

## **Sustained Engagement: Justifying the Humanities in the Age of Multitasking and Social Networking**

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Humanities instructors often feel compelled to make a case for our own relevance. We seem to feel as though we are continually fighting for a place both within the academy and in the minds of our students. We defend our territory and the products of our disciplines from the encroachments of more “practical” endeavors on both of these fronts, as though they are a pair of interlocking zero-sum games in which we have found ourselves steadily losing ground. In the former, we engage in perennial battles to secure or preserve our modest share of funding, library space, and curriculum requirements. The latter battlefield, however, presents some more daunting challenges. Many of us perceive in our students not simply a lack of interest, but a mindset even among those with aptitude for and interest in our subjects that they are merely obstacles to overcome: boxes to be checked on their transcripts because some disembodied administrator demanded it of them. Too often, the engineering major or budding marketing executive wishes to do their time in “humanities purgatory” in order to pursue that which really matters once they earn their freedom. Thus, we find ourselves unable to teach the skills of our disciplines to many of these students until we convince them that history or literature offers them something valuable.

These issues are not new to the 21st century, nor are they confined to one discipline or college. Nonetheless, it appears that the situation is becoming more dire by the quarter (and soon – semester), at least in the minds of instructors. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is a social change borne of our increasing engagement with and dependence upon technology. I could not say when this change took place in me, but I find myself constantly drawn to my laptop and smartphone, ever checking emails, updating webpages, and getting the latest updates from friends, family, and colleagues from multifarious online sources. All the more so for my students, who tell me that they update their facebook status while

listening to their newest playlist while texting while downloading while watching YouTube, etc., while studying for exams! When the bell rings, they remove their earbuds, send off that last text or status update, switch to vibrate, and download my powerpoint from the course website to follow along and take notes. At least that's what I tell myself they are doing.

We celebrate multitasking today: all of us constantly juggle the myriad of obligations and interests in our lives in increasingly rapid fashion. This lifestyle is not conducive to the humanities generally, or historical study in particular. I find that many of my students arrive in class without the skills or attention span necessary to allow sustained engagement with course material. In short: it is a struggle to convince many of them to sit down and read. I can hardly finish a chapter nowadays without downloading the intriguing article just cited within, or checking the latest text to come my way, so how can I expect more from my students? All of this reminds me of Thoreau's critique of modernity, in which every man awakens from a nap asking, "What's the news?" We live in constant distraction, the antithesis of humanistic study which, to stick with *Walden*, helps us "to live deliberately and suck the marrow from life."

Many instructors are adopting new technology in order to reach our students by "speaking their language." No one would confuse me with a Luddite: indeed, I weave multimedia into presentations, post relevant YouTube videos on our course message boards, engage in extended online conversations with students, and hold extended office hours via Skype. I enthusiastically embrace these wondrous digital tools, and look forward to holding class in virtual historical worlds or teaching with 3-D hologram "blackboards." But none of this replaces the fundamentals of historical study. Only sustained engagement with and quiet reflection upon course material can produce the results we desire. Whether prompted by their desire to get on to the next thing or their lack of practice at sustained engagement, I have found that many of my students wish to "retrieve" the knowledge I have asked them to generate as though it was so many pelts, to be laid before me come exam or term paper time. Too often, these pelts are hunted down on Wikipedia or reproduced *verbatim* from the text or my own powerpoint slides. It is not that these students are lazy or unable to accomplish the objectives I set before them. On the contrary: they are remarkably efficient and imaginative in their use of resources. The problem, too often, is that they do not understand what I am asking of them. They apply what they have been taught both in their approach to their education generally and to my course in particular, ac-

completing tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible, and moving on to the next thing on their never-ending itineraries.

Many of us are prone to “sell” our disciplines, to both students and the academic powers that be, in another way. We tell them that our courses teach marketable skills: effective reading, research, persuasive writing, indispensable “critical thinking” strategies, and so on. I am particularly guilty of this tactic: I tell my students that my courses will help them compose business emails, or construct engineering plans, or re-evaluate projects in any discipline by applying historical methods of analysis. I discuss the ways effective written and verbal communication can help them succeed in any career they choose. I relate historical events to current events and encourage them to make meaning of the present through the lens of the past. I explicate Enlightenment principles to the biologist struggling to make the material relevant to her; I help the marketing major compare Wal-Mart with the British East India Company. This strategy seems to produce a certain measure of “buy in” among many. Appealing to their practical natures may reinforce an educational ideal that runs contrary to my own, but if it gets them on board, can it be all bad? And in any case, the skills are important.

But that is relinquishing the high ground. I am no longer comfortable with this approach, because it does not foster the other goals I have for them, and does not show them the world I wish to show them. Helping them pick up skills and satisfy their general education requirements cannot replace sustained engagement with great ideas. Expecting many of them to “unplug” for long enough to become riveted by a poem or short story, much less teaching them to love curling up to give a book their undivided attention, seems like an impossible task. I was at a loss for a way to convince them that sustained engagement is in their “enlightened self-interest.”

So I took to confronting them with these issues, in as straightforward a manner as possible. I presented them with data suggesting that multi-tasking is an illusion, simply counterproductive, schizophrenic distraction. I produced data showing that they do not study nearly as much as they think they do, even less than previous generations of U.S. college students, and less still than their emerging international competition. I read them expert opinions from all corners of academia bemoaning the quality of their work. In short: out of desperation, I tried to get their attention and their help by casting about wildly to shock or anger them

out of complacency. They were not shocked. If they were angry, it was at the complacency of schools and teachers that failed them, or at their own complacency. Again and again, they told me that they feel pulled in too many directions every second of every day, they feel as though they are “falling forward” through their lives, from one obligation to another, sending emails in between. They romanticize the idea of shutting everything off and focusing on one thing. Nobody has ever told them that they are actually less productive living such a schizophrenic lifestyle. They actually crave sustained engagement. They already buy what the humanities are selling, but they have not been taught how to cultivate it. They don’t know how to justify slowing down and aren’t convinced it is allowed.

Sustained engagement is a skill in and of itself. It is a diminishing skill among the LOLOMGADD generation, and seems to be an endangered value in our increasingly mercenary academy. But I am learning that arguing for our own relevance (and funding) within the academy and in the minds of our students by selling ourselves as purveyors of “marketable” skills is a losing proposition. We must fight this battle on our own terms. We need to show students and remind administrators that the intrinsic value of the humanities is that they teach us about the range of human experience. Students instinctually value this, because they are human. They crave it because it is meaningful. And they have the courage to work at it, but we need to demand it of them. We need to show them that sustained engagement is a non-negotiable path to understanding. It can be encouraged by or at odds with new technologies, but is most often independent of them. It is often likely to encourage material success, but is independent of that as well. Simply telling them all of this straight out “sells” my courses better than integrated multimedia and skills-based lesson plans ever did, because I have stopped selling and begun simply giving them permission to do what they want to do already.