Public Humanities (2025), 1, e4, 1–7
doi:10.1017/pub.2024.6

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Teaching the Humanities for the Future Public

Jonathan Bate

Department of English and School of Sustainability, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA
Email: Jonathan.Bate@asu.edu

(Received 05 July 2024; revised 14 August 2024; accepted 15 August 2024)

Abstract

This manifesto is a case study of a new method of configuring Humanities wisdom. Following the 2008 financial crisis, students and parents questioned the value of Humanities disciplines in relation to debt and future employment prospects. The experiment described here is an attempt at Arizona State University to reinvigorate humanistic pedagogy by means of an entirely new transdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts degree that abandons the disciplinary nomenclature that goes back to Aristotle and was instantiated, then ossified, in the twentieth-century university. The problem, it is argued, is not in the content, but in the naming: History, Literature, Philosophy, Language, and Religion. The experiment is to begin not with these discrete and seemingly moribund bodies of knowledge, but with the most pressing concerns of present and future publics. We name these, and so we name the new degree, Culture–Technology–Environment. The manifesto describes the design and content of the degree and raises the hope that curricular innovations of this kind will create Humanities-wise citizens for the future.

Keywords: culture; environment; technology

The Humanities have a naming problem. When a colleague from across the campus says that they are a scientist, everybody knows what they mean and will have some sense of what they do. There will be visions of lab coats, spreadsheets, kit at the bench, and quadratic equations on the whiteboard. But if one says "I am a Humanist," it could mean all sorts of things. I am a humanitarian? I do not believe in God? As for what the Humanities scholar does: there are few in the profession who do not have stories of glazed eyes and baffled expressions when they try to explain their research at cocktail parties beyond the walls of the academy.

Similarly with acronyms: STEM is recognizable and seems very useful. Society needs science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. We live in an age of metrics where science and medicine have the great advantage of quantifiability: the demonstrable transfer of knowledge from a research discovery to a startup; the empirical processes of verification, falsification, and replication that ensure research rigor and thus value for money; the evidence base of random controlled trials. Science can always prove its worth, so STEM has become shorthand for messages such as "keep the research funding flowing" and "study with us in order to graduate into a well-paid job." Meanwhile, there is no agreed or widely recognized acronym for the disciplines of the Humanities. A few years ago, the British Academy tried to find one. Eventually, they came up with SHAPE: Social Sciences,

Humanities, and the Arts for the People and the Economy.[1] This sounds very worthy, but – besides being something of a mouthful and completely unmemorable – it is not immediately obvious that economic service is the true end of disciplines that have historically been devoted to the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness and more recently been associated with causes such as social, racial, and gender justice. Valiant efforts can be made to demonstrate how the Arts and Humanities disciplines feed into those great engines of economic prosperity, the creative industries and the heritage sector[2]; statistics may be produced to show that graduates in English are as employable as those in Computer Science.[3] But always there is a double bind: to submit to the tyranny of the metric is to concede to the instrumental way of thinking that it is the business of the Humanities to question; to refuse to do so is to risk the closing of the cheque book of legislatures, parents, and students.

Would it have been different if the headline name adopted in Anglophone universities had been not Humanities but Human Sciences? As the Natural Sciences are the domain of the organic chemist and the astrophysicist, could we not say that the domain of the cultural historian and the philosopher is the science of being human? This indeed was what the German polymath Wilhelm Dilthey proposed in the late nineteenth century when he made a distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften.*[4] For him – and in the subsequent German university tradition – the sciences of the "spirit" were indeed the disciplines that we would recognize as the Humanities: philosophy, history, philology, musicology, linguistics, literary studies, religious studies, and jurisprudence. The problem here is that, insofar as the term Human Sciences now has traction in the Anglophone world, it tends to be associated with disciplines such as neurobiology, genetics, and psychology or regarded as a synonym for the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, human geography, and so on). Might another rebranding be possible? Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften* was his translation of the term "Moral Sciences," which had been coined by David Hume and developed by John Stuart Mill as a kind of fusion of psychology, economics, and ethics.[5] It is doubtful, however, that faculty leadership would want to take on the mantle of Dean of Moral Sciences.

So we are probably stuck with the Humanities. But should we also be stuck with the disciplinary nomenclature of the next level down: History, English, Philosophy, Languages and Linguistics, Religious Studies (which has for the most part replaced Theology), Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Theatre Studies, Art History, Musicology, Critical Theory and so forth? Might these names be one of the causes of the precipitous decline in Humanities enrolments that has been widely documented in the last few years, with alarming consequences for all these disciplines?

The evidence suggests that the enrolment crisis became severe as a result of the 2008 financial crisis.[6] Students and parents questioned the value of Humanities disciplines in relation to debt and future employment prospects. Hence the drive to STEM and business degrees. The thought was: "What's the use of History, Literature and Philosophy in a world of insecure employment, not to mention multiple crises of climate, health and social division?"

[1] British Academy n.d.
[2] Comunian et al. 2014.
[3] MLA 2024.
[4] Dilthey 1883.
[5] Mill 2011.
[6] Schmidt 2018.

Or, in response to the centuries-long notion of *studia humanitatis* as the accumulation of the collective wisdom of the past: "Why should we care about the past when the future is so uncertain?" Or, more locally, "Why do we need language degrees when we will soon have instant AI translation?"

Without Humanities teaching, there can be no future Humanities, public or private. This manifesto proposes a new method of configuring Humanities wisdom in a way that addresses issues of concern to publics in the present and that seeks to create Humanities-wise citizens for the future. It describes an experiment at Arizona State University in which a new transdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts degree has been designed by abandoning the disciplinary nomenclature that goes back to Aristotle's differentiation between History, Philosophy, and Poetics, and that was instantiated, and in many respects ossified, in the twentieth-century university. The problem for the Humanities, it is argued, is not in the content, but in the naming: History, Literature, Philosophy, Language, Religion, and so on. No one would wish to abandon these established disciplines, but is there an alternative route into the wisdom and skills they offer? The experiment is to begin not with these discrete and, in a fastmoving world of techno-capitalism, seemingly moribund, bodies of knowledge, but with the most pressing concerns of present and future publics. We name these, and so we name the new degree, Culture–Technology–Environment.[7] To begin, that is to say, with what we might describe as *applied* Humanities.

Culture: approaching equitable and diverse global citizenship through the study of culture and language. Technology: bringing Humanities thinking to the human and ethical challenges of a world shaped by technology. Environment: addressing environmental sustainability and justice through the Arts and Humanities. The degree's three keywords invoke intimately connected knowledge domains. The goals are to develop students' knowledge, competencies, and commitments in these domains. Culture designates multilingual inquiry into media, narrative, rhetoric, belonging, and the imagination. Technology is shorthand for humane technology, applied ethics, and equitable innovation. Environment is meant to convey a focus on environmental justice and how the Humanities enable us to imagine and articulate more just and sustainable modes of collectivity, especially but not only in relation to race, gender, class, age, and disability, during a time of rapid climate change. Coursework engages design aspirations of the kind that meet with the approval of university administrators, such as "transforming society," "fusing intellectual disciplines," "being socially embedded," and "engaging locally and globally." The BA allows students to engage with historical, ethical, literary, linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural dimensions of humans as part of the environments they inhabit and the role that technology plays in sometimes facilitating but often disrupting these relationships. As the US National Humanities Alliance articulates through its "Study the Humanities" initiative, Humanities degrees offer a pathway not to particular vocations but to success in forging a series of careers within a rapidly changing work landscape.[8] This particular combination of content knowledge and life skills seeks to enable success in the workplace, no matter what career the student pursues (entrepreneur, lawyer, nonprofit director, author, consultant, environmental activist, and so on). Just as importantly, this combination of content knowledge and life skills will challenge students to be life-long learners who will also pursue justice in their communities – whether local, national, or global.

[7] ASU n.d.
[8] NHA n.d.

The aim is to reinvigorate the traditional disciplines of literary study, history, philosophy, religious studies, and languages by deploying them as tools with which to explore the great challenges of the modern world: the relationship between cultures – our ability to live together – and the relationship between humankind and the environment, specifically, the multiple crises of our time such as climate change, air pollution, resource depletion, and thirdly, the role of technology in shaping these connections. It is through technology that humankind has developed culturally and controlled the environment, sometimes for good, but sometimes with devastating effects.

When we designed the degree, the dimension that we were least sure about was technology. Should we be looking at the long history of technology, going back to early human use of fire and on through the industrial revolution with the techniques that vastly increased prosperity and life expectancy in developed societies, but caused immense environmental damage and inequality? Or should we be looking at the changes wrought by contemporary technology: the advent of the Internet and the mobile phone, the sense that all our students are digital natives? But then, just as the introductory module was being taught for the first time in the fall of 2023, ChatGPT arrived on our screens and in our lives. It brought the realization that the challenges of AI should be the core of our thinking about technology in relation to human culture and the human future. The potential for good is immense, but so is that for harm. At this moment, we saw that science fiction had anticipated where we are with AI.

Over the past fifty years, there have been numerous novels and movies about AI going rogue.[9] So it was that we began to study some of these anticipations, these test cases. In one module we watched Alex Garland's 2015 movie *Ex Machina.*[10] In this critically acclaimed film, a young programmer is invited to administer the Turing test to an intelligent humanoid robot named Ava. As the test progresses, the line between human and AI blurs, leading to a thought-provoking exploration of AI consciousness and the potential dangers of creating sentient machines. This led to an animated class discussion, but also provided the opportunity to educate students in a longer history: the movie is explicit in its references to Prometheus' theft of fire in Greek mythology, to the Eve of Genesis, to the Pygmalion theme of the creator falling in love with his creation, to the Ur-text of speculative fiction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and especially to the story of Bluebeard's Castle.

But the module also engaged actively with ChatGPT and Google Bard (now Gemini). One of the things we questioned was the capacity of large language models to develop creative work. I said to the class, "What is your favorite TV show?" To my surprise, as an Englishman, one of the answers which came back was *The Great British Bake Off.* So I typed into ChatGPT, "Write an episode of the *Great British Bake Off* set during a climate emergency." And within a millisecond, it came back with a not implausible script, making jokes about sustainable food, naming contestants and judges, and reproducing with remarkable exactitude the style of the original television program.[11]

At the same time, it was also important to demonstrate to the class the fallibility of these models as they currently exist. We prompted with various questions related to literary history and always got a wrong answer. This was very helpful in showing students that they must not rely on the new AI models; they must always go to original sources as well. What

[9] Hogan and Whitmore 2015.
[10] Parker 2015.
[11] ChatGPT n.d.

impressed me was the way that the students embraced the potential of AI with enthusiasm while also remaining skeptical about its limits and aware of the potential ethical and social problems that it may bring in the coming years.

An advantage of a transdisciplinary degree of this sort is the potential for team teaching. A colleague with expertise in the history of language can lead students through the evolving meanings of the keywords, showing for instance how "culture" means one thing in the "Two Cultures" debate about the arts and the sciences,[12] but altogether something else in the sense initially developed by the late nineteenth-century ethnographer Edward Tylor: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[13] Another faculty member with a focus on the Environmental Humanities can introduce concepts out of literary ecocriticism, ecofeminism, environmental history, and ethics. A guest lecturer from the science division might come and explain the gene-splicing technology, the medical potential, and the ethical pitfalls of CRISP-R technology. Among the most successful case studies in the initial iteration of the introductory core course were a week spent reading Don DeLillo's astonishingly prescient novel of technological mediation and airborne toxicity, *White Noise* (1985); a deep dive into the question of whether the circle of rights should be extended to the non-human, approached via jurist Christopher Stone's seminal essay "Should Trees have Standing?"[14] and the Maori-led campaign to grant legal rights to the Whanganui River in New Zealand[15]; and ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's powerful work on "Women and the Gendered Politics of Food."[16]

Usually, a major impediment to the creation of new degrees in the Humanities is the pressure on resources of both time and funds created by the processes of design and implementation in the bureaucratized twenty-first century university. The elegance of the Culture-Technology-Environment initiative has been that a plenitude of existing courses embraced one or more of its themes. So only a minimal architecture of new offerings was required: two courses, one introductory and the other upper level, defining and developing the terms, especially emphasizing the intersection of the three concepts. The more advanced course does so via the ancient elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, considered both historically and in terms of their relevance to contemporary global challenges. Beyond these, a wide array of existing courses are offered as electives, ranging from "Rhetoric of the Environmental Movement" and "Emerging Digital Media" in the English Department to "History and Philosophy of Sustainability," "Religion, Culture and Public Life," and "Writing and the History of Science, Ideas and Technology" in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, to "Food, Culture and Society in Latin America" in the School of International Letters and Cultures. In addition, as a capstone, every student enrolled for the major has to take a course in the Humanities Lab – an innovative center in which courses addressing real-world problems and involving hands-on experience are co-taught by a Humanities and a Sciences scholar.

In sum, then, the initiative is not intended as a substitute for the traditional major in English, History, Philosophy, or the other Humanities disciplines, but rather to offer an alternative track in which students with concerns for the real-world value of their degree are exposed to

[12] Snow 2012.
[13] Tylor 2010, 1.
[14] Stone 1972.
[15] Fried 2019.
[16] Shiva 2009.

the methods and materials of those fields. So, for example, a student might begin their college career with the intention of majoring in a STEM discipline such as Engineering or Computer Science, but then realize that they want qualitative, debate-led humanistic knowledge more than quantitative, data-driven rote learning. By transitioning to CTE, such a student may retain their focus on questions concerning technology and their passion for environmental activism whilst being stimulated by the study of literature, media, and history. Through the electives mechanism, the recruitment of such students then has the effect of increasing enrolment in traditional Humanities courses.

It is possible to imagine many other ways of repackaging Humanities knowledge and methods in ways that demonstrate value to students and funders, and in so doing to contribute to the public good. Culture–Technology–Environment is only one particular triad of transdisciplinary investigation, but it does have an especially powerful logic in our fractured, precarious world. Back in the twentieth century, the Oxford University degree of PPE (Politics-Philosophy-Economics) was a renowned training ground for future leaders – presidents, prime ministers, chief executives, and opinion formers.[17] Flipping Aristotle's content-and-method-based categories of Philosophy, Poetics, and History (PPH?) into problem-and-humane-solution-based categories such as CTE might just be the way not only to save our disciplines, albeit under new names, but also, more importantly, to contribute to the improvement of human, societal and planetary health.

Sir **Jonathan Bate** is Regents Professor of Literature and Foundation Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University and a Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University, where he was formerly Provost of Worcester College. He is the author of 20 books, including prizewinning biographies of the poets William Wordsworth, John Clare, and Ted Hughes, and numerous scholarly editions, including the Royal Shakespeare Company edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*. His *Romantic Ecology* (1991) and *The Song of the Earth* (2000) were pioneering works of literary ecocriticism. He was editor of *The Public Value of the Humanities* (2011) and he is currently completing two further books: *The Garden: A Green History* and *The Planetary Imagination*.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: J.B.; Data curation: J.B.; Formal analysis: J.B.; Investigation: J.B.; Methodology: J.B.; Project administration: J.B.; Writing – original draft: J.B.; Writing – review & editing: J.B.

Funding Statement. No funding was received in relation to this article.

Competing interest. The author is employed at the university where the case study is taking place.

References

ASU. n.d. "Culture, Technology and Environment, BA." Accessed May 31, 2024. https://degrees.apps.asu.edu/bachelors/major/ASU00/LACTEBA/culture-technology-and-environment.

British Academy. n.d. "This is SHAPE." Accessed May 31, 2024. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/.

ChatGPT. n.d. "Baking for a Greener Tomorrow." https://chatgpt.com/c/fad7d324-211a-4210-8132-10704425598c [not publicly accessible].

Comunian, R., A. Faggian, and S. Jewell. 2014. "Embedding Arts and Humanities in the Creative Economy: The Role of Graduates in the UK." *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 32 (3): 426–50. https://doi.org/10.1068/c11153r.

Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1883. *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.

Fried, David. 2019. "How a River was Granted Personhood." *The Atlantic*, April 22, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/587689/river-me/.

Hogan, Michael, and Greg Whitmore. 2015. "The Top 20 Artificial Intelligence Films – in Pictures." *The Guardian*, January 8, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2015/jan/08/the-top-20-artificial-intelligence-films-in-pictures.

[17] Oxford n.d.

Parker. 2015. "Human After All: *Ex Machina*'s Novel Take on Artificial Intelligence." *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/04/ex-machina-and-the-virtues-of-humanizing-artificial-intelligence/390279/.

Mill, John Stuart. 2011 (originally 1843). *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence, and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*. Book VI, "On the Logic of the Moral Sciences." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139149846.

MLA. 2024. MLA Academic Program Services, ADE Ad Hoc Committee, "Report on English Majors' Career Preparation and Outcomes." Accessed May 31, 2024. https://www.maps.mla.org/content/download/191583/file/ADE-Ad-Hoc-Career-Report.pdf.

NHA. n.d. "Study the Humanities." Accessed May 31, 2024. https://www.studythehumanities.org/.

Oxford. n.d. University of Oxford, "One Hundred Years of PPE 1920–2020." Accessed May 31, 2024. https://www.humanities.ox.ac.uk/files/ppe100yearsreportpdf.

Schmidt, Benjamin. 2018. "The Humanities are in Crisis." *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/the-humanities-face-a-crisisof-confidence/567565/.

Shiva, Vandana. 2009. "Women and the Gendered Politics of Food." *Philosophical Topics* 37 (2): 17–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43154554.

Snow, C. P. 2012 (originally 1959). *The Two Cultures. Introduction by Stefan Collini*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139196949.

Stone, Christopher D. 1972. "Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects." *Southern California Law Review* 45: 450–501. https://iseethics.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/stone-christopher-d-should-trees-have-standing.pdf.

Tylor, Edward Burnett. 2010 (originally 1871). *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511705960.

Cite this article: Bate, Jonathan. 2025. "Teaching the Humanities for the Future Public." *Public Humanities*, 1, e4, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.6