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## Digital Culture or Gutenberg Culture: Some Reflections on the Design Principles of Online Courses.

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## **Digital Culture or Gutenberg Culture: Some Reflections on the Design Principles of Online Courses.**

### **Abstract:**

This short essay explores online course design, especially in the crisis conditions of the coronavirus pandemic. We reflect on the question of whether the basic design orientation in online classes should be toward textual or non-textual content, and we consider the view that textual content may in fact be far better.

### **Overview of the Problem**

Our FLC community addressed the problem of teaching the humanities in large lecture courses. The challenge was to devise against the limits of a classroom with 70-150 students, given subject matter that is inherently dialogic. During our discussions, we had little inkling that, by Spring Quarter we would, like most educators, be contemplating teaching our large lecture courses in a 100% online format perhaps until 2022 (a fact that may not quite have dawned everywhere, even now). In view of this radical transformation in University education, we will reframe our written contribution to our pedagogical work in order to reflect the new challenge of online teaching we are all facing in triage fashion. Since University list-serves are awash in invitations to ten thousand new digital gadgets that help us deliver online instruction, we will consider the argument on behalf of an underrepresented, minority view: that online classes should eschew complex multi-media interfaces and gadgetry and embrace a predominantly textual format.

### **Two Visions of the Online-Lecture: Multi-media Spectacle or Return to Gutenberg Culture**

It is a commonplace that we are living through a sea change between the culture of print, which might be called, following Sven Birkerts, Gutenberg culture, and digital culture, embodied by the devices, applications, and corresponding forms of consciousness of the networked computer. Humanist habits of mind: patiently reading, carefully reflecting, paying attention alternative views and to contrary arguments, deferring judgment, weighing sources and evidence, following norms of argument and citation, maintaining a posture of skepticism, subjecting ideas to multiple lines of attack and falsification, etc., are all squarely rooted in the Gutenberg culture of print. Digital culture, by contrast, entails other very different habits of mind: speed-reading or skimming (i.e. impatient haste), hive-mindedness and conformity, seeking silos of opinion (a.k.a echo-chambers), etc. (to name a few).

If we place humanist inquiry in the visual and technical frame of digital culture, we are inviting students to bring digital habits of mind to objects that demand Gutenberg habits of mind. This is a point that cannot readily be impressed upon technicians whose job is to devise, maintain, and disseminate digital technologies, but that doesn't make it any less true. A literature professor whose talking head appears in a box on a mobile phone or computer invites

comparison with entertainers, influencers, and other denizens of digital infotainment. This invitation frames humanist inquiry as a multi-media spectacle. This framing happens quite apart from *what* we say; it results from *how* we say it, i.e. from the media and technologies *through* which we say it. If we begin with this error, we can expect unsatisfying results. In particular, we can expect to fail in one of our chief aims: to inculcate Gutenberg habits of mind. The troubled world that surrounds us offers daily reminders of what happens to societies that lose their grip on the culture of literacy.

We should at least consider the merits of the alternative approach—a return to Gutenberg culture. What would it mean to eschew digital gadgetry and enshrine the Gutenberg culture of text in online classes? This is a large question; we'll hazard just a modest sketch here. First, perhaps it means that we show a preference for textual forms of instruction. The prevailing wind blows athwart such a preference and tends to find us asking, "How can I find time to incorporate this new snazzy ap so I seem up-to-date?" That question might be replaced with the question: What problem of Gutenberg culture does this technology address? Very often the answer is: none. We can see at once that the Gutenberg orientation to online teaching will be hard to sell and hard to brag about. That doesn't mean it will be less valuable. Second, perhaps it means that we embrace (rather than fearing) difficulty. Gutenberg culture was an attainment—something won through effort. It wasn't a gate through which everyone could rush at once. Some people will not, or can not, summon the effort. If we can't accept this basic fact, perhaps we are unfit custodians of Gutenberg culture. Therefore, in so far as digital technologies aim to replace difficult Gutenberg activities like reading and writing with easier digital ones, like looking at pictures, we ought to view them with doubt. Finally, perhaps we'll view textual communication as a culminating achievement rather than as an outmoded tech we use until we figure out how to use digital, image-based, substitutes. Accordingly, the pedagogy of an online class in the humanities would enshrine the value of exchanging texts (both between students, and between professor and student).

## Implications

- I. The value of digital technologies may chiefly lie in : (a) the ability to do instruction online at all, (b) the ability to make humanities accessible, e.g. to blind students, (c) the wide availability of free full texts of humanist culture (e.g. Project [ahem] Gutenberg).
- II. Instructors may be better off spending intense preparatory efforts on well constructed, text-based, online courses than on mastering and deploying non-textual technologies.
- III. The absence of the latter, and the preference for the former, might be read as a strength, rather than a weakness.