Open Inquiry Archive

Special Section: Views from the Ivory Tower

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Issue introduction

This issue of *Open Inquiry Archive* is the first installment of "Views from the Ivory Tower," a new *Open Inquiry Archive* section. The section will consist of a series of white papers and position papers that are personal essays and reflections on the state of higher education today, from the perspectives of academics themselves.

In this first contribution to "Views from the Ivory Tower," we present David Boffa's engaging piece, "On Not Heeding the Warnings of Plato: Why the Internet Doesn't Have to Mean the Death of Higher Education."

The views and opinions expressed in this and other entries of the series are those of the respective author(s). As always, we welcome and encourage thoughtful discussion and responses. Please contact us with ideas for future installments.

~The Editors

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On Not Heeding the Warnings of Plato:

Why the Internet Doesn't Have to Mean the Death of Higher Education

David Boffa

> He who thinks, then, that he has left behind him any art in writing, and he who receives it in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person, and in truth ignorant of the prophecy of Ammon, if he thinks written words are of any use except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written.
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> ~Plato, *Phaedrus*[1]

Plato's critique of writing as nothing more than a memory aid, voiced through the character of Socrates, is part of a larger dialogue that warned against the pitfalls and shortcomings of the written word. Such an idea is perhaps foreign to those of us who cannot image a world *without* the written word. Indeed, modern scholars trade almost exclusively in texts. The idea that writing's only purpose is to serve as a memory aid seems hopelessly out of touch with the realities and possibilities afforded by it. Writing opened the door to entirely new kinds of research and scholarship—in short, to modes of thinking about and examining the world that are simply not possible with a strictly oral culture.[2] And the irony, as scholars like Dennis Baron have noted, is that the only reason we know anything about Plato is because of the technology of the written word.[3]

The warning that Plato sounds about writing has particular resonance within the context of the Internet, which is only the latest in a long line of technological innovations related to the written word and the spread of information. Yet there is still a significant body of resistance to the Internet's potential for innovation within higher

education. Many—though by no means all—in the academy are calling for scholars to dig in and hold a position that looks to be untenable and unwinnable. In the face of things like open access scholarship and online learning the response from a number of scholars, both established and emerging, is to stay the course, clinging to some notion of a Golden Era that never was.

The unfortunately named MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) offer one telling example. After decades of turning a blind eye to labor problems within higher education—despite the steady growth of adjunct and contingent labor, to the point that they now make up three-quarters of the university workforce—a number of academics are up in arms over threats to the professorship as a profession. If the fear mongers are to be believed, online education and MOOCs threaten to upend the entire higher education system. Not only will they destroy the job of being a professor for all but a select few (which is already the case, as many in academia will tell you), they will ruin academic freedom and scholarship—at least if people like Cary Nelson, former president of the American Association of University Professors, are to be believed.[4]

All this despite the fact that MOOCs have yet to take over anything, much less higher education in the US. You can't get a MOOC degree. Some companies, like Coursera and Udacity, have an option for credit, but that's a long way from destroying the traditional college experience or the professoriate. So far it's more hype—from the MOOC people themselves, in most cases—than results, and recent developments suggest MOOCs may already be a thing of the past.

But there is no small amount of irony in a lot of the current discussion. The accusations that MOOCs or online courses don't care about student outcomes seem disingenuous coming from a professorial class that has long been willing to farm out student outcomes to adjuncts and grad students who often work below the poverty line. Yes, the online system has the potential to be exploitative, especially within the hands of for-profit corporations. But the adjunct system, which has had the tacit, if not official, sanction of academia for decades, is similarly exploitative, if not more so. Neither system is beneficial, and we should not be opposing online education only to shore up the broken traditional university system.

This is not to say online courses—massive or otherwise—don't pose new problems. Professors and academics (and really anyone with a stake in higher

education) need to grapple with the very real questions and issues presented by developments like open access scholarship and teaching. Online education is not something we can stop. Fifteen or twenty years ago only a handful of academics were addressing the promises and pitfalls of the Internet. By now certain elements—like email—have become a ubiquitous and accepted part of teaching and research. Other elements remain to be utilized or even acknowledged by a wide swatch of the academic world. We do this at our own peril. By failing to address the developments of the Internet age we've allowed the rules of the game—specifically, those of higher education—to be determined almost entirely by for-profit corporations and university administrators.

Until the supposedly sacrosanct tenure positions were truly put at risk there were very few who seemed to care. This is not to say all the blame falls at the feet of lifetime academics and professors. They've never had that much power, as many of them will readily admit. And as others have written, extraordinary amounts of pressure have come down from conservative (and liberal) forces in the government, who see academia as a potential source of unrest. Florida Governor Rick Scott's proposal of higher tuition for certain humanities fields is only the most egregious and recent example of attacks on the Liberal Arts and higher ed. It will not be the last.

But online education need not destroy the university any more than Napster and other file-sharing services destroyed the music industry. And there's no reason why the most important people in education—educators and students—can't undermine the for-profit motive of many MOOCs and their corporate backers before these entities even turn a profit. It's still unclear (at least on the public face of things) how MOOCs are going to make money. By taking more control of education and online content right now—via resources and scholarship that is more open access, for example—academia has a better chance at threatening the profitability, and thus the power, of the corporate players.

In short, the problems of online learning present those of us in higher ed—especially so-called Humanists—with the chance to rethink modern approaches to learning and scholarship. We should be excited by these prospects, rather than fearful of them.

Unfortunately, the current stance by many in the humanities is resistance. This is doomed, and will only ensure that professors and students are the biggest losers in the game. Again, there is no small irony in noting that many humanities professors—who claim that a benefit of studying the Liberal Arts is an ability to think critically in a cultural, political, and technological landscape that is rapidly evolving—appear unable to do the very thing they preach. What's needed now is not resistance but a critical response from professors that works on the terms that have already been set. We need a creative way of rethinking the way we provide and distribute higher education and scholarship in the Internet age. There are certainly professors out there doing this already—utilizing the Internet and class-time in novel ways—but there has yet to be a concerted response from the academy.

We would do well at this point to consider the ways the Internet—a tool no more inherently good or bad than any other—has changed the face of two other industries: music and journalism. The music industry spent years trying to maintain a system that, like the current higher ed system, did little more than line the pockets of the few while exploiting the majority, including its customers. Napster changed everything, and I think most would agree that the changes were for the better (unless you were a record exec making a killing off underpaid artists and ripped-off consumers). There are more good artists getting exposure now than ever before, something that was impossible less than twenty years ago. Sure, lots of people still download songs illegally and don't do anything to support artists. But lots of people *do* use the Internet in ways that actively support musicians, from finding and promoting new music to buying directly from musicians to learning about shows (where they can support musicians in real life). This is not necessarily a model for how we should do things in education, but it should show us that there are some exciting possibilities if only we have the courage to take risks.

Similar changes took place in journalism. The alleged death of traditional journalism and media outlets is, for many reasons, lamentable. But in its ashes we have now found something that may be *better*, or that at least offers a new way of thinking about the world and news. Traditional journalism, once it became wrapped up in corporate and governmental interests, was *never* all that good at keeping the public informed (the same might be said for most universities these days). How much good did traditional journalism do in the lead up to the Iraq War? In the aftermath of

the invasion, the NY Times actually *apologized* for its failings. This was a surprise to absolutely no one who knew anything about the situation (regardless of their views about the invasion or the war). This is where non-traditional and new forms of media have shone, promoting truly critical discussion and dialogue and investigations (even if the traditional networks are working hard to maintain their grip on what gets shown to the public). People who are legitimate experts on topics now have a public forum and a variety of outlets through which to promote their views and research. Not all outlets are equal, and many take advantage of this situation by not paying contributors or stealing content, but several publications are making it work. There is no reason this cannot be the case with higher education.

One way to do this is to beat the for-profit, consumer model of higher education before it gets out of control (any more than it already is) by making more material freely available via the Internet. This means open access courses, syllabi, lectures, and—perhaps most critically—research. Doing this might work to inspire broad curiosity and promote democratic learning, subsequently promoting greater public engagement with traditional colleges and universities. The resources available at the Smarthistory site, for example (http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/), provide an excellent demonstration of how open-access course materials have the potential to improve the quality of education (without forcing students to buy expensive new textbooks). So too do a number of excellent open-access journals. This is not to say people shouldn't be paid for their work; they should. But it's not as if the current publishing or teaching model is especially—or at all—lucrative for all but a select few.

Open access is also a means of addressing one of academia's biggest failings: the exclusion, to our own detriment, of the general public. Consider that the library in which I worked last spring—Rome's Bibliotheca Hertziana—won't even let you in unless you have a Master's degree. No tours, no visits, no opportunity to see what the latest research is. Such exclusionary practices have done nothing to endear us to the broader public. To be certain, there are benefits of restricted access: I rarely, if ever, worried about my computer being stolen, for example. But turning away a handful of genuinely curious visitors (as they did in the four or five months I was there) seems only to confirm the public's perception that academia—and the humanities especially—is a realm that is disdainful of the populace at large.

I'm willing to bet some concerns are based on longstanding classist fears, in which broad appeal means dumbed down content. There is a worry, for example, that the Internet will turn higher education into little more than "edutainment", or some other terrible hellspawn creature that is more hat than cattle, a product with high production value and sexiness but little real substance. If we in education stand aside and complain while other people make the decisions then yes, this is a serious risk. But consider that one of the biggest and most popular repositories of knowledge—indeed, "the largest and most popular general reference work on the Internet" (per its own site)—is Wikipedia, a decidedly unsexy resource, and one that is continually improving. Wikipedia is not perfect (what reference work is?) but it points to the Internet's potential as a medium for the democratic spread of information. Imagine how powerful—how extraordinarily influence and far-reaching—an alliance among scholars and teachers and Wikipedia would be.

Fears that research and scholarly publishing will die are perhaps also valid, but the thing people are so concerned with saving—traditional academic publishing—is already on the ropes. And there's good reason to think that this may not be a bad thing. For all the clamor over "research improving teaching," I have yet to see a serious discussion of whether there is any reason to believe this is always the case. Yes, research can make you passionate. Yes, that passion can, and sometimes will, translate into an improved classroom experience. But how much research is done simply in the hopes of getting tenure, rather than (a) for real scholarly value, or (b) to improve classroom goals? Should we really be clinging to a model that, according to many, is part of why the humanities are failing? As a few in the professoriate are beginning to acknowledge, the focus on research at the expense of teaching may be partly to blame for current negative attitudes toward academia—especially the humanities.

There is great potential if we're willing to let go of that model, or at least open ourselves up to modifying it. At a minimum, we should realize it doesn't need to be the *only* model. With colleges and tenured professors no longer firmly rooted in their positions as the gatekeepers of capital-k Knowledge, scholarship has a chance to become more democratic—and potentially more exciting—than ever. The field I work in, Renaissance art history, has long been criticized for stagnation and adherence to old-fashioned modes of thinking. This is not inherently bad (e.g., some of the best

recent research I've seen is stuff that people would call "traditional"), but it becomes stifling when that's the only game in town, or at least the only game that is acknowledged. Calls in recent years for new approaches—often put out by the same people or institutions who are themselves wedded to older traditions—have produced little noteworthy success. But there is no reason this should be the case, for my discipline or any other. Unfortunately, the majority of creative young scholars has been disempowered and disenfranchised because they lack institutional affiliation or big-name degrees or any sort of *agency*, or at least the feeling of agency. I'd venture a guess that most young scholars are either too afraid of the consequences or too busy working at or below poverty levels to put out the really interesting and exciting research they think about in their moments of reflection. A new conceptualization of higher education, which will necessarily involve a new conceptualization of scholarship and research, has the chance to change this.

Interestingly, the Internet offers a means of making texts do what Plato thought the written word was incapable of: changing, responding to questions, clarifying itself. For as much as I love books and the printed word, I recognize that a printed text is static, caught somewhere between a dead thing (in that it does not change) and a living one (in that it speaks). A text on the Internet can be very much a living thing: speaking, as a traditional text, but also changing, in a way very unlike a traditional text. There is both promise and danger in this, as errors can be corrected quickly and inserted just as quickly. But academics, it seems, have focused too much on the latter, failing to realize the great potential offered by a technology that can make texts into something with the best qualities of both oral and written culture. Comment threads under articles and online forums are only one expression of this, and a somewhat primitive one at that; Wikipedia is another, and perhaps the best current example of a text that is alive and changing. But there is no reason for such developments to end there. There is, instead, a great opportunity to think in big, discipline-changing ways about the nature of scholarship—an opportunity we are squandering, by clinging to outdated modes of thinking (as in calling for dissertation embargoes).

There are some very legitimate fears and concerns about the Internet, open access, and online education. The Internet is not our savior. It will not cure higher education's ills. Imagining some utopian future where the Internet has saved teaching and research is just as unhelpful as envisioning the death of the university at the

hands of the digital age. But the questions being raised by online learning, and the problems it's exposing in the traditional university system, have the potential to be of great benefit.

What's needed now is meaningful discussion, not fear mongering about the ills of the Internet, online education, and the end of higher education. Plenty of other traditional walks of life are rethinking their roles in the digital age. Authors and publishing houses and agents are responding to e-books and new means of publishing. News outlets are developing novel ways of delivering quality content. The music industry is saturated with more talented people than ever before. There are great difficulties involved, but that's to be expected in the face of new technologies.[5] Why should education and research be exempt from these sorts of developments? The answer, of course, is that academia is *not* exempt. For decades many in academia have thought this to be the case, as though the distinction between the so-called Real World and the University were ever anything more than a fiction. Yes, retreating to the Ivory Tower worked (in a fashion) for a while, but in the face of the most powerful tool of the modern era that is no longer a viable option. Not if we in academia want to stay viable and relevant. It's time for those of us in the humanities to show the public that we can practice the very skills we've laid claim to for so long. There are certainly some who are doing so already, but disciplines at large would do well to take a unified and coherent stance on these issues.

I recently heard the Dean of a small Liberal Arts college briefly discuss a summertime conference on MOOCs. When the Dean, who is interested in and engaged with these developments, asked the MOOC people what they had to say about the parts of a traditional college education that can't be replicated online—i.e., face-to-face interaction, the on-campus living experience, etc.—the MOOC response was "we're working on it." We in academia have no reason to believe otherwise. If we don't start working on some kind of intelligent and coordinated response, which must necessarily involve the presence of the Internet and online education, then we can pretty much start waving the white flag now.

The failure to rethink teaching and scholarship in the Internet Age represents a critical shortcoming of academics. In the current landscape of higher education, many in the humanities appear to be better at holding on to old traditions than developing

new ones. I don't know whether this is true, but it doesn't need to be. There is a chance to make the university, and academia in general, into something progressive rather than regressive, innovative rather than static. Failing to do so will only give credence to the notion that we are as petty and narrow-minded as our detractors have long claimed. It is time to break with the modern Platonic fear that the Internet is going to destroy education and scholarship. The Internet offers us the chance to create new types of learning—much as writing opened the door to new kinds of thinking—if only we can begin to think beyond our tiny, ever-shrinking Tower. Should we begin to think creatively—as *real* Humanists—there is hope that we may demonstrate to the public at large just how innovative academics can be.

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About the author:

David Boffa is currently Visiting Assistant Professor in Art and Art History Department at Beloit College. He received a PhD in Art History from Rutgers University in 2011, with a dissertation that examined the signatures and inscriptions of sculptors working in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. In 2010-11 he lived in Rome while finishing his dissertation, supported by a Mellon Dissertation Fellowship. Prior to Beloit College he taught art history at the University of Maine. His current research focuses on questions of artistic status and identity, authorship and audience, and the relationship between different textual media (such as inscriptions and the printed word). An article based on some of this research, titled "Sculptors' Signatures and the Construction of Identity in the Italian Renaissance," was recently published in the book *A Scarlet Renaissance.* A forthcoming article examines the Holy Face image in the Psalter and Hours 'of Yolande of Soissons' (M. 729).

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[1] Plato's *Phaedrus* (from *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, translated by Harold N. Fowler. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1925; excerpt available at http://www.english.illinois.edu/-people-/faculty/debaron/482/482readings/phaedrus.html)

[2] John Searle, Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, notes: "I think you don't understand the full import of the revolution brought by writing if you think of it just as preserving information into the future. There are two areas where writing makes an absolutely decisive difference to the whole history of the human species. One area is complex thought. There's a limit to what you can do with the spoken word. You cannot really do higher mathematics or even more complex forms of philosophical argument of the kind that I am interested in, unless you have some way of writing it down and scanning it. So it's not

adequate to think of writing just as a way of recording, for the future, facts about the past and the present. On the contrary, it is immensely creative. But now a second thing about writing, which I think is just as important as that, and that is when you write down you don't just record what already exists, but there are elements in which you create new entities. You create money, you create corporations, you create governments, you create complex forms of society, and writing is essential for all of that." From http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/transcripts/episode15/.

[3] Dennis Baron, *A Better Pencil*, Oxford University Press, 2009, 3.

[4] "AAUP Sees MOOCs as Spawning New Threats to Professors' Intellectual Property," *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* http://chronicle.com/article/article-content/139743/

[5] Note, for example, that some book publishers seem unable to think creatively about how to make digital copies available for lending. Libraries are often restricted into how many digital copies of a book can be lent, as if a digital copy were a thing that disappeared when one person downloaded it (the way a real book changes physical hands during borrowing). This is patently absurd, and the only hope is that at some point sanity will prevail in this and similar cases.