

A View from the Mahindra Humanities Center

Homi K. Bhabha

Does the experience of the Mahindra Humanities Center (MHC) have anything to contribute to a discussion of the teaching of the humanities at Harvard College? A first response would surely be that the MHC and the College are a study in contrasts. Although we have always had a small program dedicated to undergraduates (unlike most other Humanities Centers) our constituency consists largely of faculty, post-docs, and graduate students. More to the point, we do not officially count as a teaching unit; our seminars, conferences, and lectures carry no course credit and are open to the public. The academic roles played by the MHC and Harvard College seem far apart in scale and function. However, both institutions contribute to the study of the humanities as the intellectual core of a liberal arts education committed to a culture of civic consciousness that extends beyond national communities to global polities.

The humanities are neither quantitative nor simply qualitative. They are *integrative*. The MHC, I like to say, is the *crossroads* of the campus, not the center of anything at all! The integrity of humanistic disciplines lies in their ability to integrate a wide variety of human experiences and articulate them as frameworks of scholarly knowledge. It is for this reason that the humanities have an important pedagogical role to play within the university while appealing more generally to an informed public beyond the campus. Humanities disciplines—literature, history, philosophy, religious studies, the classics, art history, music, etc.—are embedded in philological traditions that inculcate methods of textual analysis and cultural interpretation.

Reading “between the lines,” essential to any hermeneutic practice, must respect the fine line that exists between scholarly description (ethnography) and speculative judgment (evaluation). Humanists are not only engaged with the voice of the past as it enters into the conversations of the present, but reflect on the fate of knowledge and scholarship in the process of transition and transformation. Interpretation, as a vehicle for the transmission of textual and cultural value, ensures that the humanities disciplines are as true to the knowledge of the past as they are fair to the paradigms of the present. The provenance of such philological and historical probity lies in the long democratic history of liberal humanism that creates a climate of opinion that defines the life of universities.

At the MHC we have encouraged intellectual traffic between the “hub” of humanities disciplines and the satellites of humanistic teaching and learning as they exist across the map of the university. We have attempted to grow a constituency that stretches across the divisions and schools of Harvard, and beyond its boundaries, in Cambridge and Boston. The interdisciplinary connections between the academic kernel of the humanities and the wider world of humanistic interests are made possible by a rigorous training in the norms and methods of the individual disciplines of the humanities. Interdisciplinarity is endangered when it is achieved at a cost of the “dumbing down” of disciplinary distinctiveness/distinction in the interest of lazy relativism. For example, it is because departments of language and literature have a strong sense of their authority, and confidence in their collective authorship, that over the years they have been the institutional seedbeds for emergent disciplinary formations. Gender studies, cultural studies, cinema and media studies, postcolonial studies, the new historicism, to mention but a few, are interdisciplinary forms of knowledge that have been nurtured in their early phases of

development by departments of language and literature whose own intellectual frontiers have, as a result, extended in scope and scale and increased in expertise.

Take, for instance, the relatively recent turn to narrative in the fields of law and medicine. Knowledge of narrative theory is seen as essential for both recording and interpreting medical case histories, while the importance granted to the testimony of individuals in the International Criminal Court and in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions has revived the importance of narrative as an act of personal and historical witnessing on a global scale. Human rights studies establishes networks across the campus, stretching from law, government, and forensic medicine—the traditional contexts for human rights—to film studies and world literature that provide experiential and affective “first person” testimonies of terror and genocide. In giving voice and body to the aspirational and affective aspects of rights, students of the humanities and practitioners of the arts shape a culture of community and citizenship based on an ethic of public virtue that goes beyond legal status and political systems.

If there are such rich intellectual and scholarly opportunities to be had between the humanities hub and its interdisciplinary affiliates, then how can we convey such a sense of innovation to our undergraduates? Why do we seem to lose a disproportionate number of humanities concentrators to the social sciences? These questions have been carefully and wisely considered from a Harvard College perspective in *Mapping the Future*, so I won't dwell on them at length. Let me reflect on some of these issues from the perspective of the MHC.

Why do humanities concentrators migrate to the social sciences? *Mapping the Future* considers this matter in some detail, suggesting that we humanists might present undergraduate courses with clearly recognizable cultural themes, and with course materials drawn from different disciplines. My own guess is that social science specialization feels more “worldly wise,” closer to the milieu of executive action. If that is the case, my experience at the MHC leads me to suggest that we should develop a series of ambitious *Crossroads courses*.

What are Crossroads courses? It is my feeling that instead of more “general” courses in the humanities, we need courses that audaciously cross disciplinary hubs and satellites across the campus. In the main, we have been too timid in our interdisciplinary associations, choosing to be good neighbors in our use of other disciplines (literature and history, classics and art history, art and architecture and GSD, etc.) to reinforce the value of our own. In these cases there is often a sense that disciplinary training and specialist methodologies should be whittled down into some sort of middle ground of theory. Crossroads courses would choose large questions that boldly locate the humanities in the sphere of public life or public reason on a global scale, with an eye to significant historical periods, ethical interests, and aesthetic transformations of both form and content. The topics or themes we choose would have to be carefully balanced between scholarly imperatives and resonant intellectual issues. The best cross-disciplinary initiatives often converge on shared intellectual issues and then draw on specific scholarly capabilities to shape the argument. Crossroads courses would demand that each discipline that participates in the curricular conversation should *foreground* its particular disciplinary traditions and training. It is only by encountering disciplinary specificity *in its most robust expression*, and following its itineraries of information and interpretation, that

a student learns the value of cross-disciplinary knowledge as it opens up questions relating to pedagogical comparisons and ideological contentions.

Topics or themes for such courses could be:

- From Public Space to Public Sphere
- On Imaging and the Imagination
- The Voice of the People: Language, Rhetoric, and the Culture of Political Representation
- *Cinéma Vérité*: Truth and Technology in the Field of Visual Culture

The *Frameworks* courses in the Humanities (FAS Spring 2013) represent an experiment that develops a curricular method similar to what I have suggested for the Crossroads courses. Although they are entirely located in the humanities, each of the three streams that constitute the course—the Arts of Reading, Looking, Listening—develops a strong account of the methodological and historical *episteme* that informs a chosen field. Bringing the three groups together to discuss a common project creates the conditions for a conversation about diverse methodologies and their potential interdisciplinary intersections. Our larger pedagogical aim is to give the faculty and students a sense of a Humanities Commons—a collective and collaborative sense of the world of ideas, images, and arguments that emerges from the humanities disciplines as they stretch from the hub in FAS to the satellites across schools and divisions that make up the map of humanistic learning across the university.

With the appropriate resources, the MHC could play an important role in organizing a trial run of the Crossroads courses. If humanities students migrate

because the social sciences provide them with a more tangible sense of the worldly uses and opportunities of a university education, then the cross-school, interdisciplinary Crossroads courses will go a long way in convincing our students that the “hub” of the humanities is more than capable of turning the wheels of a productive and exciting career beyond academia.

To this end, I also propose that we raise funds for arts and humanities internships, which will give our students a vivid sense of what it means to earn a living in the cultural sector. Museums, publishing houses, cultural centers, biennials, galleries, musical organizations—all these cultural institutions are in need of temporary, part-time support, which would eminently suit our students. While giving them a taste for what it would mean to pursue a career made possible by an education in the arts and humanities, such an experience would ultimately educate our students in the civic arts of cultural citizenship.