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# Counting to One Is Not Not Counting

Joseph Uργο

WE NEED to remind ourselves that the humanities are central to an education in the liberal arts and that the definition of a liberal arts education transcends technologies and precedes, logically and historically, the conflation of education with practical job preparation. Consider this passage from John Henry Newman's classic argument *The Idea of a University*, first published over 150 years ago:

It is [a liberal] education that gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical and to discard what is irrelevant. It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. . . . He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class. (126)

Newman meant to distinguish between a liberal education and specific task preparation, defending and defining the practical functionality of the impractical arts. Challenges to the humanities, in other words, are not new, and, as such, the Spellings commission report is exemplary, not phenomenal.

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, better known as the Spellings commission after its creator, United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, was impaneled in 2006 by President George W. Bush to look at the current health of the higher education system in the United States and to propose ways to improve it and make it more globally competitive. The intent of the Bush administration was to create "a blueprint for a 21st century higher education system" (United States; Dept. of Educ., "National Dialogue"). The commission's findings addressed vital issues such as access, cost and financial aid, learning, and pedagogical innovation. A primary finding was that to achieve progress in these areas, institutions of higher education must be

more accountable to the public in the way they run their organizations and in showing what students are learning. The commission proposed administrative measures such as more transparent pricing policies and a simpler financial aid system. It also proposed an increase in standardized measurement of student learning outcomes through instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (United States Dept. of Educ., *A Test of Leadership*). The most vehement criticism of the report has come from educators and scholars in the humanities, many of whom have argued that the Spellings commission simply did not consider their disciplines and pedagogy with appropriate seriousness.

Nonetheless, debates within the humanities, occurring over the last hundred years but intensifying in the last fifty, have far outvoiced any clear articulation of what intensive training and practice in humanistic fields of inquiry contribute to liberal education. Some of the debates have been so vitriolic that bystanders outside the academy must surely have concluded that the humanities don't know what they're all about and that they have lost sight of any clearly comprehensible purpose. And worse, persuasive jeremiads concerning cultural literacy, the closing of minds, the politicized classroom, and other calls for reforms or returns have left many observers convinced that *humanities* is another word for indoctrination, ideological advocacy, or resistance—in each case, a thing apart from whatever is

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*The author is vice president of academic affairs and dean of faculty at Hamilton College. This essay is based on his presentation at the 2007 MLA convention in Chicago.*

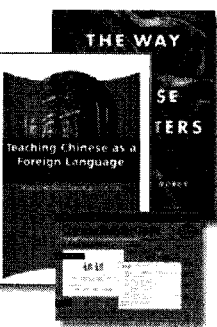
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indispensable in education and, if anything, a thing in need of curtailment. The Spellings commission, to my thinking, marks a watershed confirmation of the historic self-exiling of the humanities that took place at the end of the twentieth century, a self-exiling that endures to this day.

A confluence of revealing factors is apparent in Spellings's omission of any mention of the humanities. There can be no doubt that thoughtful people no longer expect a claim by higher education to moral or even ethical preparation—least of all a claim by the humanities in these areas. The words *ethic* and *moral* appear nowhere in the report. The word *art* appears only in a reference to the proliferation of “state-of-the-art fitness centers” on campuses. *Reading* is referred to solely as a base-level skill, the lack of which is cause for alarm in fields other than the humanities, where the inability to read threatens the intake of data and technical information. The word *book* appears nowhere, and in its plural form, a reference to books read outside class appears only in a sidebar report on student satisfaction surveys. It is not simply that the Spellings commission report fails to mention the humanities as a factor in higher education; the report itself is devoid of a humanities perspective on what it means to be an educated human being. Note that I do not say, “what it means to educate millions of human beings,” because it is the individual, not the mass, that is the subject of humanistic inquiry.

During (or, perhaps, despite) the quantifying of higher education, the humanities have retained, rather tenaciously, their focus on the individual and as a result now risk being counted out of the various equations that embody what is considered essential to the endeavor. If the Spellings commission report is symptomatic, not unique, then the burden returns to the humanities to reaffirm the centrality of the individual to their educational mission—hence the grammatical complexity of this essay's title: “Counting to One Is Not Not Counting.”

In its preamble, the Spellings report is unequivocal in its denunciation of faulty reading and writing skills:

[T]here are . . . disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined. Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy in which,

as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever. (United States; Dept. of Educ., *Test x*)

The claim is repeated early in the report, when the commission asserts, “Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces” (3). As the MLA's official response expresses unambiguously, and as many in the humanities no doubt thought when they read the report, Surely this is the place where the Spellings report should have said, “Therefore, we must bolster funding in the humanities so that every student gets a thorough course of study in language and literature.” But it doesn't. And to my thinking, the omission is not the Spelling commission's problem, but ours.<sup>1</sup>

In its March 2007 response to Spellings, the MLA wisely cautions against defensiveness, even as it bemoans the fact that “[t]he humanities are conspicuously missing” from the report's call for “increased federal investment” in the scientific and technical fields that are “crucial to our nation's global competitiveness” (“Comments”). The humanities are missing, I would contend, because of their historic success in standing against countable methods of locating knowledge. Their demonstrated insistence on the single voice as the source of inspiration and insight—whether that voice be Shakespeare's, Faulkner's, or Toni Morrison's; Derrida's, Kristeva's, or Guillory's—has left an impression that the field is marked by inconsistency, trendiness, and interior debate. Where other fields have methods, the humanities strut and fret from one paradigm to the next. Although there are certainly data-based humanists and although we are well aware of debates over essentialist thinking (there is nothing humanists do that is not debated), the field is more typically characterized by a Socratic call to look inward toward singularity—toward the great authors, the great books, the great critical voices that define each scholarly generation.

The major debates among humanists nearly all come down to questions of individuality—including the debate just mentioned about essentialism. Canon debates, moreover (which to the public provide further evidence that humanists do not know their own subject matter), are debates over which voices will be heard, who speaks, who is represented on the syllabus. Job interviews for humanities departments are characterized by probing questions to find out which school of thought, or theory,

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guides the candidate's thinking, and each school of thought is dominated by its major voices. This perspective carries over into pedagogy. In chemistry, teams of students work computationally on a single set of experiments. In economics, an entire class works on a longitudinal survey, and teams of students take portions of data for analysis. Can we imagine, in Spanish 599, seventeen students working on an analysis, or a translation, of *Don Quixote*? Ought we imagine it?

What is it that study in the humanities, specifically in the languages and in literature, adds to a liberal education—adds in a way that we may count? Newman defined liberal education as "simply the cultivation of the intellect" based on the premise that "[e]very thing has its own perfection, be it higher or lower in the scale of things," and that the pursuit of "intellectual excellence" (his term, precliché) is a measurable endeavor easily distinguished from content. To preserve its essence, education in the humanities must be protected from standardized outcome and not be confused with instilling any particular end, not even "virtue":

To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible . . . as the cultivation of virtue, while at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from it. (90)

Newman's definitions of learning outcomes for a liberal education are explicit and as applicable to the humanities today as they were in the nineteenth century. What we cultivate is a quality of mind, not of production.

What, then, in the language of today's compulsions, is the humanities method? The concept of an agreed-on outcome is foreign to humanities scholarship. Even in the more communitarian moments of our disciplinary history, we have been too steadfastly individualistic to agree on a single endpoint—the very concept is antithetical to what we do. We look back to the articulate voice from the past and forward to the next supervoice around whose articulateness we shall rally for a time: the new set of propositions and claims on which, as a result, we'll be thinking and saying things that will feel new and invigorating. And this fresh thinking will affect how we see everything around us; it will sustain our further development. Our inability to

recognize the historical succession of focal points as methodological is not the fault of the Spellings commission, but it is the reason, I think, that no one on the commission seems to have thought of the role played by humanities education in addressing the crises the report identifies.

The Spellings report's concern is dominated by the perceived need for measured outcomes:

*Postsecondary education institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes.* (25)

Faculty must be at the forefront of defining educational objectives for students and developing meaningful, evidence-based measures of their progress toward those goals. (25)

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) should be administered by the U.S. Department of Education at five- instead of ten-year intervals. (24)

Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes. (25)

If reinvigoration is called for, it is in fields other than the humanities:

With too few exceptions, higher education has yet to address the fundamental issues of how academic programs and institutions must be transformed to serve the changing needs of a knowledge economy. We recommend that America's colleges and universities embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement by developing new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning, *particularly in the area of science and mathematical literacy.*

(25; emphasis added)

The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) should be revitalized and its funding increased . . . for *such rapidly growing areas as neuroscience, cognitive science and organizational sciences.*

(25; emphasis added)

At rock bottom, the report is concerned about adults' ability to read the medicine label:

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy indicates that, between 1992 and 2003, average prose literacy (the ability to understand narrative texts such as newspaper articles) decreased for all levels of educational attainment, and document literacy (the ability to understand practical information such as instructions for taking medicine) decreased among those with at least some college education or a bachelor's degree or higher. (13)

Nowhere in the commission report is there a call for reinvigorated humanities and restoration of classical humanist study in language and literature as a means of addressing the drop in average prose literacy. This omission ought to provide a long-overdue alarm for all humanities scholars. Is there someone who will articulate our response to the Spellings definition of where innovation originates?

The United States must ensure the capacity of its universities to achieve global leadership in *key strategic areas such as science, engineering, medicine, and other knowledge-intensive professions*. We recommend increased federal investment in areas critical to our nation's global competitiveness and a renewed commitment to attract the best and brightest minds from across the nation and around the world to lead the next wave of American innovation. (27; emphasis added)

We have a problem. And I want to reiterate that it is our problem and not anyone else's—certainly not the Spellings commission's. Not since the New Criticism has there been anything close to a publicly articulated humanities method—a number of improvements and alterations to the New Criticism have come and gone, and some have stayed. Within the humanities, however, the method became confused with the politics of some of its practitioners, and we've had a succession of new names for the same practice as a result. In the classroom, for the last century, a methodology of close reading, defined as attention to form, structure, context, and meaning, and of close writing, defined as attention to precision, clarity, complexity, and engagement, remains our dominant practice. Why do we do this? Because it's the only way we know to make possible the emergence of the next articulate voice.

Jane Gallop claims rightly that “the most valuable thing English ever had to offer was the very thing that made us a discipline, that transformed us from cultured gentlemen into a profession: close reading” (183). The value of the method of close reading, Gallop continues, lies in its opposition to “the banking model” in education, “in which the teacher deposited knowledge into the student”—into all the students, in the aggregate. The banking model, if anything, has received renewed vigor as a result of the stress on assessment as a means of measuring learning outcomes in vast numbers. Gallop argues:

The literature classroom has represented a real alternative to the banking model: students had to encounter the text directly and produce their own knowledge;

close reading meant they could not just apply knowledge produced elsewhere, not just parrot back what the teacher or textbook told them. (185)

Pedagogical and scholarly methods in the humanities are designed to cultivate an individual voice. We routinely reward insight and articulateness aside from, or irrespective of, content—which is to say, when we are startled by newly stated content or a freshly, memorably articulated idea, we assess highly. Duplication, however, is death: there is no such thing as a standardized essay on *Hamlet*, much to the dismay of Internet-surfing undergraduates in search of shortcuts. The very method that distinguishes literary studies (and, to a large extent, the humanities generally) is threatened by what we might call the contemporary measuring movement: assessing student learning by measuring against a preconceived standard or, worse for the humanities, working to define outcomes that may be duplicated by teachers year after year. That outcome to this conversation would eliminate what is vital to the humanities method from all educational programs.

We know what a thorough grounding in the humanities' modes of reading and writing does for our students—we know what it does for our faculty members, who are called on more than those from most other fields to write reports, serve as deans, chair accreditation self-study committees, and the like. At Hamilton College, we have a universal requirement in all majors, the senior research and writing project, and we need to assess the learning outcomes of the requirement in order to satisfy our accrediting agency. Those from quantitative fields are comfortable with the idea, the humanists less so. At the same time, the humanities departments believe that their students learn a great deal through the capstone research and writing project.

I asked our assistant dean for institutional research, Gordon Hewitt, how we were going to prove students' learning in the senior program. He answered:

Going about it can be done in two ways. We could impose certain standards to be evaluated in every senior program (writing standards, oral communication standards, etc.) and ask faculty members to show that they have evaluated those standards and that they meet a certain level of quality. Or, we could make the effort to uncover and describe the assessment activity that is already going on, and communicate how important learning outcomes are already being evaluated in senior programs across disciplines (and, how they are probably being done better now than under an imposed system).

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A top-down imposed system certainly would make it easier to collect data and describe findings to an external agency. A bottom-up descriptive system would be more time-consuming and labor-intensive, but would give our faculty and students the flexibility and autonomy to work on the creative edges of their disciplines.

A bottom-up method will count the humanities back into the logic of the Spellings report, “to serve the changing needs of a knowledge economy,” and allow the humanities to continue to count to one. Through our practice of close reading, the outcome that crosses the humanities irrespective of subject matter is high-level literacy, a level of performance far beyond skillfulness or competency. In other words, the outcome we are able to measure is a higher-level capacity for comprehension, manipulation, and generation of language through a facility with abstract and complex ideas. The products we count are sophisticated arguments, nuanced critiques, and the ability to link ideas at superior levels of abstraction, drawing on the long record of human achievement in aesthetic, philosophical, and intellectual production, broadly conceived. Furthermore, such argumentation and critique display a linguistic agility, a demonstrable facility among various and competing theoretical contexts and frameworks.

All this is measurable—in fact, it’s measured all the time in the way student writing is graded and assessed by faculty members. What’s changed is the amount of light shone on the practice: the age of information demands that faculty members explicitly state how they come to those numerical assessments, 3.3 or 4.0. Articulating long-standing practice is not reinventing standards. We ought to do so from the bottom up, not simply to respond to the Spellings commission report, but also to reassert the centrality of the humanities to the development and maintenance of twenty-first-century literacy,

especially higher-capacity literacy with the skills to manipulate complexity. What we should be asking humanities scholars to do, then, is not to answer to Spellings but to remind us, because we seem to have forgotten, how the methods of humanistic study prepare students for the “knowledge economy”—not by not counting, but by counting to one—by an emphasis on the capacity of the individual voice, shaped by and giving shape to language, quite literally to create the terms of its existence.

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## Notes

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Gordon Hewitt, assistant dean of faculty for institutional research at Hamilton College, for his assistance in the preparation of this essay.

1. With the exception of the credentials of Commissioner Arturo Madrid (Murchison Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Trinity University), the word *humanities* does not appear in the Spellings report.

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