

Do the Liberal Arts Have Any Authority in the Digital Age?

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It is likely that the 'authority' of the literary text requires a rethinking. The teacher has traditionally been invested with epistemic authority: the legitimate exercise of knowledge and expertise-as-power in the transmission of learning. Teaching is a specific exercise of authority. It is this form of authority that has taken a beating in the digital university and classroom.

What do we talk about when we talk about teaching the liberal arts in the digital university/classroom? We naturally talk about the collapse of reading, the short attention spans of students, the ubiquitous 'copying' from internet resources, among others.

For the liberal arts, long attuned to ethics, the 'construction' of meaning, the hegemony of some meanings over others, and its own lessons about authority, have come back to bite it. Thus, having destroyed the literary canon ("all texts are the same"), institutions ("they are all hegemonic") and processes ("examinations are inadequate modes of testing"), the liberal arts teachers find that their lessons have been learnt too well in Literary-Cultural Studies, the human sciences and other disciplines, and as a result, now, it is impossible to insist that Daniel Defoe and Danielle Steele are not quite the same in terms of literary merit, and the Folger and Ken Follett are not interchangeable in terms of what they do. In short, over the years, liberal arts has done its job quite well, and perhaps now finds itself with little *authority* in determining reading habits, analytical frameworks (they are *all* hegemonic) and even the classroom.

'Authority' is the legitimized exercise of power, as numerous commentators from Max Weber to the present have theorized it. In a university, this location, assimilation and deployment of authority is precisely what may be at stake. If the 'shadow conception' of the (public) university's disciplines, to adapt Sasheej Hegde's (2018) approving gloss on Michael Meranze, is the making of democratic citizenship which stems from the authority in teaching rather than in scholarship, then what happens when the authority in teaching is eroded, by liberal arts' own trajectories in the last few decades, the insistence on numerical accountability (rankings, citation indices, enrolment numbers, grants secured) and the digitization of education?

The digital university – that is, a university now, committed to the use of devices, the internet and digitized teaching/learning/assessment – has exacerbated the 'crisis' of the liberal arts,

particularly in terms of one specific state of being: authority. We can discern a crisis of authority in three domains, which can be examined in the context of the discipline I am relatively more familiar with: literary studies.

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(Spoiler alert: There are more questions than answers, in keeping with the liberal arts' mode of progressing through any thorny subject.)

Is there a text in this class?

What is the authority of the text in the age of the internet? With Wikipedia becoming the first stop for all inquiries, the presumed sanctity of the text being used for reading purposes in a classroom or for any pedagogic purposes has eroded. Teachers caution (assuming they are themselves not using the Wiki for their 'class notes') students about the unreliability of the Wiki and other similar (free) online resources. A glance at the Wikipedia's own Disclaimer, shows that it makes no guarantee of validity, and entries do not undergo peer review, nor is it to be taken as offering professional advice.

Free texts uploaded on, say Project Gutenberg, are useful, but are these standard editions? And what exactly is a 'standard' edition? Is a text edited by any lay reader the same as one edited by an academic who has worked with the text/author for several years? Have we democratized the nature of the texts we study? The larger crisis is the inability of the reading community to put in place measures to evaluate our reading materials, to rank reliable texts and authenticate them. The 'appeal to authority' argument that teachers rely on – this is the definitive text because it was produced by Prof X who is an authority on the subject – is now a far more difficult one to sustain, given that the freely available texts are democratized into the same textual pool.

A text can be easily modified/edited, corrupted and transmitted today, a very far cry from the circulation of printed texts, and unless one is attentive to, say, metadata and the provenance of the edited/digitized texts, it is impossible to discern the 'original' from the later-day digitized version. Then, there are the non-linear, experimental, multi-authored texts, which again modify our sense of what an authored text is or means. What, for instance, is the cultural status and value of the 'authored' text? Does the very proliferation of texts undermine their authority?

A further point is: how was any text (printed, manuscript, digital) produced and edited? Are the editorial principles of any text clear? The 'scholarly' edition's value depends on the historical, technical, social and rhetorical dimensions of the genre (say, the novel) in which the text was edited. Thus, the canonization and standardization of the language – as was famously done by the RW Chapman edition of Jane Austen (1923) – is a process whereby cultural value was assigned to a certain kind of language. Editorial decisions are a part of both traditional textual-bibliographic work and the contemporary digitization project (as Kathryn Sutherland 2009), Matthew Kirschenbaum (2007), Dino Buzzetti and Jerome McGann (<https://tei-c.org/Vault/ETE/Preview/mcgann.html>) and others have pointed out). The 'bookishness' of texts that purveyors of traditional print texts value over anything else, has run into the immaterial wall of the digital edition. And this has seriously altered the conceptualization and authority of the text.

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Another possible reason why the authority of the text has eroded in the digital age is because the literary studies pedagogics rely on the printed text when students, who are in 2021 digital natives, experience texts as multimodal – whether emojis, GIFs or memes that constitute the visual universe of communication today. This, in all probability, has reconfigured the cognitive experience of reading itself. It is therefore likely that the ‘authority’ of the literary text requires a rethinking.

Where have all the experts gone?

The teacher has traditionally been invested with epistemic authority: the legitimate exercise of knowledge and expertise-as-power in the transmission of learning.

Teaching is a specific exercise of authority. Dennis Wrong (1995) in his study of power distinguishes between routine authority (which he defines as “the untested acceptance of another’s judgment”) and “persuasion” (defined as “the tested acceptance of another’s judgment”). The teacher, one could say persuades, through all available resources at her command. The teacher’s judgement and knowledge need to have been tested and then accepted. The key question remains: how is the teacher’s knowledge and judgement tested? Would it be through the teacher’s published work that has been scrutinized by peers and experts in the field? Would it be through the students testing the teacher’s arguments against other commentators on the subject? Are course curricula and classroom work subject to such a testing, so as to validate the teacher’s judgement and knowledge?

Or, is the teacher’s (untested/untestable) authority stemming from a tradition where the spoken word is deemed authentic, reliable and unquestionable? The lecture mode, part of the oral discourse tradition across most cultures, implies the authority of the speaker. It also assumed the lecturer’s control over the knowledge she expounded to the audience is a marker of her authority. The choice of what to explicate and explain, and how, was a sign of the legitimate authority of the speaker.

It is this form of authority that has taken a beating in the digital university and classroom.

First, with multiple devices and sources from which one may glean the same information, why should anyone come to class and listen to lectures? Why not substitute, say, the podcast, for the classroom lecture? Conversely, is the lecture riveting enough for the devices and internet sources to be put away and everyone stays tuned to the teacher-in-the-classroom, or is the new documentary on cargo ships on YouTube far more fascinating?

Second, a digital native generation’s attention span may well be determined by the length of a YouTube video or a TedTalk (20 minutes) and extended class hours of 60 minutes to 120 minutes are *not* quite captivating. This too contributes to the inability to carry authority in the classroom.

The authority of the teacher in the age of verifiable, multiple information sources may require a shift of focus away from information-dissemination to something else. The key may well lie not in the information disseminated in the lecture but in demonstrating a methodology through which the information may be collected, approached and assimilated. That is, the teacher does not offer

bite-sized data, but a framework through which she has come to examine that data. This framework is not ready-made and the lecture may well shift the focus away from *what* the text says to “how to read what the text says”. Implicit here is the assumption that the teacher is not doing summary – often a substitute for analysis in the Indian classroom, articles and even research – but asking the next question of the text: “so what?” It is not the content (which can be retrieved from numerous www resources), but the approach to the content that may retain the power of the lecture mode even in the digital era. So, instead of asking is there a text in this class, or whether there is class in this text, the solution may lie in asking how the text may be approached for questions of class, or textuality itself (and this *would* separate Daniel Defoe from Danielle Steele).

Who decides on the interpretation?

In a famous argument Stanley Fish (1982) proposed the idea of an interpretive community:

if the understanding of the people in question are informed by the same notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed – in short, by the same interpretive principles – the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it.

In a later work, Fish (1989) qualified the definition where ‘interpretive communities’ are ‘no more than sets of intuitional practices’ that are ‘continually being transformed by the very work that they do’ and exist in relation to ‘general purposes and goals that ... form the basis of a continuity’. Classrooms are excellent examples of interpretive communities, where despite varied backgrounds, interests and abilities, the very experience of shared reading ‘forms the basis of a continuity’. These communities were once constructed out of teachers, editors, reviewers, producing the ‘authority’ of interpretation – an authority compounded by the text’s presence in classrooms, syllabi, testing mechanisms and students/readers are alert to what is ‘acceptable’ interpretations for the class and the teacher. As Fish cautions us, the authority of a text, its ‘truth’ value exists “in an institutional structure within which one hears utterances as already organized with reference to certain assumed purposes and goals”.

Interpretive communities come into play, in the digital age, depending on the platform/portal (Insta/FB/Goodreads). With more and more contexts made available to the interpretive community even in the classroom, the text is in the hands of a diffused audience. Not that the interpretive community was ever a monolith, but it is now increasingly constructed through multiple means beyond the classroom, and even the text. The social construction of the text and the reading mode – with new political, social and economic concerns – has changed, shared instantaneously across peoples and regions, and this has altered the nature of interpretive communities.

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Evidently, much has changed for the liberal arts, most specifically in the nature of authority in teaching, textuality and interpretation. Oddly, it is in its insistence (speaking without authority!) on asking who is to be called an ‘authority’ that makes the liberal arts such a vibrant discipline.

Liberal arts remain an unavoidable mode of understanding human actions. Contextualizing human behaviour in all its diversity requires more than just an understanding of the economics and political formations in which humans are embedded. This also means, like the nature of the diffuse interpretive community, the student/reader has multiple sources of ‘authoritative’ texts and interpretations, not one. If liberal arts is doing its job, it is precisely the *methodology* (the shift of focus from information dissemination to methodologies of reading information, as discussed above) of documenting how a particular text or meaning has acquired validation that is brought to the discussion. That authority is acquired, contested and realigned is precisely what the study of human behaviour, interaction and communicative acts – the domain of liberal arts, particularly literature – enables us to understand. By refusing to give (up) *all* authority to say neurological understandings of human emotions or the economic basis of human behaviour the liberal arts holds its own. In their *Cents and Sensibility: What Economics can Learn from the Humanities*, Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro (2017) write:

It is interesting to learn how the human capacity to make and appreciate art evolved, and it would be curious to know “what happens in the brain when we laugh at Mark Twain”. For that matter, the economics of novel publishing could be informative, and so could the chemistry of papermaking, the physics of book-binding, and the physiology of reading poems aloud. But each of these contributions would matter only if we already had an appreciation of great art and literature, which you can’t get by de-aestheticizing, de-literizing, or dehumanizing them.

In the digital age, a more scrupulous attention to the practices of reading texts, of arriving at judgements may be required.

It is the teachers, for once, who are being tested.

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