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Introduction: Ethnographies of the Classroom

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Common Knowledge, Volume 24, Issue 3, August 2018, pp. 353-355 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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IN THE HUMANITIES CLASSROOM

A Second Set of Case Studies

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William J. Simpson, Youval Rotman*

Introduction: Ethnographies of the Classroom

Last year, *Common Knowledge* published a group of five case studies titled “In the Humanities Classroom.”¹ Our purpose was not to add to the plethora of recent books and articles arguing for the relevance of the humanities in the current context of declining enrollments and funding. It was our feeling that such arguments had become formulaic and dull and had done little to change the minds of those who saw such study as worthless or to communicate why so many students and teachers still feel joy at learning and teaching. We wanted instead to present a sort of ethnography of the classroom, to guide and induct readers into those revelatory moments that can spring from contact with a text or object when the leader of discussion about it is forceful and prepared.

The collection has garnered some attention, in particular from the American Historical Association,² and individual readers have responded with enthusiasm. One teacher wrote in a message to me:

1. “In the Humanities Classroom: A Set of Case Studies.” Participants in this first installment are Mary Harvey Doyno, Dorothea von Mücke, Frederick S. Paxton, Ramona Nadaff, Katherine Wallerstein, and myself.
2. Miller, “Promoting Good Teaching in the Humanities.”

Common Knowledge 24:3

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-6939731

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I was so moved and awakened by reading the descriptions of the classes, the comments of the students, the thought process behind the texts and objects brought to class. It was for me the first time I had a window into someone else's lesson other than my own and it was both inspiring and thought provoking. . . . I think you have initiated a new genre of writing which is invaluable in the impossible juggle between doing one's own work, on the one hand, and being at the same time attuned to the questions and thought processes going on in other fields of the humanities, on the other.

Such reactions would be enough to justify a second set of essays. But the editors were aware that these should broaden the discussion to include student voices, non-American venues, and new efforts necessitated by the increasing use of technology and distance learning. Cell phones must now be incorporated into lesson plans, not deplored.³ Many humanities teachers find new opportunities and extra salary in study-abroad programs. Students are increasingly eager to tell their instructors how they learn best. The high fence formerly thought to stand between the lab and the library as means and venues of instruction is beginning to be breached in new fields such as the study of material culture. Hence, we have included in our second symposium the voice of an undergraduate who tells us how he carried his in-class experience into discussion with his peers outside the classroom; a group of graduate students recounting their hands-on learning in the Columbia University "Making and Knowing Project," which brings laboratory experience into the study of history; and contributions from three instructors who have moved outside their comfort zones to teach online or in classrooms far from their home universities.

Something else has happened, however, between our first and second set of case studies that suggests a different and more challenging context. The national mood in the United States, Europe, and Israel has darkened; the mood on campuses has become more fraught and polemical as well. Searing conflicts and accusations have erupted in professional gatherings, so much so that the inclusion by the American Historical Association in its January 2018 meeting of a session titled "Historians Behaving Badly" seems not a joke or a rebuke but rather a description of where we are. The darker side of our earlier set of essays, represented by the discussion that Ramona Naddaff and Katharine Wallerstein contributed on trigger warnings,⁴ is now echoed in the concern that William Caferro articulates about teaching Western Civilization courses and the worry almost tantamount to despair echoing in Youval Rotman's description of his efforts to

3. For creative efforts to do just this, see Reyerson, Mumme, and Higdon, "Medieval Cities of Europe"; and Higdon, Reyerson, McFadden, and Mumme, "Twitter, Wordle, and ChimeIn as Student Response Pedagogies."

4. Naddaff and Wallerstein, "The Wrong Words in the Wrong Times."

bring students to see the study of history as a tool for confronting fundamental moral and political issues.

We feel, therefore, that the need for essays such as those published here is more acute than ever. Not only is awareness of such encounters still the best argument to a readership beyond the university for the relevance and power of humanities teaching; descriptions of such encounters can also give those of us who are *in* the classroom both the consolation Jeffrey Hamburger found in his own teaching and the excitement William Simpson took from his German history class into a wider world ever more needy of a moral compass.

—*Caroline Walker Bynum*

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