Relevant Interdisciplinarity: Taking the Art History Classroom to the Field

Mickey Abel
University of North Texas

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By Mickey Abel, University of North Texas

Many of us in the academy find ourselves confronted with the constant refrain of "relevance." This "Age of Relevance" has developed out of a reaction to the ever-evolving variety of educational movements, theoretical positions, and administrative mandates given slightly obscure acronyms or futuristic titles such as: "QEP-Quality Enhancement Programs" "Learning in Zeros and Ones," "Big Data," "MOOCs-Massive open online courses," or maybe least threatening, the now almost-ubiquitous status of the "Digital Humanities."[1]

The question for those of us in Medieval Studies is, where do we stand in this changing environment? How can we help our students in this era when, by all accounts, they are swimming upstream. Knowing what we are up against is a start. The public rhetoric of the academy—at least at the state level—seems now to be linked to the business model of Clay Christiansen, in a book co-written with Henry Eyring, entitled *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*.[2] Critics note that the line of

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[1] For "Quality Enhancement Plans," see https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?search=Qulaity+Enhancement+programs&title=Special%3ASearch&go=Go. For Learning in Zeroes and Ones, see "Unary Coding, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unary_coding#Unary_code_in_use_today. For "Big Data," see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_data. For MOOCs, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course. Digital Humanities is an area of research and teaching at the intersection of computing and the disciplines of the humanities that embraces a variety of topics to include curating online collections to data mining. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_humanities.
[2] Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring, *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2011).

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thought conveyed in Christiansen's theories features the language of "panic, fear, asymmetry, and disorder," and professes among its highest goals an emphasis on community engagement, tangible solutions to "real world" problems, and quantifiable/measurable results that produce not just change and progress, but what is known as "Disruptive Innovation."[3] Described as "progress stripped of aspiration" or "innovation with a hope for salvation,"[4] the drive for the "disruptive new" highlights the value of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) research, with its seemingly expansive pools of external funding.[5] We in the humanities are being asked to get on this bandwagon and "establish new rules of engagement--blow things up!"[6] — or at the very least, consider the creative potential and lucrative benefits of interdisciplinary research clusters and cross-campus collaborative partnerships.

The suggestion just under the surface of this none-too-subtle rhetoric is of course that the humanities in general, but Medieval Studies in particular, is less-relevant than our STEM sisters because we do not on the surface contribute to the new over-arching public mission of "job-force ready" graduates. Addressing this aspect of the problem, Jonathan Rothwell's article "Skills, Success, and Why your Choice of College Matters," suggests that there is a direct correlation between "skills" learned in college and future earnings potential.[7] While giving some tacit lip-service to the social value of the work of educators, humanists, and social scientists, Rothwell

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[3] Jill Lepore, "The Disruption Machine: What the Gospel of Innovation gets Wrong," *NewYorker Magazine,* June 23, 2014): (Http://www.newyorker.com/magizine/2014/06/23/the-disruption-machine. "Disruptive Innovation" describes a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and the relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors. See http://www.christenseninstitute.org/key-concepts/.
[4] Lepore, "Disruption," 5, links this to the Enlightenment.
[5] "STEM" is traced to "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform," a 1983 report of American President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. See, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Nation_at_Risk.
[6] Lepore, "Disruption," 4.
[7] Jonathan Rothwell, "Skills, Success, and Why your Choice of College Matters," Brookings Institute, July 8, 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/07/08-skills-success-college-choice-rothwell.

clearly falls in the "job-force ready" camp, highlighting 9Matlab, Python, C++, and algorithms as the valuable skills a student needs to master in order to find financial success with their STEM or business education. Moreover, his message is that those schools that stress these skills are what we need in order to counter the broad critique of American universities, as is suggested in Richard Arum's popular book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses.*[8]

Scholars like Geoffrey Harpham, Director and President of the National Humanities Research Center, however, are not fazed by this hard-edged assessment. In a recent lecture at the University of North Texas, Harpham stated that in fact, it is the "rarified, pure oxygen" of traditional humanities research and teaching that not only sets American universities apart from those of the rest of the world, but actually makes our system the most innovative and productive, far surpassing those that are driven by strictly economic or scientific principles.[9] He argues that because humanities research is philosophically open-ended, it is where new interpretive insights arise.

Co-opting this line of thought, a more recent strategy is the incorporation of the arts into STEM to produce STEAM. Proponents here seeks to demonstrate that the true value of the humanities or arts within the American system is not Harpham's "pure oxygen," but rather the strengths the study of the arts contributes *in service* to STEM—in other words using the arts to open the sciences to the imaginative, creative methodologies. In this service mode, innovation is highlighted as the "lifeblood" that feeds scientific and technical advancement.[10] Thus using the 'arts to augment STEM education' argument, advocates cite humanities research as being able

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[8] Richard Arum, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[9] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Valuing and Evaluating the Humanities," public lecture, University of North Texas, April 28, 2015.

[10] Eric Swedlund, "Gaining STEAM: Science and Technology Educators add Arts Component to Spark Imaginative Leaps," *ASU Magazine*, 18/3 (2015): 26-31.

"to generate multiple ideas around the same topic," to productively incorporate "improvisation," to embrace "abductive reasoning," and importantly, its inherent ability to be "tolerant of ambiguity."[11]

That these "competencies," rather than the specific "skills" of the sciences, are the productive results of a humanities program is, of course, not new news. As Christie McDonald of Harvard University noted in the Plenary Lecture she delivered in 2015 at the *Society for French Studies* conference in Cardiff Wales,[12] the competencies learned in a humanities program, particularly "tolerance," are classical in origin. She, however, finds them to be most profoundly debated in Voltaire's 1763, "Treatise on Tolerance."[13] Noting the resurgence in popularity of this text in France after the recent shooting at the headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo*,[14] Dr. McDonald suggested that "tolerance" should actually be the number one quantified learning outcome we should all be tracking and assessing on our annual reports. She sees it as the necessary balance to our STEM colleagues' "hard data" and "measurable skills."

The STEAM proponents would neutralize this divide, by arguing that the greatest "competency" is the problem-solving and ability to "synthesize complexity" that can only grow out of interdisciplinarity.[15] With this in mind, it can, however, be argued that the various disciplines comprising Medieval Studies are already inherently interdisciplinary. English, History, Music/Liturgy, Philosophy/Religion, Archaeology, Art History, and Language

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[11] Steven Tepper, Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts; Evan Tobias, School of Music; Darren Petrucci, The Design School; Ed Finn, Center for Science and the Imagination; and Grisha Coleman, School of Arts, Media and Engineering, as quoted in Swedlund, "Gaining STEAM," 28-31.

[12] Christie McDonald, "Failure and Change: Measuring Transformation in the Arts and Humanities," Plenary Lecture, *Society of French Studies,* Annual Conference, Cardiff, Wales, 29 June-1 July, 2015,

[13] Voltaire, *Toleration and Other Essays,* Joseph McCabe, trans. and ed. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1912).

[14] The shooting took place on January 7, 2015 in Paris, France. McDonald was referencing *NPR* news story, Eleanor Beardsley, "After Paris Attacks, Voltaire's "Tolerance" is back in Vogue," *National Public Radio*, February 15, 2015. http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/02/15/385422239/after-paris-attacks-voltaires-tolerance-is-back-in-vogue.

[15] Swedlund, "Gaining STEAM," 30.

Studies—are all in some sense inseparable and interchangeable at their medieval core. Unlike the medievalists in universities of the last century, our work would not pass the peer review system of any of the major journals if we disregarded the advancements in our sister disciplines. Moreover, it is quite often the theoretical stance of those sister disciplines that serves to inspire new ways of looking at long-neglected problems. Sadly, however, this sort of "inter-" or "intra-disciplinarity" does not necessarily make our work 'relevant' in the real-world sense of the "disruption" proponents. So the question remains: how can we do what medievalists have always said we do best—that is, teach our students to think creatively and to be critically tolerant--while at the same time helping them develop collaborative skills that will translate into "work-force ready" jobs?

Looking to my own research agenda, I have even asked myself whether there is anything particularly relevant about a tenth-century monastery in Western France that lies mostly in ruin. While the expanded study of Maillezais abbey has served me well in opening new collaborative lines of funding, new venues for publication, and new collegial avenues of teaching, for my students, it has indeed led to new sources of support, and importantly new and unforeseen connections between humanist research and 'real world' problems. I present the papers of this volume in hopes of illustrating how even the seemingly least relevant historical problems can be used to teach research skills that feature creative innovation, collaborative tolerance, and relevant solutions. By way of an introduction to these essays, I will begin with a brief history of how I came to my own little bit of "disruptive innovation" – much of it published here in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art & Architecture*.

I can trace my interest in spatial interactions to my colleagues in Cultural Geography, who have become my "interdisciplinary" partners; they introduced me to the wonders of

GPS/G.I.S.—or the basic technology of geography. I admit, however, that my first employment of this technology was driven by my perception that the reviewers of the grant proposals would be more impressed by a scientific sounding project than those with more esoteric (read irrelevant) titles, methodologies, or outcome. It was, however, only after engaging geography students in my "spatial" questions that I realized that the addition of technology would serve to turn my own research questions in on themselves, essentially shifting the research model from one where the research question drives the search for data, with analysis coming at the end of the process, to one where the generation of data and its analysis serves to identify the appropriate research questions to be asked.

The subject matter for this line of inquiry grew out of broader dissertation research, where a particular geographical region of Soria, in northern Spain, with a distinct set of Romanesque buildings and a unique place in the history of the Spanish Reconquest stood out as requiring its own study. Initially, the recognition of the geographical anomaly, both on a map and within the historical documents, caused me to question the difference between these documented types of historical perceptions and those which would have been perceived on the ground, across the landscape.[16] In other words—at this stage, the underlying question driving the research was how were the sacred buildings of this distinct region perceived and understood by the people who used them?

The empirical identification of the prominent features that distinguished the ecclesiastical buildings of the region -- the distinctive north or south positioning of their portal openings, and their highly visible siting on the top of isolated hills or rocky outcroppings suggested a significant relationship between the two features that, in turn, signaled the need for what

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[16] Mickey Abel, "Strategic Domain: Reconquest Romanesque along the Duero River," *Peregrinations,* Vol. II/2 (2007):1-57 (http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/vol2-2).

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archaeologists call a "settlement study."[17] In this case, this meant a contextual mapping of the Sorian province, illustrating the relationship of these buildings to one another and to the geographical/ historical environment. Important in this mapping exercise was capturing the "cognitive features" of the visual landscape, those socially or culturally constructed perceptions that are recorded in the mind or memory without reference to factual data such road names or cardinal directions.

The result of this now embarrassingly 'low-tech' study was the understanding that building a map up historically-- that is moving from the natural topographic features to the addition of Roman buildings and infrastructure, to the adaptations made by the Visigoths, and finally adding the defensive sites of the Reconquest along with the small ermita associated with them — served in the end to illustrate the differentiation between the perceptions of the people who inhabited the valley floor and those who ruled from the mountain-tops. Incorporating this difference into our understanding of the historical documents, the study supported a long-held archaeological hypothesis that the Duero plain was never completely abandoned. In terms of my own insight, this project served to validate the productivity of 'mapping" as a tool of art-historical research.

Bringing this research methodology to the classroom, a group of inquisitive and technology-savvy grad students asked if the geo-political orientation observed in the pre-conquest landscape continued in buildings of the Post-conquest era. These students purposed a new study that combined their Geography and Art History backgrounds and featured the

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[17] C. Renfrew and P. Bahn, "What Did They Think?: Cognitive Archaeology, Art, and Religion" *Archaeology Theories, Methods, and Practice* (New York, 2004), 393-397, 406-408; Kevin Walsh, "A Sense of Place: A Rule for Cognitive Mapping in the 'Postmodern' World?" *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past,* Hodder, *et al* (eds.), (London, 1995), 131-140.

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employment of a more sophisticated use of technology.[18] In an attempt to move beyond the empirical "connoisseur's eye," and the reliance on an individual's visual memory, which were the hallmark of the earlier study, these students understood that qualifying their observations, quantifying them in the form of data, would shift the weight of their conclusions from the positivistic to the challengeable, and in the end elevate the status of their findings to the rank of a scientific conclusion.

For my purposes, the more tangible results of this new field project were not so much the conclusions drawn from the mapping project, but rather the insights gained from the interactions between the geographers and the art historians, as their methodological approaches to the collection and visualization of data were quite different. For instance, the art historians wanted to create a period-specific perspective of the landscape—all the while acknowledging the multivalency of the creative act of map-making. They were therefore mindful of what they chose to exclude from the study as well as what was to be examined.

The art historian's need for visual scrutiny was, however, balanced by the geographer's more-scientific qualifications. In addition to the visually perceptible elements such as topographical features, spatial relationships, the building's stylistic criteria, as well as building phases, the geographers insisted on quantifiable information obtained in the field, such as cardinal orientation, elevation, and building measurements. For statistical purposes, they also stressed the importance of establishing and limiting the scope of the project. This confirmed the necessity for locational accuracy – obviously my hand-drawn maps would not do!! And thus the

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[18] Mickey Abel, Kim McCarty, and Brittney Gregory, "Geography, Archaeology, Art History: A Case Study for a Multidisciplinary Approach to Mapping Architectural Heritage," Special Theme Issue, "Placing the Middle Ages: Contextualizing A Geography of Material Culture," Mickey Abel and Jennifer Way, eds, *Peregrinations,* Vol. II/3 (2009). (http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/vol2-3).

introduction to the technology of Geography—specifically a Geographic Positioning System (GPS), which would facilitate a more detailed accounting of what was going to be a large quantity and variety of data. Triangulating each site's exact position to assign it a geographic coordinate, a map was created for the accurate recording of the associated data. The use of a Geographic Information System (GIS) allowed the students to automatically link the variety of information they gathered and compiled as database categories to each GPS generated point on their electronic map, which facilitated a system of data analysis that satisfied their need for control. At the same time, the geographical display of this data presented interesting and important possibilities for the visually-oriented art historians. While it allowed them to visualize quantifiable information in terms of its spatial relationship to the geographical locale, it also facilitated the linking of an extensive photographic record of each building, as well as the footprint plan of each church, both meant to indicate significant and relevant details not otherwise captured in the field notes.

In the end I was convinced that the cross-disciplinary affiliation had opened new avenues for exploration and analysis for all involved. Significantly different from the focused analysis of a monograph, as is typical of art-historical research, this less discriminating type of examination, i.e. "tolerant of ambiguity," signaled where the more singularly focused analysis would be warranted and served to clarify which questions were relevant to ask. Importantly, it also highlighted areas of evenly distributed consistency that suggested a different set of conclusions than one would come to with the analysis of only a few examples. The most-relevant conclusion was that the availability of detail provided by a visually-oriented data bank changed the complexion of the analysis. We found that the inclusion of the less-phenomenal sites alongside those previously documented for their unique spaces or elaborate ornamentation helped us check

the subjectivity of our personal observations and provided a balance that enhanced the quantitative value of these experiential and aesthetic impressions.

Stealing shamelessly from this student-driven project, I proposed a GPS/GIS approach to the cultural history of Maillezais Abbey in western France, where I had been working for some years, to a new mixed group of art history and geography graduate students. This time I insisted that while the students would be helping with the collection of data associated with my own project on the hydraulic system surrounding the abbey, they were to develop their own research project in which could either share the data set gathered for the Hydraulics Project or gather, employ, and assess a different set of data, as long as it was related to Maillezais abbey in some manner. Thus in addition to my article, "Defining a New Coast: G.I.S. Reconstruction of Maillezais Abbey's Hydraulic Drainage Program and the Coastline it Created," geographer Dory Deines explored the distribution of vineyards in relation to soil types and various aspects of the hydraulic system, and Owen Wilson used his training in transportation systems to analyze the commercial possibilities of the development of canals and locks. Both of these articles are to be published elsewhere; here these students have provided an explanation of the technology used in our joint work ("Using Mapping Technologies to Understand Canal Development in the Vendée"). Art-historian Shana Thompson, intrigued by illustrations and descriptions of Maillezais abbey in several editions of the *Roman de Mélusine*, developed her inquiry around the geographical sites mentioned in these texts and their relation to the region's water features ("The Lady of the Marshes: Place, Identity, and Coudrette's *Mélusine* in Late-Medieval Poitou"). LauraLee Brott found her inspiration in the lone sculpted capital extant in the nave at Maillezais ("Reading Between the Lions: Mapping Meaning for a Surviving Capital at Maillezais Abbey.") Seeking to understand its iconographical significance within the marshy context of Maillezais'

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island setting, she catalogued and mapped similar types of sculpted imagery in the region in order to draw some conclusions on the scope, configuration, and understanding of Maillezais' missing sculptural program.

While none of the student's papers were explicitly reliant on the "hydraulic" data set we developed as a group, it was interesting how our collaborative analysis of this data influenced and colored their very different projects, both methodologically and theoretically. All would agree that it was the field work—the intimate exploration of the details of the landscape that shaped their understanding of their particular projects. The collaborative sharing of the geographer's technical skills and the art historian's visual scrutiny served to both deepen the methodological approach and clarify the results of the final studies. Acknowledging that these synergetic interactions were facilitated by the close quarters of the field situation, it is important to recognize is the level of tolerant insight was brought about through the interdisciplinarity of the collaboration. And although the mastery of this "competency" may not lead directly to a significant paycheck, it will no doubt serve these students well as they move into the workforce. The takeaway is this: we humanists should not jettison the importance of the library, the archive, or the museum. We do, however, have to acknowledge that the model of "relevance" that probably has resonance for our students is the lab, the courtroom, and/or the marketplace. Interesting is where the two come together. ❧

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