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Honors in the Electronic Age

George Mariz
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No blessing comes unmixed, and this is certainly the case with the plethora of opportunities that the new electronic world presents to higher education and to honors programs. For some this electronic revolution threatens to undermine established values and traditional academic practices, while for others it represents unprecedented ease and access to information with even greater benefits on the horizon. Both sides are right, if not completely right. Electronic innovations have certainly disrupted the academy, but new means of research and communication have enhanced academic life significantly and will continue to do so. The trick, obviously, is using these new tools to greatest effect and simultaneously avoiding the dangers that they bring with them. As this brief essay argues, what will, indeed does, distinguish honors in the electronic age has less to do with this new world *per se* than with the way honors students and faculty use its tools.

We are now overrun with electronic gadgetry of all kinds, and this essay will not deal with everything that impinges on academic life and honors. I will not discuss services such as YouTube or cell phones, which have become a good deal more than phones, save to note that both have transformed and will continue to change the nature and scope of audiovisual communication. Higher education and honors must confront the new electronic world; if they do not, then Wiki, Flickr, and all their cousins will come rushing in uncontrolled and do serious damage while their potential for good may be vitiated.

Both faculty and student opinions of the electronic revolution seem divided: proponents vigorously promote the virtues of this brave new world of culture and research while adversaries see only disruption, degradation, and trivialization in its wake. The middle ground seems to have few occupants. Many in the academic community initially react to electronic technology with hostility. Visualize the faculty member proctoring an exam who sees a student in the back row texting, perhaps to another student in the class, an all-too-common occurrence today. Imagine another instructor who receives a paper she suspects has been purchased from one or another Internet service: Is Joe, who has failed both tests in this class miserably and who has yet to utter two consecutive coherent sentences, actually capable of writing so forcefully and eloquently?

On the other hand, the electronic age has brought with it a host of innovations. Instructors can now expect serious revisions of papers from students, and students themselves now think multiple drafts of papers are routine. Computing has transformed data manipulation in the sciences and the social sciences, and operations that once took weeks or months now require nothing more than a keystroke. From the standpoint of the academy more generally and honors as well, the present and future are rich with promise in the electronic age, but, as with all new technologies, care and open-mindedness are necessary to take full advantage of the possibilities that the new world of technology opens up to higher education.

While the electronic realm offers exciting new forms of social networking, some are meretricious. Twitter, for instance, is generally limited to the most trivial communication (Basho's achievement of satori in sixty characters doesn't really hold in this realm). Such options are inadequate to communication between students and faculty in higher education, serving primarily social and commercial possibilities. Among the investors in Twitter, for instance, are Jeff Bezos (of Amazon.com), Benchmark Capital, and Institutional Venture Partners, all anticipating a hefty return on their investments. Nonetheless, I think it would be a mistake to dismiss Twitter or other options such as Facebook or MySpace out of hand. If nothing else, they are a promising means to communicate with potential students, and they are the primary means of communication for many students nowadays. For many of them, e-mail is sooo 2005!

Some educational products and practices are already proven, and others that are still in development hold enormous promise. Most instructors now use Blackboard, which allows communication with an entire class at the touch of a key as well as instantaneous syllabus revision. Blackboard has allowed many faculty members in honors to go paperless, shifting duplication costs to students, who at some institutions have a printing and copying allotment included in their regular fees.

The Internet is, of course, already well established as a research tool. Search engines are now the choice of first resort for virtually all research projects, and Google receives over two hundred million hits per day. The number of electronic tools available for researchers in all fields is large and growing all the time. Just on the electronic horizon are new aids that promise to enhance research efficiency and effectiveness even more. Web crawlers, also known as spiders, are now in the early stages of availability, and others are in development; they allow metadata searches, simultaneous searches of multiple sites with similar kinds of materials, e.g., nineteenth-century European literature or censuses, that aggregate the results into very large searchable databases. Web crawlers harvest these results and make them directly available to

the user. BOSS and SearchMonkey are two such services, and BOSS predicts that it will receive one billion hits per month in 2009. Others such as PubMed will provide similar benefits for medical information once they come online.

In thinking about honors in the electronic age, it makes sense to start not with what is new but with what is traditional in honors programs and colleges. Let us begin by answering a question that all honors directors or deans, not to mention advisors and others in the honors community, have heard countless times from prospective students: "Is honors harder than regular work, and does it take more time?" The answer we typically give is something like the following: "Honors work is not harder than other work; it's different work." A long, amplifying explanation generally follows. Here is mine.

Virtually every year I teach a non-honors history class that deals with the ancient Western world. The students have reading assignments in a large, standard text, supplemented by primary source reading that includes ancient epics, the most prominent of which is Homer's *Odyssey*, a Greek tragic play, and some ancient philosophy and prose. In this class I lecture three days per week, and students listen, absorbing the information. On Fridays they attend smaller discussion sections led by graduate students. Class work consists of several short papers on the readings, quizzes, an hour exam, map exercises, and a final examination.

I also teach an honors class that covers the same time period. In the honors class, students read virtually the same sources, save that there is no required textbook for the class and they normally read entire works rather than selections. I lecture perhaps six days during the term (comprised of forty class meetings) to provide background information on the composition of the works they are reading. The other class meetings are devoted to discussion of the readings. Class work includes two major papers, with a minimum of two drafts each, the second of which is graded and which students can resubmit in revised form for a better grade. There is also a comprehensive final essay exam in the course.

Obviously the honors class can and does work differently for several reasons. First, the students have more than the normal amount of curiosity, and they seek understanding on their own. Second, they are able to work independently and need not be nursed along with lectures that provide a guiding framework. Third, they have a high tolerance for intellectual frustration; rather than surrendering when they don't understand a text, they continue to read and to grapple with difficult material. I believe this last characteristic most clearly defines honors students. Rather than yield to problems, they look for solutions, even when the solutions are slow to come and difficult to determine. Moreover, they understand that data and knowledge differ from one another in fundamental ways, that the former are the basis of the latter, not a

synonym for it. They seek the reality, the "how this works," behind the appearance. This difference is apparent in all honors offerings. Our honors math sequences emphasize the importance of understanding the mathematics underlying solutions, not with getting the right answer, and as a consequence students emerge from these classes with a more comprehensive grasp of theory, i.e., the way mathematics works, not merely with the ability to manipulate figures. Chemistry, sociology, and other honors classes on my campus, and I am certain on virtually every other one, work the same way. Honors classes can work at this level because the students are more intellectually independent than the average college student and react positively to a challenging environment.

In academic pursuits, students use the Internet more than any other electronic medium, and here again I think honors students use it in ways that emphasize the differences between the two groups of students. Students can buy pre-written papers from online services. More prevalent is the paper that results from cutting and pasting material from a number of sources, each of which may provide some piece of the information necessary to the paper. Such papers can be well done, but typically they bear telltale signs of how they were composed, e.g., tense shifts, lack of transitions, differences in writing styles (passive voice in one section and active voice in another), and changes in narrative perspective, to mention but a few. Students can learn important skills in these exercises: where to find information and how to create a crude synthesis. Such papers, however, often border on or immigrate entirely into plagiarism, and, given how easy it is now to detect plagiarism, cutting and pasting can lead students into disastrous temptation.

In general, honors students use electronic resources quite differently from other students. I do not wish to suggest that they do not do their share of texting and blogging; no doubt they do. When they do research or creative work, however, they understand and use these media differently from most, though not all, other students. For example, an honors student knows that the Internet is a tool and a source of information, indeed a very useful tool and a very good source. It allows the researcher to compile large amounts of primary and interpretive material in a way that eliminates the drudgery of old-fashioned searches. Those of us who spent the earlier parts of our academic lives in card catalogs and endless bibliographies, often with scant returns, welcome these developments. However, honors students, indeed all good students, understand that this phase of research is data gathering and that data are the building blocks of knowledge, not knowledge itself. They constitute the basis from which papers are written and scientific work proceeds. The Internet provides students in the visual arts with images to study, not the study itself. In other words, honors students use electronic media differently

from most non-honors students in about the same way that they function differently from other students more generally. They are curious, self-starting, and independent. In this new environment they distinguish themselves by making full use of the resources available to them, and they use them to greater advantage than most other students. They now have new tools that allow them to produce work that differs from what most other students produce in about the same way as before the electronic revolution. In fine, they differ from their contemporaries in about the same ways they always have, but all students, both honors and non-honors, are functioning at a higher level. The late major-league pitcher Dan Quisenberry, at least as well known for his comic sense as for his athletic ability, once noted that he had seen the future, and it looked to him very much like the past, only longer. In the same way, honors students will function differently from their peers in this new world in pretty much the same way that they always have, only more so.

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