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Healing the Liberal Arts: Undergraduate Research and Documentary Editing

Robin Leslie Condon

Every now and then, even the most cynical among us find ourselves on the receiving end of an inspiring surprise. Last summer, the Institute for American Thought at the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts, where I am assistant editor of the Frederick Douglass Papers, hosted a group of undergraduates from Taylor University along with their mentor and professor Dr. Robert Lay. Having prepared himself by reading documentary editing theory and consulting with scholarly editors, Lay designed and supervised an intensive summer-term research project for undergraduates whose aim was to prepare two nineteenth-century journals for publication. These volumes contain the private accounts of Bishop William Taylor and his wife Anne. His diary recounts the Methodist evangelist's pioneering missionary work with miners during the years 1851–56, the height of the California Gold Rush, while his wife's diary recounts the family's travels from South Africa to Europe a decade later. Both journals are now preserved by the Bishop William Taylor Collection at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana.

As textual editors working on three different longstanding projects (Douglass, Santayana, and Peirce), we believed that the purpose of our meeting with Lay and the Taylor undergraduates was to offer guidance and instruction. However, one student after another surprised us as each presented his or her work in progress, speaking intelligently about collation, historical annotation, and emendation. More striking still was the students' recognition of the importance of their work—work they clearly felt privileged to do. With minimal training, these undergraduates were able to accomplish a substantial amount of work in a short time and even to infer processes that they had not been taught.

The students' presentations caused me to reflect on my own teaching experiences and the pedagogical possibilities in the work I do now as a textual editor. While teaching a variety of undergraduate courses during the past decade, I have employed quite a few strategies to convince my students

of a liberal education's value—that learning about the past will not be irrelevant to their future careers and lives. But as the years pass and tuition prices rise, this argument has become harder and harder to make. The humanities now face difficulties beyond variations in the perpetual “crisis” recounted each time fresh fiscal indignities are suffered.¹ The American university is in the midst of profound and rapid change; to be sure, the vocabulary of crisis continues to apply to the liberal arts, but continuing to indulge in applying such terms seems riskier than ever before. Diminishing enrollments, dismal employment prospects for new PhDs (especially those in humanities disciplines), and cuts in federal funding for humanities projects now seem to demand calls for action rather than calls for papers. The business model seems to have skewed the once salutary power structure built on respect for those who had dedicated years to acquiring expertise in their fields. This shift impoverishes the experience of scholars and students alike.

On the other hand, liberal arts faculty cannot ignore the material aspects of our responsibility to undergraduates. We need seriously to consider the trajectory from a liberal arts curriculum to careers whose salaries may someday accommodate repayment of student loans or justify the burden of parental investment and expectation. We cannot dismiss this issue as incompatible with the purity of our academic pursuits: such worries are practical and inevitable—moreover, scholars with children of their own to educate share them. As important as scholars may deem their individual research and their collaborations with peers, the classroom's claims on faculty attention are justified, if not ethically, at least economically—undergraduate tuition is one of the major sources, if not the major source of higher education's income. In fact, in its 1998 recommendations for undergraduate education in the twenty-first century, the Boyer Commission refers to undergraduates as the “university's economic life blood.”² The question of how we justify the existence of the liberal arts becomes a more urgent one: how do we practice the liberal arts in response to new demands for inquiry-based learning and the trend of early career tracking? As scholarly editors, we have a unique perspective on this difficult question. As Dr. Lay and several others have done, we must recognize that undergraduates do possess the ability to con-

¹See, for example, Jerome McGann, “Information Technology and the Troubled Humanities,” *TEXT Technology*, 2 (2005): 105–21.

²Boyer Commission, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* (1998), 32. Also see Colleen Cordes, “Study Links Federal Research Grants to Increases in Tuition,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 February 1996; and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, “Who Pays for the Growing Cost of Science?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 August 2003.

tribute to our projects in ways that may greatly advance the cause of the liberal arts.

The Boyer Commission's report touts undergraduate research as the model for higher education in the twenty-first century. Some liberal arts scholars maintain that this model, long a staple in the sciences and engineering, will enable us to accomplish the broad aims of liberal education, as outlined in 1852 by John Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of the University*. Undergraduate research in liberal arts disciplines may provide opportunities for students to produce quantifiable results comparable to the output of our more generously funded colleagues in the sciences. For example, V. Daniel Rogers, associate professor of Spanish at Wabash College, writes persuasively about how the idea of disseminating their work outside the confines of the classroom increased the engagement of his students in their collaborative research.³

Incorporating undergraduate research into humanities curricula may help ailing disciplines recuperate, but it is not a panacea. While such work can provide practical skills that could lead to future employment for liberal arts majors, it raises complex questions. Scholars and administrators debate what form this research should take, how students should be prepared to undertake it, how much faculty involvement is required, what the desired outcomes should be, and how to assess research outcomes.⁴ Underlying these questions is an issue of deeply personal concern to faculty: that of requirements for tenure and promotion. As more research and publishing moves to online forms, and as university library budgets diminish, university presses face unprecedented problems. Several have ceased publishing scholarly monographs in humanities fields, a situation which in 2002 led Stephen Greenblatt to advocate alternative modes to evaluate the research done by junior faculty.⁵ Jerome McGann addressed a similar problem in 2005, proposing born-digital peer-reviewed scholarship supported by established academic organizations.⁶ New modes of assessment of faculty accomplishment

³V. Daniel Rogers, "Surviving the 'Culture Shock' of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities," *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* (March 2003): 134.

⁴Todd McDorman, "Promoting Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: Three Collaborative Approaches," *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* (September 2004); Thomas J. Wenzel, "Why Faculty Members Do Not Need to Directly Involve Students in their Scholarly Work," *Council on Undergraduate Research Quarterly* (March 2004); Lee S. Shulman, "More Than Competition," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 September 2006.

⁵Stephen Greenblatt, "A Special Letter from Stephen Greenblatt," 28 May 2002. http://www.mla.org/scholarly_pub. Accessed 11 December 2007.

⁶Jerome McGann, "Culture and Technology: The Way We Live Now, What Is To Be Done?" *New Literary History*, 36.1 (Winter 2005): 71–82.

seem long overdue, and some federal agencies that fund liberal arts projects have rewritten their funding opportunities to imply a requirement for open electronic access to project work. University presses, understandably, resist the idea of open access and can hinder faculty's efforts to secure external funding for research. None of these problems can be fixed easily or quickly, and concerns about undergraduate research, under the circumstances, may seem frustratingly trivial.

As faculty and administration in the liberal arts worry about their own survival, both collectively and individually, they might consider how undergraduate research can be recast to serve the needs of several different populations within the university: faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates as well. The Boyer Commission suggests a "synergy of teaching and research" and financial rewards for scholars who employ such a synergy well. The report, unfortunately, fails to explain how this synergy can be accomplished and does not mention the source of remuneration for those who employ it successfully.⁷

As for the synergy between research and teaching, I suggest we begin by focusing on our gateway courses, particularly those in composition. Students tend to despise these courses, and many instructors are dissatisfied as well. Some universities are in the process of transforming these programs to better target student interests, and the revamped courses apparently provoke less misery for everyone involved.⁸ Because some students enter college unprepared to write clearly about the subjects that interest them, and because they have little training in research, such courses cannot be abandoned. They can and should, however, be reshaped. Generally, such courses begin with interpretation of a text that leads to a reasonable thesis statement. In turn, that thesis statement should be supported with credible evidence, after which a conclusion following one of the recommended textbook formulae provides closure. Typically, writing courses do not teach grammar or sentence structure, though many students need help in these areas. Career-minded undergraduates question the value of writing courses they must pass before pursuing their job training. They question the very idea of interpretation of anything, since interpretation is "subjective"—the idea that there is "no right answer" can make anyone uncomfortable. This model is a first step toward more sophisticated essays, but perhaps it should not be the very first step.

⁷Boyer Commission, 33.

⁸Thomas Bartlett, "Why Johnny Can't Write, Even Though He Went to Princeton," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 January 2003.

Reed Wilson, director of the Humanities and Social Sciences Undergraduate Research Center at UCLA, offers a cogent rejoinder to the follow-up survey to the Boyer Commission report's point that the sciences and engineering incorporate research and teaching with greater success than do the humanities.⁹ Adopting the original report's surgical metaphor of "radical reconstruction," Wilson suggests reconstruction of the notion of research in the humanities. Rejecting the model of the scholarly monograph as final product of research in favor of the collaborative goal of process as partial product, he believes that the reconstructed version of research should be taught as a first priority in every undergraduate humanities course. He maintains that research in every discipline is "the process of discovery that creates knowledge, one in which subject and object interact to create new structures of reality."¹⁰ What more fertile object can we place under our students' microscopes than a primary source? Alien to many undergraduates, a historical primary text provides a laboratory of question and answer. Formulating valid questions and locating answers from credible sources should be the practical work of elementary humanities research.

Before rushing into interpretation of a work read once or twice, students need to examine thoroughly the object of interpretation: the text. A published text has many histories to discover: a publishing history, a personal history of the author, a history of the context in which it was written, a history, perhaps, of its various versions, a history of variants, authorial and editorial, not to mention the histories of the author's subjects within his or her work. These aspects of the published work provide much of the evidence that supports a responsible interpretation. Even in elementary undergraduate courses, then, we might begin tapping an underutilized source of great intellectual wealth: scholarly and documentary editions. Perhaps both undergraduates and faculty would benefit by revisiting some of the work that historians, literary historians, philosophers, social scientists and textual editors are paid to do. The very idea that people do get paid for close examination of historical texts which culminates in published documentary or scholarly editions could even persuade students that introductory courses might be worth some time and expense.

Using published scholarly and documentary editions as teaching tools can be valuable to undergraduates in upper-level classes. All students may

⁹Reed Wilson, "Researching 'Undergraduate Research' in the Humanities," *Modern Language Studies*, 33.1/2 (Spring 2003): 75.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 77.

benefit from hands-on experience with work that has already been done and has, in most cases, been done quite well. Using completed documentary editions as research tools gives undergraduates a model and a safety net for trial-and-error investigations. If we adopt the safety net approach, we may even be rewarded with some knowledge, some document, some information overlooked while the official work was in the process of being done quite well. Such a discovery may be one extrinsic reward for professors and students. Students will learn the necessity of painstaking attention to detail, both in historical annotation and in historical collation. From both historical and textual apparatuses, they will see good writing modeled, edited, and revised. They will learn that punctuation changes meaning, and the meanings of particular conventions of punctuation. They will see mistakes and will learn that these mistakes may be important pieces of history.

Wilson comments that valuable collaborative research in the humanities occurs infrequently, and most often on scholarly edition projects. Reconstructing teaching on the undergraduate level accomplishes the goal of preparing undergraduates to do textual and historical work on scholarly editions and documentary editions. Including students in varied disciplines on editions may even increase the likelihood of external project funding by expanding the practical and pedagogical aspects of our work. Larger staffs including undergraduates trained in textual editing techniques and adept at research for historical annotation will enable editions to accomplish work plans more quickly and in a more cost-effective manner. While Wilson doubts that undergraduate research contributes significant help to faculty investigators, Dr. Lay's students seem to refute that claim. The time taken to summarize a source for annotation, participation in a vocal collation or copy-text proof, ordering sources through interlibrary loan—these activities are not only substantive but essential to completion of project work; the Taylor University students understood the crucial importance that each of these stages plays in the reliability of a scholarly edition.

Accommodating undergraduates in research projects requires, of course, some adaptation on the part of faculty, especially those involved in documentary editions. It means reengaging ourselves in teaching, possibly at the temporary expense of our individual research. It means more projects like Lay's—larger projects, and more student involvement in long-established editorial projects. It means training students to work collaboratively on scholarly editions. It means making the effort to know our students and spending however much time it takes to monitor and augment their skill development.

It might mean mentoring small groups, learning with them, and, occasionally, allowing them to teach us. In this way, we can provide students with experiences that develop lasting skills, provide the excitement of discovery, the security of guidance, and satisfying collaboration with peers and fully engaged mentors; these activities, in fact, do match some funding agencies' mission statements. While faculty mentoring anchors this endeavor, almost equally important is each student's sense of control over his or her contribution to the learning and construction processes of a documentary text. Our students will develop practical skills—close attention to detail, meticulous record keeping, research methods, interrogation of the significance of grammar and punctuation, to name a few—that will benefit them regardless of the career path they ultimately choose.

Lay's summer humanities research project is one realization of the power of successful mentoring and undergraduate research in the humanities. The Taylor students are not the only undergraduates involved in documentary or textual editing, nor are they even among the first.¹¹ McGann and several other scholars have been teaching both undergraduates and graduate students, sometimes including their work in the scholarly (in some instances, electronic) end product. McGann has admitted that student involvement in many instances will not meet a mentor's expectations, and that a certain degree of disappointment is inevitable. Undergraduates are learning, after all; part of our work is to demonstrate that failure contributes to research—sometimes more profoundly than success does.

Anyone who has written a grant application for documentary or scholarly editions is well acquainted with the fact that the preservation of literature, history, philosophy, and anthropology does not (at least not directly) cure disease. However, we must bear in mind that just this year, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay was named a MacArthur fellow for his work using the *Iliad* to treat psychological trauma in Vietnam veterans. Dr. Shay himself read translations of the Greek epics, Homer, and Athenian plays and philosophers while recovering from the stroke he suffered at age 40.¹² Shay explains that he was trying to fill gaps in his education. He was teaching himself.

¹¹Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Democratizing Student Learning: The 'Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1820–1940' Web Project at SUNY Binghamton," *The History Teacher*, 35.2 (February 2002): 163–74; Carol Toner, "Teaching Students to Be Historians: Suggestions for an Undergraduate Research Seminar," *The History Teacher*, 27.1 (November 1993): 37–51.

¹²David Berreby, "Scientist at Work," *New York Times*, 11 March 2003.

Shay was teaching himself, and, to a degree, he healed. To a degree, he became a better or at least a different healer, now wielding classic literature as well as a prescription pad. In considering the place of documentary editions in undergraduate course work, we might ourselves consider tandem notions of teaching and healing. By changing the manner in which we teach introductory humanities courses especially, by sharing the great wealth of documentary editions, by teaching skills that can be used in a number of vocations, we can link the practical, the financial, the aesthetic, and the humane. Perhaps we should view the burden of teaching as therapy for the liberal arts—a course of treatment that may boost its enrollments, create intellectual community, and overall, improve its quality of life.