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The Public Role of the Humanities: From the Student Perspective

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Abstract

There is a tendency in academia to expect humanities graduates to have an innate understanding of the significance of their educational training, even in the midst of a diminishing regard for their chosen subjects within educational policy and public discourse. This pedagogical reflection explores the experience of two tutors and eight students on a final-year module called "The Public Role of the Humanities." Grounded in the pedagogical principle that the Liberal Arts offers interdisciplinary education for engaged citizenship, its remit is to explore the ways in which arts and humanities perspectives play a vital role in all walks of public life. The module is designed to help students understand how they can bring their educational training to bear not just on future careers but also on the kinds of paid jobs and volunteering roles in which they are already engaged. The students each create a podcast reflecting on this topic. In this article, we discuss the shared experience of thinking about the public humanities, including situations where issues and disagreements arose. We draw conclusions about how to move beyond defensive discourse about value and instead integrate interdisciplinary insights and approaches with daily living and working practices.

Keywords: Liberal Arts; pedagogy; podcasts; public humanities; value

It's early summer 2024, and we're starting to grade around 50 podcasts that have been submitted for a final-year Liberal Arts module called "The Public Role of the Humanities" (PROH). For the assignment, students are tasked with exploring the public value of the arts and humanities through reflecting on 20–30 hours of work experience (paid or voluntary) they carry out beyond the confines of their degree course. We (Kirsten Harris and Pippa Marland) are listening to the recording made by our student Rose Jeffs, who is discussing her role as co-curator of "Britain's smallest and most exclusive art gallery."[1] The gallery, appropriately named "The Loovre," is housed in the toilet of the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, a community space in a fiercely creative but economically disadvantaged area of Bristol. Rose takes her activities in the gallery as a starting point for thinking about the meanings of more spontaneous lavatorial art—toilet graffiti or "latrinalia."[2] The podcast,

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[1] "The Loovre Gallery and Facilities" n.d.
[2] Dundes 2007.

with the alluring title "The Skid Marks We Make," is littered with scatological puns and related sound effects, and by the time Rose advocates for the "pubic" role of the humanities, we're laughing so hard we snort tea through our noses. But it's not just a comedy monologue. Underlying her light-hearted tale of an art "revolootion" is a more serious exploration of how the practice of latrinalia might be seen as a means for people to inscribe their being and their identity in public places in a way that pushes back against feelings of social and economic precarity.

By design, "PROH" mobilises the conception of liberal education as preparation for engaged citizenship. While pressure has rightly been put on some of the assumptions that underpin this framing, we want to equip students to bring their interdisciplinary undergraduate training to bear on the world they inhabit—confidently, intentionally, and self-reflectively.[3] We want students to see themselves as practitioners of the public humanities, in ways both large and small, and to be able to communicate with care and creativity in different social and public contexts. The podcast assignment, as well as the module more generally, encourages students nearing the end of their degree to interrogate their own engagement in civic society and to develop an understanding of how they can integrate their arts and humanities education not just in future employment but also in the range of activities and networks that make up their lives, including those in which they already participate. It also asks them to critically assess the dominant narratives and structures that shape those activities and networks.

Nevertheless, deciding how to approach the delivery of this module has been challenging. How exactly can we "teach" the public role and value of the humanities? The basic framework is a series of talks and seminars that introduce a range of scholars and practitioners (and scholar-practitioners) whose work engages a broad set of publics and applies arts and humanities perspectives to social issues in different ways. In the 2023–24 iteration, for example, guest speakers shared case studies in the fields of medicine, the environment, and social justice. But we find ourselves stumbling over the way in which the module is shaped by the overarching question of "value." Asking the students to assess the "public value" of these case studies (and to carry this question across into their podcasts) rather than simply learning about what is being done in a public sphere begins to feel uncomfortably defensive. Is there a danger that this approach might activate a sense of "precariousness" in our cohort, by inviting them to actively question the "value" of the applications of their chosen fields? When the mid-module evaluations come in, while most students appreciate the range of speakers and projects to which they have been introduced, one or two feel that the very framing of the module undermines their vocational choice to study the arts and humanities and, furthermore, focuses on instrumentalising these disciplines in a way that detracts from an understanding of their intrinsic value. Our hearts sink.

The responses compound our own concerns about our pedagogical approach. As the second semester comes to its end, we invite our students to participate in an online roundtable discussion to learn more about their experience of the module and the podcast assignment and about their broader sense of the meanings and significance of the engaged public humanities in the context of their interdisciplinary Liberal Arts degree. We prepare some questions to share with them in advance. We then meet online and, while taking the written questions as a basis for dialogue, encourage the students to take the discussion in any direction they feel relevant. We have collated responses and drafted the following narrative,

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[3] See, for example, Telling 2018 or Telling 2023.

which the students were given the opportunity to edit and revise. The piece therefore represents not only the individually held views of students but also perspectives reached through the process of collective reflection, as well as our own conclusions, as tutors, on how to approach future iterations of "PROH."

The fraught concepts of "value" and "usefulness" emerge from the outset as students reflect on perceptions of their degree in the context of the diminishing regard for arts and humanities subjects within educational policy and public discourse. Students are acutely aware of the way these terms have been weaponised against the arts and humanities and how this impacts the way that they and others might think about their degrees. Imogen Baxter expresses surprise at the lack of awareness of what Liberal Arts is and connects this to a broader disregard for the humanities:

> The lack of appreciation that such a diverse degree receives within our modern-day society shocked me and marked the first time that I began to notice the lack of public appreciation for the humanities.

While increasingly confident in her choice of a Liberal Arts degree and the value of the arts and humanities more broadly, Olly Keefe reflects on a generalised anxiety about how Liberal Arts might be viewed:

> I think I feel a little bit of fear over how my degree is perceived by society. A lot of emphasis is being put on pragmatic degrees now, and I think some people believe that the arts [don't] have the same instrumental value that other degrees have.

The instrumental value of the modern Liberal Arts degree is Adam J. Smith's concern in "Economic Precarity, Modern Liberal Arts and Creating a Resilient Graduate."[4] One common strategy in higher education is to assert the "real-world" value of the arts and humanities in terms of employability and professionalism. This, then, is one way to position the value of a module such as "The PROH" and the transferable skills it confers. Yet Smith, writing as a recent Liberal Arts graduate, is critical of the "employability status quo," which he claims is the "reigning intellectual force in [English] universities."[5] An "insipid" emphasis on transferrable skills as a metric for value "reduces education (and the graduate) to a great, grey utilitarian space in which the knowledge, joy, life and philosophy of learning has been extracted and discarded."[6] Instead, Smith proposes that in a world of economic precarity, we look to "re-root" the value of education in "humanity and resilience."[7]

In our discussion, Rae Ferner-Rose expresses related ideas in her robust assessment of the value of arts and humanities degrees as well as an astute awareness of the broader political context in which academic study takes place:

> It is no great mystery to me why our current political climate would benefit from casting the arts and humanities as a waste of time and unimportant. The way [that] creative and interdisciplinary thinking fosters critical and independent thought and, by extension, thinkers that can imagine new worlds by assessing social and artistic

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[4] Smith 2018.
[5] Smith 2018, 1038.
[6] Smith 2018, 1039.
[7] Smith 2018, 1040.

trends both laterally and in depth, more often than not threatens the status quo. My response to this constant criticism from peers, strangers and the media has prompted me to harden my own ethical, intellectual and artistic core, with these factors often intersecting. In many ways, my impending graduation does not feel like an ending, but a continuation in a chain of events stimulated by collected knowledge and creative thinking, both within and beyond the academy.

Rae's powerful sense of continuity and purpose beyond academia chimes with the insistence of arts and humanities scholars on the vital importance to public life of these disciplines. Bernard Williams argues that the humanities are needed in order to understand "social reality," that they "are concerned with a truthful understanding of what we are and where we have come from" and that they integrally preserve the possibility of "social criticism" and thus the ability to speak to alternative futures.[8] Judith Butler similarly asserts that no less than "the public, the public good, life and futurity all depend upon the humanities."[9]

However, even these broad understandings of the integral value of the arts and humanities, and of liberal education, which we discuss with our students in class, prove problematic. Jakob Claus, Thomas Meckel, and Farina Pätz identify what they call "a new spirit of capitalism" in the typical Liberal Arts narratives of "self-optimisation and freedom of self-realisation," which mimic a "capitalist imperative" to develop skills such as flexibility and creativity but leave students ill-equipped to deal with their potential lack of economic security and agency post-graduation.[10] Priorities such as those identified by Smith are themselves easily converted into commodifiable transferrable skills and put to work for utilitarian extrinsic purposes. Something of this ambiguity, about whether our module's design served utilitarian or intrinsic purposes, and about which was preferable, provoked what Orlà Brachi describes as "the occasional tension in seminars":

> Disagreements often arose between those who supported a public-serving humanities and those who resisted the idea. Some participants firmly believed that the humanities should extend beyond academia to improve access and reaffirm their value and relevance. They saw this shift as particularly important considering the humanities' growing vulnerability in the face of contexts such as the commercialization of higher education, the discontinuation of arts and humanities courses nationwide, or increasingly utilitarian attitudes to education. To them, the public possibilities of the humanities represented hope and an opportunity for revitalization.

On the other hand, Orlà recognised that other students felt uneasy about this prospect:

> They viewed the push to find "public" applications for humanities knowledge as capitulation to external pressures, undermining the intrinsic value of the humanities and compromising students' personal relationships with and commitment to these fields. While the module aimed to highlight the potential and enduring relevance of humanities knowledge in various settings, it also exposed the divide between more conservative and progressive attitudes. The tensions revealed resistance whenever tradition or personal choice seemed threatened.

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[8] Williams 2014, 274.
[9] Butler 2022, 45.
[10] Claus, Meckel, and Pätz 2018.

The tensions Orlà describes are the same ones that informed the mid-module responses. They replicate long-standing scholarly debates around the question of intrinsic versus extrinsic worth, particularly in terms of the standing of the humanities in relation to STEM subjects. Butler, for example, warns that "demonstrating the value of the humanities can never be fully accomplished by showing that the humanities serve other disciplines."[11] She continues: "That argument assumes the value of those other disciplines, especially STEM fields, and relegates the humanities to a secondary position whose value is, at most, instrumental."[12] Our decision to approach discussing the public value of the arts and humanities through looking at case studies of areas in which arts and humanities scholars act in collaboration with other fields (e.g., environmental, medical, and digital) perhaps runs the risk of presenting the arts and humanities as merely a helpful adjunct to other fields and institutions, but our guest arts and humanities speakers explicitly take issue with any such assumptions. Our Environmental Humanities specialist is clear, for example, that literary nature writing is much more than "science communication," while our Medical Humanities scholar, drawing on the work of Jane McNaughton, outlines the trajectory of the medical humanities as it has moved beyond its initial role as "a field of study that helps doctors do what they are already doing in a more humane, empathic way" to a disciplinary formation ready to play a crucial role in "the re-evaluation of medical and health-care practice, policy, and research."[13] We feel that our talks fulfil Butler's exhortation that "to avoid ratifying the subordinate and derivative status of the humanities, it is imperative to show how all the disciplines require the humanities."[14]

Nevertheless, we soon realise that it is difficult to present how "all the disciplines require the humanities" without inadvertently slipping into a defensive narrative. There seems to be an expectation among our students that the arts and humanities are necessarily going to be pitted against the sciences, again perhaps partly because of our emphasis on having to assert the public "value" of those fields as well as the way in which the students themselves are already experiencing a perceived need to defend their educational choices to others. It's not surprising that this assumed antagonism arises. The divide between the arts and humanities and the sciences is stark in the United Kingdom and has been so for decades. C. P. Snow famously coined the phrase "the two cultures" in 1959 to express his concern that a growing divide was opening up between the scientific and literary circles he moved between. That rift has not healed. Anne-Marie Imafidon and Julia Black, writing in the Times Educational Supplement, have recently made a new call to end the STEM versus SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and Economy) debate.[15]

Our cohort has grown up having to decide by the age of 16 (when they choose their A-level subjects) which side of the divide they want to be on. While a Liberal Arts degree provides interdisciplinarity within the arts, at our institution, it still sits separate from the sciences and even the social sciences. Not only does this division exist, but it also marks a disparity in how the two sides are valued. As Orlà's words above indicate, our students are well aware of ongoing cuts to arts and humanities in the education sector. They also began their academic career during the pandemic and remember clearly when the British government launched an initiative to encourage arts practitioners to retrain in technology, producing a now notorious poster featuring a ballerina (with the kind of *en pointe* foot position that must have

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[11] Butler 2022, 40.
[12] Butler 2022, 40.
[13] McNaughton 2011, 928, 931.
[14] Butler 2022, 44.
[15] Imafidon and Black 2023.

taken years of specialist training to achieve) and the caption "Fatima's next job could be in cyber (she just does not know it yet)."[16]

We discover that an internalised sense of inferiority infiltrates the students' thinking at times. Luanna McCallum, for example, confesses that though she found the medical humanities material interesting, this may have been related to the "subconscious validation" she felt in the humanities "being used for something 'useful.'" Rosa Leah Picard is appreciative of the opportunity to explore the public role of the humanities but does not want to oppose this antagonistically to the sciences:

> I found it very grounding to hear the practicality of the humanities being insisted upon. I see my responsibilities as an arts and humanities graduate as including a kind of soft self-defense: soft because it is a defense that should not (in my opinion) come at the cost of belittling science degrees. *She expands:* It is helpful and empowering to begin gathering vocabulary and stories with which to defend the value of arts and humanities. At times it can feel slightly strained, trying to read/interpret a situation with a particular end in mind—that is, the public role of humanities—but I think that's inevitable when you are making narratives and arguments that have previously been quite overlooked.

For Rosa, then, the module provides useful narrative strategies that can be deployed in defence of her chosen field of study.

And as our roundtable discussion goes on, the students express a view that despite the pitfalls of exploring the "public value" of the arts and humanities, this is ultimately a useful endeavour. Indeed, Orlà feels that in the effort to aid the emergence of a "meaningful" public humanities, conflicting viewpoints are a necessary component:

> However, these tensions are not necessarily obstacles to the growth and transformation of the humanities. Instead, they are essential for ensuring that the emergence of public humanities is meaningful and productive, rather than a crude shoehorning into other disciplines or non-academic contexts.

We collectively move towards a view that some of the dichotomies we have inherited are false. One of these is the assumed conflict between intrinsic and instrumental values, which rests on the assumption that studying the arts and humanities "for their own sake" somehow excludes the possibility of broader meanings. But the arts and humanities exist first and foremost in the public sphere; the creation of art is always in some way meaningful, purposeful, and/or interpretable, and the humanities-based act of exploring that meaning, purpose, and significance arises from that richness and in no way diminishes the integral value of art. That conversations about these meanings should move between the academy and the world beyond it seems self-evident. Indeed, this is one of the insights that arises from one of the talks on the module. Reflecting on this talk, Rae explains:

> A highlight of the lecture series that I come back to again and again is when [one of our guest speakers] said that in the Latin American communities where his fieldwork takes place a module like The Public Role of the Humanities would not exist, simply because in those cultures humanities subjects that are not seen as having a practical application would not be taught. I guess I agree to some extent that a module like this is essential

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[16] See, for example, Bakare 2020.

but if I was being completely utopian about it, we would not need this module, and the humanities would just be recognised as something that are public and practised.

While Rae sees the recognition of the humanities as inherently public as utopian thinking, others feel that the module has helped to bring out the way in which the arts and humanities transcend institutional boundaries. Orlà tells us that one of the most useful ideas she encountered was that "humanities knowledge needn't be contained":

> The Liberal Arts degree primarily took place on campus, with seminars and lectures [being] exclusively for affiliated students, and assignments produced mostly individually and seen by a single teacher. However, the scope of this module extended beyond academia, highlighting the various applications of humanities knowledge. I found the words of the liberal arts graduate speaker particularly moving. Their trajectory illustrated the afterlife of a humanities degree, showing the versatility of humanities knowledge outside a university context and its ability to reconfigure and enrich disparate expressive forms, lifestyles, communities, and sectors. Their talk reminded me that humanities knowledge needn't be dislocated from the personal; rather, it can inform decisions, conversations, and actions.

This sense that the personal and the public can intersect comes to the fore in the final part of our roundtable discussion, in which we ask the students to describe the experience of creating their podcasts. These observations are a testament to how thinking in a different medium (one more associated with the public sphere than the academic one) has helped the students to begin conceptually to bridge the divide between academia and the world beyond it—in terms of not only how the arts and humanities might help to reshape public life, but also how applying these approaches might reciprocally promote interventions in the structure of universities and their curricula. Rae, for example, expresses a greater understanding of how her work experience and the perspectives she has adopted from her arts and humanities training can feed back into the academic environment from which she is about to graduate:

> For me, the podcast really solidified the reasons I was doing what I was doing in my work. I discussed an essay competition I was running in the FE college where I did my A levels. It is crucial that students from lower-income families and students from ethnic minorities have access to higher education, yet often the access schemes that take place in the institutions that cater to these students between the ages of 16-18 (FE colleges, sixth forms and colleges) fall short. In my podcast I aimed to imagine a new access curriculum that would reach beyond surface level advertisement of universities, and instead could equip students with hard academic skills such as researching, referencing and academic writing - skills that would give students who did not attend private/ grammar schools a leg up.

Meanwhile, Ethan Wilshaw finds that the podcast has helped link his degree with the workplace:

> Essentially my podcast took problems I've identified with management in a fast-food setting and posed humanities-based teachings and solutions. The main thing I took away from the assignment is that it bridged the gap between academia and the everyday. I interviewed my co-worker and observed a very clear connection between humanities concepts and their application in the workplace, even one with no humanities foundation. It made me think about my degree existentially which I suppose is the aim of the module. My colleague enjoyed being able to think critically about the

activities she does all the time. I found that really interesting because it's central to the point of this [module]. It shows the value of this degree in public life.

In her influential "guidebook" for interdisciplinary research in the humanities, Meike Bal explores how concepts "travel"—"between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed communities"—changing meaning as they move.[17] They are, therefore, a powerful tool for academic work that troubles interdisciplinary boundaries. Here Ethan's comments suggest that Bal's claims could usefully be extended to consider how concepts travel in and out of institutions of higher education, between different publics, in different professional and civic contexts, and how the interdisciplinary Liberal Arts graduate might harness these "travelling concepts" to facilitate meaningful dialogue across academic and public borders.

The podcast assignment seems to have helped the students find the public voices with which they will speak in the world beyond the academy. Rose, with whose study of latrinalia we began this piece, says:

> The podcast I made focused on the impact of mark-making in public spaces, taking an unanticipated existential route that connected my work to my experience of the world more broadly. It is, without a doubt, my proudest creation at university. The podcast medium prevented me from refashioning my voice to fit a code of conduct I assumed was necessary for written essays. It was the only piece of university work accessible to my friends and family who are not university-educated. I am so thankful that it allowed me to finally share something with them. It allowed me to recognize what was threatened in the translation of my voice to the written word. It made me angry and disappointed that I had never noticed this before, but it has given me hope for the future. I am determined not to forget this lesson and to prioritize the language of my family and friends going forward.

The roundtable discussion with the students has provided an invaluable opportunity for us as tutors to reflect on the challenges, disappointments, and successes of "PROH." A year on, we are reframing the module as a celebratory exploration of the arts and humanities in the vital role their approaches and perspectives play in all walks of life. We have moved explicitly away from the term "value" and from any kind of defensiveness beyond simply acknowledging that the arts and humanities are under threat.[18] It may seem counterintuitive to remove the word "value" at this time, but we want our students to be able to do more than just defend the value of the arts and humanities or articulate their employability skills. There is, after all, a substantive body of literature devoted to the former, and ample evidence of the latter.[19] We want students to move beyond dualist approaches and instead explore how arts and humanities perspectives can be integrated dynamically into the open-ended and complex networks of knowledge, interpretation, and practice that make up contemporary society.

However, revising the module within broader institutional structures isn't plain sailing. When we propose the new version of the podcast assignment (asking simply "What is the

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[17] Bal 2002, 24.

[18] The Queen Mary University of London University and College Union (UCU) page "UKHE Shrinking" is a woeful testament to the cuts being made in UK academia, largely in arts and humanities subjects ("UKHE Shrinking" n.d.).

[19] For more on the value of the humanities, see, for example, Bate 2011, Small 2013, and Belfiore and Upchurch 2013. On employability, see, for example, British Academy 2020 and Robson et al. 2023.

public role of the arts and/or humanities?"), an external examiner feels this is a little too "directive" and suggests we reframe the question as "What, if any, is the public role of the arts and/or humanities?" Considered though the proposal is (and laudable in the sense that it might stimulate more scholarly debate), we feel that the insertion of "if any" is returning us inexorably to the defensive approach we are trying to move beyond. We push back and, for now, keep our simplified version. But our deliberations continue as we think more broadly about the narrative offered throughout the Liberal Arts degree about the relationship between interdisciplinary training in arts and humanities and wider society. As we plan further iterations of the module, we will think about how best we can familiarise students with the idea that there is in effect a Public Humanities that both influences our curriculum and is a vital, active component of contemporary life. Our aim is that our students will graduate with new-found voices and awareness of their own agency, even in the midst of the kinds of precarity they will almost inevitably encounter. In keeping with Rose's idea of the benefits of latrinalia, we wish them the capacity to inscribe their being and identity on the world, and to discover that, as Rose herself concludes, there's nothing anyone can doo-doo to stop them.

Conflicts of interests. The authors declare none.

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