



Fresh faces in the Humanities

Julie Buckler

April 13, 2006 For Julie Buckler, professor of Slavic languages and literatures, "we've never been more open" within the field of the humanities to other cultures, other ways of looking at the world. "But," she says "there's also a hunger for a common body of text and ideas - not the old 'Great Books' idea, but a meeting place of common ideas." This is a trend she sees developing over not just the past couple of decades, but over 30 or 40 years.

"We care as much about history as ever - but we want to be connected to the world now.

"Humanities thinks of itself as a bridge; we're trained to be cognizant of discourse ... we can go out, and we can invite people in for a conversation."

The humanities, Buckler adds, need to remain open to multiple interpretations: "Not that anything can mean anything, but that most things can mean more than one thing."

She sees the humanities as a check on the "privileging of the role of the instrumental and the quantitative" - as a check on the social scientist's tendency to ask, "What's it good for?" That kind of bottom-line question, she suggests, is alien to the humanities.

She also sees a less rigid distinction than some between the arts and the humanities, between the arts and their interpretation, between artist and critic. "Some people are doing both," she says. It used to be a "guilty



Julie Buckler (Staff photo Maggie Masticola/Harvard News Office)



Humanities videos



Humanist prognosis:

Nancy Rappaport describes how her undergraduate

degree in literature fit into her life's work: assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and child psychiatrist.

[Real video/Quicktime](#)



Mathematics in motion:

Pandit Chitresh Das explains Kathak dance during a demonstration at the Sackler Museum.

[Real video/Quicktime](#)

secret" if a scholar actually wrote novels, or painted, or whatever; such activity was seen as likely to undercut someone's credibility as a scholar.

One focus of Buckler's is the 19th century, which she examines through the lens of the Soviet period. The grim, gray, concrete-block communists inherited an imperial legacy including "all this stuff - malachite desk sets... ." Lenin, she notes, was smart enough to realize these works of art and craft should be preserved - and, in some cases, needed to be restored. Yes, the tourism revenues the Soviets knew these treasures would generate were important. But this doesn't begin to explain why they devoted such painstaking attention to these works. "The answers are very complicated."

- Ruth Walker

Eileen Cheng-yin Chow

As Eileen Cheng-yin Chow, assistant professor of Chinese literary and cultural studies, thinks about the changing role of the humanities, the notion of form and content immediately comes to mind. Content, she suggests, has remained relatively stable: People are still telling stories, writing novels, and so on. What's changing is how content is brought to, and purveyed by, people.



Eileen Cheng-yin Chow (Staff photo Kris Snibbe/Harvard News Office)

She cites a noted Chinese author who last fall released a new novel in serial form - 500-word daily installments to be downloaded as text messages, presumably to be read by riders of buses or trains.

But even as new forms attract attention, "content has never been more important," Chow says. "It's such a cliché to say that people aren't reading and writing any more." She finds her own students are continually doing both, generating "so much text through every possible



Music with Levin:
Harvard Professor Robert Levin opens up the world of music to students.

[Real video/Quicktime](#)



Gumboots:
Harvard dance troupe celebrates history and rhythmic self-expression by paying tribute to the struggle of South African gold miners under the apartheid regime.

[Slide show](#)



The Silk Road Project:
The Silk Road Ensemble, founded by cellist Yo-Yo Ma '76, brings together ancient musical traditions of Asia and the West.

[Real video/Quicktime](#)



Kim Wilson:
The founder and front man of the Fabulous Thunderbirds speaks to - and performs for - students in the Extension School course 'The History of the Blues in America.'

[Real video/Quicktime](#)



Harvard collection:
Lois Orswell, a woman of relatively modest means, amassed a collection of more than 350 modernist paintings, sculptures, and drawings, which are now at the Fogg Art Museum.

[Real video/Quicktime](#)





A day in the life: As we accompany Elvira G. Di Fabio, senior preceptor in Romance languages and literatures, on a typical day, it becomes vividly clear that the life of a humanist is spent, perhaps not surprisingly, as much with humans as with books.

[Slide show](#)

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modality," including, notably, blogs.

Another cliché she disputes is the idea that new forms of content delivery lead necessarily to an atomized society. She finds that the shared experience of, for instance, legions of office workers having read the same installment of the latest text-message novel leads to another kind of public conversation. "Discussing the daily installment becomes a way to talk with one another."

Her own work has focused on early 20th century urban culture in China - popular entertainment, newspapers, and films. Silent film was a surprisingly international medium, she notes, and there were even Charlie Chaplin impersonators in China in the early days of movies.

- Ruth Walker

Leland de la Durantaye



Leland de la Durantaye (Staff photo Maggie Masticola/Harvard News Office)

Who wouldn't want to spend their days at the spa? That's how Leland de la Durantaye described the view from outside. "If you don't have immediate practical aims," says the assistant professor of English and American literature and language, "if you don't develop products or reach definitive conclusions, if your so-called work is what most people do for pleasure - reading, viewing works of art, studying history and culture - then the humanities can seem an idle endeavor, a sort of mental spa experience. It's a charge that anyone at any level in the field confronts: that they have found a way to relax all the time."

In fact, however, the humanities are necessary not just for the dreamers among us, but for everyone, says de la Durantaye. They teach the art of rhetoric, help us develop the ability to think critically and express ourselves clearly, and show us ways to cope with the "unbelievable richness of information that characterizes our age."

Perhaps most important, de la Durantaye points out, this particular spectrum of disciplines allows us to think in global terms - "to know about other places, other times, other cultures, and, through that knowledge, to understand ourselves and other people," he says. "The humanities give us ways of conceptualizing and reconceptualizing our world. It may sound excessively dramatic, but at a basic level, the humanities teach us to combat inhumanity."

- Elizabeth Gehrman

Alison Frank

For Alison Frank, assistant professor of history, with a specialty in modern Europe, the major development in academia since the 1980s is a change in the way scholars regard the idea of "the nation."

The national borders on the map are ceasing to define academic topics in quite the way they once did - e.g., the German labor movement or Polish music.

National identity and nationalism are understood, but "the nation" itself as an idea is proving elusive, and more scholars are taking a transnational approach to their subjects, Frank says. She calls this "a truly major change" as "more and more people feel a need to demonstrate that they're not constricted by national borders."

This trend began in the field of history, and over the past five years or so, Frank has seen it spreading to other disciplines as scholars "attempt to create new categories," as she puts it. Some historians have focused on commodities, for instance, to produce transnational histories. Frank's own book, "Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia," just out last fall, is an example of this approach.

She's now beginning a new project focusing on three cities on the Adriatic coast during the Habsburg era - a study of their environment and cultural history, and of "what they mean to the imperial imagination," she says.

Frank has another important message about the humanities at this point: "There's a pressing need more than ever before for language study." Americans think they have an advantage in being able to travel the world and speak to everyone in English. "But it's not an advantage," she insists. Monolingual Americans aren't getting the benefit of learning to imagine "other ways of being in the world" that come from foreign language study.



Alison Frank (Staff photo Maggie Masticola/Harvard News Office)

- Ruth Walker

Malinda Maynor Lowery

Malinda Maynor Lowery, an assistant professor of history, concedes reluctantly that she sees some negative trends regarding the study of humanities. "People are starting to look at education not as fundamental to the enrichment of the human soul, as it was in previous generations," she says, "but as a way to gain and sustain a career in a consumer-oriented society." Though the humanities often seem peripheral to an education that has building wealth as its primary function, in fact they are fundamental to true comprehension and communication in any field.



Malinda Maynor Lowery (Staff photo Maggie Masticola/Harvard News Office)

That point was driven home to Lowery on a recent visit to Japan that reminded her of the importance of language and illustrated just how small our world has become. "Here I am, a Lumbee Indian girl from rural North Carolina," she says. "Who would ever have thought I'd even have the opportunity to go to Japan?"

But that kind of chance is increasingly available to Americans of all backgrounds and education levels. "Those who do study the humanities tend to use the skills they gain to promote social change in very sophisticated ways," Lowery says. "The humanities teach us about identity - who we are and who others are - and that's so important in an increasingly international world. That's the one gift the humanities give everybody - the gift of self-awareness."

- Elizabeth Gehrman

Leah Price

Far from sounding the death knell for the humanities, as many people expected it to do, the technological revolution of the past quarter-century may be enhancing the field in some important ways, according to English professor Leah Price. The new methods in which text and data are organized, stored, searched, and navigated have changed our working habits, she says, and given us "ways of thinking about intellectual life that don't just concentrate on the content of ideas, but also remain alert to the mundane mechanisms by which ideas are transmitted" - giving rise to a more widespread interest in footnotes, for example, or 15th century incunabula.



Leah Price (Staff photo Maggie Masticola/Harvard News Office)

And though many have bemoaned the loss of basic grammatical and spelling skills thanks to IM-driven abbreviations such as "gr8 2 CU, l8r!," Price sees hope in the blog- and download-driven interest in writing, independent music, and homemade videos. "It reminds me of the explosion of the periodical press in the 18th century," she says. "Early magazines and newspapers invited readers to write in, and that actually supplied a lot of their content - personal essays from people without any officially recognized authority on a given topic."

It's all in the way you look at things, she contends. "If we define the humanities in terms of a specific canon," she says, "then unfortunately a lot of people do feel disconnected right now. But if we can take a step back and define the field in more abstract terms as encompassing questions about the circulation of knowledge, then the humanities would be important to anyone trying to understand the culture they live in."

- Elizabeth Gehrman

Michael Puett

The big change that Michael Puett, professor of Chinese history, sees coming to the humanities in the 21st century is a real push toward a "truly international" conception of the field.



Hitherto, he says, the humanities were "the Western tradition," with typically one course outside that canon - Chinese philosophy, for instance - to represent everything apart from the Western tradition.



Michael Puett (Staff photo Maggie Masticola/Harvard News Office)

But now the humanities are beginning to include non-Western philosophy, literature, history, and other studies as integral, not just exotic extras.

"We've got a lot further to go," he says, "but it strikes me as incredibly exciting. ... People are beginning to think of themselves as global citizens."

Educational curricula in the schools are very conservative, he warns, and reluctant to adopt a more global approach. But forces are at work to internationalize

young Americans' learning, he says. He cites Primary Source, an organization in Watertown, Mass., which is bringing the study of China into the K-12 curriculum throughout New England.

"It's important that this generation grows up thinking about the rest of the world," Puett says, predicting that future generations of Americans will grow up reading not only Plato but Confucius, too.

"When I teach, I always begin with a promise to my students: If they read the material and take it seriously, it will change their lives. They don't have to like the material, but" - he repeats for emphasis - "if they take it seriously, it will change their lives."

- Ruth Walker

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