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## Hacking the Academy

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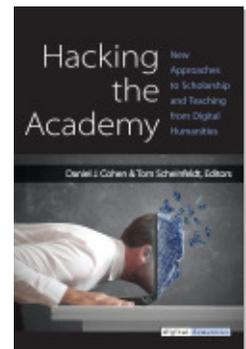
Published by University of Michigan Press

Cohen, Dan & Scheinfeldt, Joseph T..

Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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# Lectures Are Bullshit

Jeff Jarvis

*The following is an excerpt from Jeff Jarvis's talk at TEDxNYED, an independent regional version of the TED conferences, with their spotlighted lectures. Jarvis took the opportunity to turn against this form of academic theater.*

Right now, you're the audience and I'm lecturing. That's bullshit.

What does this remind of us of? The classroom, of course, and the entire structure of an educational system built for the industrial age, turning out students all the same, convincing them that there is one right answer—and that answer springs from the lectern. If they veer from it they're wrong; they fail.

What else does this remind us of? Media, old media: one-way, one size fits all. The public doesn't decide what's news and what's right. The journalist-as-speaker does.

We must question this very form. We must enable students to question the form. We should want questions, challenges, discussion, debate, collaboration, quests for understanding, and solutions. Has the Internet taught us any less?

But that is what education and media do: they validate. They also repeat. In news, I have argued that we can no longer afford to repeat the commodified news the public already knows because we want to tell the story under our byline, exuding our ego; we must, instead, add unique value.

The same can be said of the academic lecture. Does it still make sense for countless teachers to rewrite the same essential lecture about, say, capillary action? Used to be, they had to. But not now, not since open curricula and YouTube. Just as journalists must become more curator than creator, so must educators.

A few years ago, I had this conversation with Bob Kerrey at the New School. He asked what he could do to compete with brilliant lectures

now online at MIT. I said don't complete, complement. I imagined a virtual Oxford based on a system of lecturers and tutors. Maybe the New School should curate the best lectures on capillary action from MIT and Stanford, or a brilliant teacher who explains it well even if not from a big-school brand; that could be anyone in YouTube U. Then the New School adds value by tutoring: explaining, answering, probing, enabling.

The lecture does have its place to impart knowledge and get us to a shared starting point. But it's not the be all and end all of education—or journalism. Now the shared lecture is a way to find efficiency in ending repetition, to make the best use of the precious teaching resources we have, to highlight and support the best. I'll give the same advice to the academy that I give to news media: Do what you do best and link to the rest.

I still haven't moved past the lecture and teacher as starting point. I also think we must make the students the starting point.

At a Carnegie event at the Paley Center a few weeks ago, I moderated a panel on teaching entrepreneurial journalism and it was only at the end of the session that I realized what I should have done: start with the room, not the stage. I asked the students in the room what they wished their schools were teaching them. It was a great list: practical, yet visionary.

So we need to move students up the education chain. They don't always know what they need to know, but why don't we start by finding out? Instead of giving tests to find out what they've learned, we should test to find out what they don't know. Their wrong answers aren't failures—they are needs and opportunities.

But the problem is that we start at the end, at what we think students should learn, prescribing and preordaining the outcome: we have the list of right answers. We tell them our answers before they've asked the questions. We drill them and test them and tell them they've failed if they don't regurgitate back our lectures as lessons learned. That is a system built for the industrial age, for the assembly line, stamping out everything the same: students as widgets, all the same.

But we are no longer in the industrial age. We are in the Google age. Hear Jonathan Rosenberg, Google's head of product management, who advised students in a blog post. Google, he said, is looking for "non-routine problem-solving skills." The routine way to solve the problem of misspelling is, of course, the dictionary. The nonroutine way is to listen to all the mistakes and corrections we make and feed that back to us in the miraculous, "Did you mean?"

“In the real world,” he said, “the tests are all open book, and your success is inexorably determined by the lessons you glean from the free market.” “It’s easy to educate for the routine, and hard to educate for the novel,” Rosenberg adds. Google sprung from seeing the novel. Is our educational system preparing students to work for or create Googles? Googles don’t come from lectures.

So if not the lecture hall, what’s the model? I mentioned one—the distributed Oxford—lectures here, teaching there.

Once you’re distributed, then one has to ask, why have a university? Why have a school? Why have a newspaper? Why have a place or a thing? Perhaps, like a new news organization, the tasks shift from creating and controlling content and managing scarcity to curating people and content, and enabling an abundance of students, teachers, and knowledge: a world where anyone can teach and everyone will learn. We must stop selling scarce chairs in lecture halls and thinking that is our value.

We must stop our culture of standardized testing and standardized teaching. Fuck the SATs. In the Google age, what is the point of teaching memorization?

We must stop looking at education as a product—in which we turn out every student giving the same answer—to a process, in which every student looks for new answers. Life is a perpetual beta.

Why shouldn’t every university—every school—copy Google’s 20 percent rule, encouraging and enabling creation and experimentation, with every student expected to make a book, or an opera, or an algorithm, or a company? Rather than showing our diplomas, shouldn’t we show our portfolios of work as a far better expression of our thinking and capability? The school becomes not a factory, but an incubator.