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Scholarship in New Media and Beyond: A Utopian Proposal

Never before in human history have knowledge formations been changing so quickly; yet we are trying to confront these challenges with the medieval organizations known as universities and with disciplinary structures formed in the early nineteenth century. Successfully meeting the challenges posed by the creation, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge in the twenty-first century requires more than tinkering; it demands bold thinking and wholesale reform.

The need for reform may be suggested, for example, by work in digital media, which has been showing signs of reaching new levels of maturity. The strong performance of game studies as an area of serious academic investigation, the emergence of electronic literature as a rapidly developing area of twenty-first century literature, and the growth of websites as vehicles for academic research, are all on steep upward trajectories. The correspondingly rapid growth in academic jobs makes new media the fastest-growing and arguably one of the most vital territories of the contemporary academic terrain. With prestigious presses bringing out a wealth of scholarship on new media, publication in print in this area is now widely accepted. More challenging is research that appears in digital environments.

Scholarship using new media affordances still has relatively few prestigious online journals such as *Vectors*. Even more challenging are websites and blogs that present practice-based research in new media. Sites such as Todd Presner's *Hypermedia Berlin*, for example, tend to be collaborative, requiring external funding and a team of researchers to complete successfully. Some blogs, for example *Grand Text Auto*, have now become major sites for academic discourse. Developing appropriate guidelines for this kind of research is still in nascent stages.

Systemically, innovation is made difficult by departmental structures that replicate themselves, a tendency that affects hiring priorities, evaluation procedures, publication protocols, and many other areas that impact graduate students intending to work in new media and other emerging areas. A piecemeal approach, for example, appointing committees to develop guidelines for practice-based research in new media, is a necessary but not sufficient solution. It is time to re-think the problem on a larger scale.

In the spirit of utopian provocation, I want to suggest a major step toward the transformation of the inherited and stifling mode of education that no longer appears tenable in the face of digital technologies and the sweeping changes they have wrought. I propose that we abolish departments and replace them with problem-based research and teaching clusters. In this model, each faculty member would be asked to identify the issues on which she or he is focusing and the resources necessary to make headway on them. This self-survey would form the basis for establishing problem-based clusters not currently represented on the academic map; for example, a cluster on cultural mapping might include literary scholars, geographers, historians, archeologists, and architects.

Other clusters may emerge that would look much like existing departments, but they would be the exception rather than the default.

Let me be clear about the sense in which clusters would be interdisciplinary. I do not have in mind the weak and flabby form of interdisciplinarity currently pervasive in academia, where one takes, say, a bit of film, combines it with literature, and calls the mix “interdisciplinary” because it involves reading texts in different areas. Such work frequently fails to explore rigorously the implications of different methodologies and, most important for my purposes here, is undertaken without a clear and pressing need to posit problems that demand such strategies. In fact, the essential point is not to make the clusters interdisciplinary but rather to shift the emphasis from boundary-patrolled disciplines defined by discrete subject material to clusters that take their coherence from the issues, problems, and problematics they address. Given the current state of knowledge, many clusters would likely be interdisciplinary in the strong sense of bringing together diverse resources that come from different disciplines as we currently know them. It is possible, of course, that some problems can be satisfactorily addressed with a current discipline, and if enough faculty members at a given institution find that to be the case, then a cluster might well emerge that would resemble a present department.

What would happen with teaching in the cluster model, and how would this compare with our present practices of undergraduate and graduate curricula? Presently, many English departments require undergraduates to take courses with different author, genre, and period content, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, etc. The methodological skills they learn typically do not vary much from course to course, centering on learning close reading techniques and writing relatively short essays about

specific texts. The students have limited possibilities to develop a varied repertoire of investigative techniques, little chance to evaluate them for appropriateness to a given problem, and even less opportunity to conceptualize an original problem or issue and figure out how to make headway on it. In the worse case scenario, their education is reduced to an ornamental acquisition of picturesque authors and quotations with no sense of how these might be applicable to real-life problems except within the closed world of literary close reading.

Typically the first two years of graduate studies repeat in a more intensive fashion the undergraduate model of the close reading of individual texts. Only after six years of literary education do we confront graduate students with the demand to formulate an original problem and figure out what will be needed to address it successfully. Given that they have received little emphasis on challenges of this kind in their previous work, is it any wonder they typically take many months, and not infrequently a year or more, to accomplish the task? Or that the proposed “problem” not infrequently has a strongly ad hoc character, consisting of assembling the close reading of a few texts loosely joined by a common theme or concern? Why should we be surprised at these results, when they are exactly what the student’s previous education has prepared him or her to do?

In the cluster model, by contrast, teaching as well as research would be issue and problem-centered. Undergraduate education would from the start be rooted in problem-based approaches, somewhat like the general education clusters already in place at my home institution, University of California, Los Angeles. The skills characteristic of a present-day discipline—say, for literary studies, close reading techniques—would be passed on through strong mentoring relationships with faculty possessing those skills.

They would, however, be developed in the context of related skills that other faculty in the cluster would offer. For example, in the case of someone who wants to understand how cities develop and change, close reading techniques of novels depicting urban environments would be combined with mentoring and class work that included architecture, urban planning, histories of specific cities and their developments, and so on. Work in such a diverse range of areas could be expected to cause the student's initial interest to grow and develop, perhaps in unexpected ways so that its final form might be very different from the initial problem. The challenge of assembling the appropriate resources to study the question would involve not only a diverse repertoire of skills but also a wide range of projects, which might include, in addition to essay writing, building sample models, buying and developing a piece of Second Life, using a software program such as Age of Empires or SimCity to experiment with dynamic interaction of multiple parameters, attending hearings involving zoning variances, etc. Whatever the issue and resources assembled, the emphasis would be on understanding the problem in depth and the myriad ways in which it could be contextualized, historicized, analytically parsed, and dynamically understood as a changing evolving system. Instead of declaring a major, students would, after an initial period of exploration, be asked to declare a problem or problematic and to identify the cluster(s) that would allow her to make headway on it, with the assumption that the way she understood the problem, and hence the problem itself, would morph as she worked.

Graduate education would begin with an application process in which the candidate would propose a project, which normally but not necessarily would be an extension of the work done as an undergraduate. The applications would of course be

addressed to a cluster instead of a department, and cluster faculty would evaluate the application both for quality and for appropriateness of the candidate's project to the cluster's ongoing work and the resources it offers. For a candidate to be admitted, at least two faculty—one principal and one secondary—would agree to be the candidate's initial advisors, with the understanding that the student could always change advisors and/or add new ones as his or her work developed.

Although I have proposed that we abolish departments altogether in order to work out the vision of a cluster-centered education, no university is likely to engage in this transformation all at once. Nor should it. Universities have responsibilities to their many stakeholders, and it is appropriate and necessary for them to think long and hard before engaging in fundamental changes such as the one I am proposing. Much experimentation and feedback would be necessary to test the viability of the concept, make changes as necessary, and begin to move toward a new kind of structure. We might begin, then, by looking at experiments already underway and gather evidence from them to determine what kinds of transitions are possible and desirable.

I have already mentioned the cluster model currently in effect for parts of the general education requirement at UCLA. The clusters are thematically and problem-based courses involving several faculty members, who team-teach them together. Two quarters of large lectures with discussion sections are followed by a series of small seminars in the spring term focusing on some aspect of the general thematic. Topics for the cluster courses for 2007-8 include "The Global Environment: A Multidisciplinary Perspective," "Interracial Dynamics in American Society and Culture," "Work, Labor, and Social Justice in the United States," "American in the Sixties: Politics, Society and

Culture, 1954-1974,” “Sex: From Biology to Gendered Society,” and “Frontiers in Human Aging: Biomedical, Social, and Policy Perspectives.” Moreover, the faculty work together during the period of the cluster course but do not otherwise form a cohesive unit bound together by the problems they address in their research. In short, this is a brave start, but of limited effect and usefulness. Another program, this time at the graduate level, is the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Established nearly a half-century ago, the program already follows many of the suggestions articulated here, including an emphasis on a candidate’s project, a multidisciplinary approach, and the close association between graduate students, their student colleagues, and faculty mentors. Yet another approach is being developed at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where in an initiative to foster collaborative research, education and outreach, the university is creating clusters that cross the boundaries of existing academic departments. The cluster approach involves both present faculty and targeted hires in the areas of cluster research. So far, 49 newly funded clusters have been formed, including Poverty Studies, Energy Sources and Policy, Disability Studies, Cultural Studies in a Global Context, and Law, Society and Justice. Another proposal reminiscent of the Wisconsin clusters has been made by my UCLA colleague Todd Presner, who calls for implementing a layer of “virtual departments” on top of the existing departmental structures. Again, the idea is to initiate a transformation responsive to the changing contours of contemporary knowledge. In his scheme the departmental structures would continue to exist, as they do at the University of Wisconsin as well.

No doubt there are other experiments underway that I have not yet found, but perhaps these examples are sufficient to indicate how programs corresponding to pieces of this utopian cluster proposal are being implemented at different universities. Now we have the chance to move beyond pieces to a fully articulated vision of transformative change. Only by starting with fundamental premises and working outward and upward can we re-think the problem in its entirety. Although piecemeal approaches may be good and necessary ways to start, a utopian proposal such as the one made here is necessary to explore the full implications of knowledge construction in the new millennium.

I conclude with a set of questions. Why present this proposal at a Forum discussion “Professionalization in a Digital Age,” and particularly in a plenary session? In a sense, my proposal may seem off-topic; in another sense, it could scarcely be more relevant, for it addresses fundamental issues about the nature of professionalization. Does “professionalization” mean preparing our graduate students to tailor their credentials and interests so they at least *appear* to fit into existing departmental boxes? Certainly, this is at least a part of it as a normative practice. I would like to argue for another interpretation, one that perhaps must coexist for a time with the first. “Professionalization” means being a thoughtful practitioner, and that implies more than fitting existing boxes. It means examining the boxes themselves, including asking whether boxes are the best way to go in the face of rapidly changing knowledge configurations.

Finally, why address these arguments to graduate students, arguably the least empowered segment of the profession? The answer here is simple: because you are the future. Many tenured faculty members are so indoctrinated into the reification and

replication of departments that they cannot conceive of academic life any other way. But you can. Before you agree wholeheartedly to fit yourself in the boxes represented at their most reified in the *MLA Job List*, I hope you will interrogate the very idea of boxes and consider whether other models may better serve our essential mission of intellectual inquiry. The future is yours to invent.