

Teaching Philosophy¹ Kevin Kee, January 9, 2013

My passion for teaching digital humanities comes from my affection for the subject matter, and my desire to share it with others. I trained as an historian, and began my career at a time when history teaching was coming under withering criticism. I was convinced that technology, and specifically interactive media, provided new and exciting ways to communicate the humanities in general and history in particular.

My teaching philosophy responds to the perceived crisis in the humanities (part 1 below). At Brock I have provided students with new ways to learn (part 2) that involve a hands-on approach to making (part 3) in new settings (part 4) as researcher-students (part 5) in partnership with collaborators within and beyond the university (part 6).

1. Why Teach the Humanities? Universities, and especially faculties of humanities, seem to be in crisis. The title of a book published by Ken Coates, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Waterloo, capitalizes on Canadians' anxiety about higher education: *Campus Confidential: 100 Startling Things You Don't Know About Canadian Universities*². The editorial pages of the *Globe and Mail* now feature regular complaints from columnists such as Geoffrey Simpson and Margaret Wentz about undergraduates in cavernous lecture halls who pay dearly to learn little. The humanities have come under special fire. According to many critics, students should stop wasting time on history and literature, and apply themselves to useful subjects such as business and science.

Humanists have responded to these jeremiads in essentially two ways. Some have contended that the humanities are useful, notwithstanding the critics. In an article in *Inside Higher Education*, Paul Jay and Gerald Graff³ highlighted the practical value of a humanities education, and the ways in which humanists could apply their skills to business and science. At the other end of the spectrum is the influential Milton scholar and columnist Stanley Fish. In a much-discussed 2008 New York Times article he stated that “[t]o the question ‘of what use are the humanities?’ the only honest answer is none whatsoever.... The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said diminishes the object of its supposed praise.”⁴ He suggests that we should enjoy history and literature for their own sake.

Why should we teach the humanities? I have answered this question by rejecting the Graff-Fish dichotomy, and instead embracing both explanations simultaneously. Most of my colleagues do

¹ My teaching philosophy has been inspired by several friends and colleagues, especially in the Digital Humanities. A proper acknowledgement would result in a footnote running several pages, so in the interests of brevity, thanks especially to Bill Turkel, Geoffrey Rockwell, and Mills Kelly.

² Ken S. Coates and Bill Morrison, *Campus Confidential: 100 Startling Things You Don't Know About Canadian Universities* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2011).

³ Paul Jay and Gerald Graff, “Fear of Being Useful,” *Inside Higher Education*, January 5, 2012. <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/01/05/essay-new-approach-defend-value-humanities>.

⁴ Stanley Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?” *New York Times*, January 6, 2008. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/>.

the same. We should learn literature, history, philosophy and art because we enjoy being enriched by culture. While we learn we can acquire useful skills that we can apply to multiple contexts. But going a step further, I think both usefulness and enrichment can be achieved when we study the humanities with the support of digital technology and interactive media.

2. Digital Humanities and Interactive Media at my university: Technology can: i. support our love of the humanities, because emerging digital media forms (such as simulations and games) allow us to express the humanities in new and innovative ways; ii. prepare students for employment, because creating digital humanities artifacts (such as simulations and games) requires mastery of digital tools and environments, and these skills can be applied to multiple contexts beyond the academic and cultural sector.

Since arriving to Brock in 2005, I have worked to place the university at the forefront of digital humanities education, and Niagara at the leading edge of interactive media production. I helped lead the conception and establishment of the undergraduate major and minor in Interactive Arts and Science, and the Master of Arts in History (with a stream in Digital History). I have also helped create an interactive media business generator, the Niagara Interactive Media Generator-Generator at One. By linking the work of the university with the work of the digital media industry, I have provided students with opportunities to learn both within and beyond the classroom, and gain experience that they can leverage upon graduation.

3. Students Making: Whether teaching digital humanities in general, or interactive media development in particular, I have embraced a hands-on approach that draws on a deep well of theory, methodology and praxis. In the early twentieth-century John Dewey showed that the use of objects – not just words – is an integral component of learning.⁵ Jean Piaget argued that knowledge is not deposited into the student – what Paulo Freire termed “banking”⁶ – but rather constructed in the mind of the learner.⁷ For Piaget’s student, Seymour Papert, “building” was not a metaphor, but a literal description of a physical activity. Papert insisted that students should build the instruments by which they learn in a process he called “constructionism”.⁸ Central to building is modeling; as Willard McCarty has shown, to create models is to understand, because models (whether digital or physical) force us to formalize our thinking.⁹

In my classes, students make as a way of knowing. A central tenet of my teaching of interactive media is that students learn better when they both “think about” interactive media with definitions, histories, examples and theoretical problems, and “think with” interactive media by using and creating computer technologies to explore and communicate ideas.

⁵ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970).

⁷ Jean Piaget, *Genetic Epistemology*, translated by Eleanor Duckworth (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

⁸ Idit Harel and Seymour Papert, *Constructionism* (New York: Ablex Publishing, 1991).

⁹ Willard McCarty, *Humanities Computing*. Basingstoke (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.)

4. New Sites of Work: To model effectively we need appropriate physical (and mental) spaces. In the humanities we have established workflows and tools, and these functioned effectively in an age of information scarcity, where knowledge was restricted to archives and libraries. In our present age of information abundance, we need new workflows and tools, and I have developed these so students can access, manage and use the almost infinite data available.

In addition, in the humanities we have typically been confined to a lecture hall or seminar room. As a complement to the culture of the seminar, I promote the culture of the laboratory: a space of students engaged in team-based inquiry and experiment. The laboratory is collaborative and interdisciplinary. It connects the university, industry and public worlds. Moving students into spaces such as the Niagara Interactive Media Generator, for instance, has resulted in a flowering of creativity. And working on real-world projects such as my Niagara 1812 iPhone app has enabled students to move beyond being simply consumers of these new technologies, to become creators and users.

5. Teaching – Research: Students and I learn together while building these environments and projects. My teaching and research are closely related because I bring my students into the research process. I follow Mody and Kaiser, who treat pedagogy as a “central analytic category,” not “merely as formalized classroom teaching techniques... but rather as the entire constellation of training exercises through which novices become working scientists and engineers” (or in our case, humanists). Participation in the reproduction of a community of practitioners holds out the hope of learning “broadly similar values, norms, and self understandings... not (or not only) in the abstract, but as enacted through daily interactions within specific settings.”¹⁰ Most of my research grants have focused on teaching-related issues; even where this is not the case, students have played a central role in the research project.

6. Teaching beyond the ivory tower: In the process, students have worked closely with historic organizations (such as museums), cultural agencies (such as the National Film Board of Canada), as well as interactive media companies. Developing new technologies and products provides multiple opportunities for students to gain real-world experience and facilitates their transition from university to employment.

I have also supported and promoted better teaching through agencies beyond the university, organizations that I have created (such as the Ontario Augmented Reality Network), presentations that I have made, and the conferences that I have organized.

¹⁰ Cyrus Mody and David Kaiser, “Scientific Training and the Creation of Scientific Knowledge,” in Edward J. Hackett, Olga Amsterdamska, Michael Lynch, and Judy Wajcman eds., *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). Thanks go to my colleagues Bill Turkel and Devon Elliott for making me aware of Mody and Kaiser’s work.