical gesture—"autobiographical" because I was a Talking Heads fanatic when I was their age, which is the story that I tell to open the class—I put the rest of the syllabus together by balancing the idea of a poetry canon with material from the endlessly shifting texture of the world of new music.

This means that my syllabus changes substantially each time I teach the class; and each time I have taught it, I have allowed the students to choose more and more of the class content, which it is then my homework to learn and prepare and to return to them through the lens of the expertise I do offer them, in the genre of poetry.

I weave the songs they choose into relation with poems dating from 1600 to the present. In some cases my combinations are driven by formal concerns, in others by thematic linkages. Throughout we are watching the careful movements of language, lines, and sound, both the sounds of words and the sounds of instruments, to create dense textures of meaning, as any poetry class would.

In the Appendix, I have provided examples of poems and song lyrics we might cover in the course. Walt Whitman's "To a Stranger" is a poem I often teach, because, among other things it allows me to talk about free verse techniques. By the time I get to Whitman, I have already laid the ground for the free verse revolution by teaching highly formal poets like George Herbert. In fact, I began this quarter's class by teaching Herbert's formal techniques and their exacting relation to his content alongside the new Bat for Lashes song "What's a Girl to Do?," the OK GO song "Here

It Goes Again,” and the Cold War Kids song “Hang Me Up to Dry.” In the particular class that includes “To A Stranger,” I also cover a different use of free verse techniques than Whitman’s, in Stan Rice’s poem “The Strangeness.” We produced an elaborate and exacting line-by-line close reading of this poem, with me at the whiteboard walking them through the enjambments, convolutions of syntax, and searing reflections the poem offers on the estrangements that can hide within intimate relationships. Finally, we consider “Green Gloves,” a song written by Matt Berninger of the band The National, a band introduced to me by a former student. “Green Gloves” balances and contrasts beautifully with the two poems. If you glance at the first few lines, you’ll see that it opens with an exploration of the increasing distance creeping into friendship, with a gesture of closeness, “I have arms for them,” trying somewhat desperately to hold together a disintegrating relationship. As a student pointed out during this close reading just a few weeks ago, while we can see Whitman asserting his intimate connections with strangers, “Green Gloves” traces the opposite problem, that of estrangement from friends. In Rice’s poem, the opening “strangeness of others” eventually crystallizes into the more surprising strangeness of your very own mother—and within that strangeness, through the work of Rice’s lines, we find hiding the even stranger strangeness of one’s self.

One of the ways this class has been extraordinarily lucky is in active contributions from musicians. Ed McGee of the jam band One Under (who is here today), whose work was introduced to me by a student in the class, spent a session with us in person, listening and pitching in as we talked through close readings of his songs. One song, “Armageddon,” begins,

Just got back from the Argmageddon  
Couldn’t stay long but I poked my head in  
Just to put an end to the endless dreading  
All in all, it was a lovely wedding.

Ed also shared with the class the following facts that you can also find on his bio page at [oneunder.net](http://oneunder.net): “While working on his minor in English at Ohio State University, he studied poetry under Gordon Grigsby, Professor of English, Emeritus. Grigsby, demanding and stern, had a profound effect on Ed’s writing, challenging him to expect more from himself, to demand more. Though not a musical one, Ed still lists Grigsby as one of his most significant influences.”

Another musician who has visited the class is also here today, Carlos Avendano of Flotation Walls. Flotation Walls was featured a few months ago on the MTV series “Bands on the Rise,” and his breathtaking song “Kids, Look at the Waves” was named as one of the top 10 songs of 2007 in the UK. It’s also one of my personal favorites.

Musicians more far-flung have also participated in the class via videoconferences made possible through the technical support of the English Department’s Digital Media Project. Rivers Cuomo of Weezer videoconferenced with us, answering student questions and discussing close readings of his work. When we ran by him two readings of a few lines from the song “Beverly Hills” that we had discussed at some length, his clearly emotional response was, “It’s beautiful, what you did with that.” Rivers was the first musician who agreed to meet with my class. I had simply sent him a fan letter; since he had recently graduated from Harvard as an English major, I thought that if any famous musician out there might be willing to work with my class, it would be he. He also sent us the demo of eighteen songs he was working on at the time, along with a survey form to fill out about our responses. Some of these songs were released just a few months ago on the Weezer disc *Red Album*, and the disc art includes a photo of those survey forms. Our class also made the top story on [www.weezer.com](http://www.weezer.com), after which I received email from around the country asking questions about the class.

Matt Berninger, the author of “Green Gloves,” also met with us last summer via videoconference. The band has just completed a world tour, including opening for REM and Modest Mouse last summer, and he will be talking to my present class later this month. With The National too, I was simply lucky, having managed to contact the band by sending an invitation to their MySpace page. So I really did put this class together with nothing but theories, enthusiasm, and luck, all of which more than came back to it in the form of student and musician participation.

So. What will the curriculum look like after the end of the curriculum? My guess is that it will look something like what the editor-in-chief at *WIRED* Magazine, Chris Anderson, calls “The Long Tail.” He coined this term to describe the new economy of niche markets. The Long Tail is no longer driven by hits, but by its ability to cater, thanks to online distribution, to a vast array of niches rather than to mass preferences. Anderson celebrates this shift to a “world of abundance.” Just as the

Long Tail economy validates and caters to a vast array of individual tastes, so the curriculum, in my view, needs to enter its next, bottom-up phase—and will, whether we cooperate or not.

## **Appendix**

### **To a Stranger**

*By Walt Whitman*

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,  
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me  
as of a dream,)

I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,  
All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate,  
chaste, matured,

You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,  
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours  
only nor left my body mine only,

You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you  
take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,

I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or  
wake at night alone,

I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,

I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

### **The Strangeness**

*By Stan Rice*

The strangeness of others—  
Even your sisters and brothers—  
Is a responsibility to  
Overcome—or some night they will be lying  
In a bed dying—and how you loved them,  
Its quality—will be as unknown  
To you as your own mother was  
While a living stranger.

### **Green Gloves**

*By Matt Berninger/The National*

Falling out of touch with all my  
friends are somewhere getting wasted,  
hope they're staying glued together,  
I have arms for them.



Take another sip of them,  
it floats around and takes me over  
like a little drop of ink in a glass of water

Get inside their clothes  
with my green gloves  
watch their videos, in their chairs.  
Get inside their beds  
with my green gloves  
Get inside their heads, love their loves.

Cinderella through the room  
I glide and swan cause I'm the best slow dancer  
in the universe

Falling out of touch with all my  
friends are somewhere getting wasted,  
hope they're staying glued together,  
I have arms for them.

Get inside their clothes  
with my green gloves  
watch their videos, in their chairs.  
Get inside their beds  
with my green gloves  
Get inside their heads, love their loves.

Now I hardly know them  
and I'll take my time  
I'll carry them over, and I'll make them mine.

Get inside their clothes  
with my green gloves  
watch their videos, in their chairs.  
Get inside their beds  
with my green gloves  
Get inside their heads, love their loves.