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The World is Complex – That's Why We Need All of Us

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The World is Complex – That's Why We Need All of Us

By Bruce Janz
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Humanities is just about reading old books and writing new ones, isn't it? Not anymore – think digital.

People usually think of the humanities as stuck in the past, as focused on dusty old texts or pictures of Greek temples in dark lecture halls. Worse, those who study humanities are sometimes seen as unproductive or elitist. The fact is, though, that we all draw on our cultural experience – art, literature, history, languages, philosophy, religion – every day, whether we realize it.

So what do you do? Engineering? Business? I am a philosophy professor, but you know that we have a lot in common, right? I mean, both of us care about a world that works well for the greatest number of people – or at least those we love. We're both interested in solving problems, sometimes even very similar problems, and we're both interested in honing and refining our questions about the world. I bet you're interested in the design of things – we also love that stuff. And we might even use some similar tools to do our jobs.

I and my many of colleagues are interested in applying digital tools to all the traditional areas of the humanities. Some of that has to do with modeling things. There are projects, for instance, to produce virtual-reality scenes of classic temples or ancient monuments. A lot of people work with texts, making them searchable and analyzable in large databases in ways they never could before. We can ask new questions about an author's entire body of work, or even entire periods in history or in other cultures. We've been getting into a lot of GIS (geographic information system) data to link culture to all sorts of demographic data. History, literature and cultural studies have never been more exciting.

The point is that the humanities aren't what they used to be. Not that we've turned our backs on history, ideas and cultures. Far from it. We're more interested in that than ever. But the difference is that we're starting to find new ways of using new technology and integrating with other disciplines.

If you think about it, it makes sense. Every discipline, in the end, already contains a bit of humanities. Every discipline cares about how humans act, how they represent themselves to themselves and others, how they make meaning in their worlds. Doctors

treat their patients as texts all the time when they make diagnoses and when they read lab results. Scientists don't just discover what's out there, but they also focus their efforts on what matters, what we as humans see ourselves as being in the future. Technologists don't just invent new things, they have to think about cultural patterns and how those things will be significant within our cultures.

Digital and technological humanities takes many forms. We've been involved in looking at veterans' cemeteries in order to tell the stories of those buried there. We've even produced smartphone apps that allow you to get information in real time about the deceased just by pointing the phone at a headstone.

We've investigated the experiences that astronauts have had while in space, when they report experiences of awe and wonder as they look out the portals.

We've developed games that are not only fun but that train people in languages, ethical scenarios, cultural encounters, and a host of other things.

The point is this: It's not enough to just invent or discover something, and then present it to the world and expect it to be a success or an interesting finding. The stuff we invent and discover changes us. The first iPhone was dubbed by many as the "Jesus phone" for the nearly religious fervor it caused as a complete game-changer. It might feel ancient now, but it was more than just a tool. It has become a new environment in which we learn new things, gain new expectations, and change our sense of the world. We don't just use it; it changes us, individually and collectively.

I used to live with engineers when I was a student in college. We realized eventually that we cared about very similar things, but just approached questions from different angles. We all knew the world was complex and there were problems to be solved, but that the meaning we had in the world was never static, no matter how firmly one held to a cultural, religious or political belief.

And that's why we needed all of us – scientists, engineers and humanities people alike. Because we all focused on a different part of a big complex world, and we all did our parts to make that world a livable place.

Humanities is doing better and better at integrating itself with other disciplines. Digital humanities is one new way to do that, but there are others. The point is that we cannot afford to ignore aspects of human knowledge and experience, thinking that some of these things are part of the public sphere (science and technology) and some of them are part of private character and individual choice (humanities). We misunderstand how we actually come to knowledge if we separate these pursuits. We all need all of us, talking to each other.

We travel in cars, trains and airplanes built by scientists and engineers to places that are meaningful to us, that have histories and cultures and beliefs that we must understand and navigate if we are ever to accomplish what we want.

We are traveling together.

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