

2014

# The Future of Scholarship

Edward L. Ayers

*University of Richmond*, eayers@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. "The Future of Scholarship." *Liberal Education*, 100:2 (2014), 6-11.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

EDWARD L. AYERS

# The Future of Scholarship

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In 2011, the New American Colleges and Universities established a national award to honor the legacy of Ernest L. Boyer by recognizing an individual whose achievements in higher education exemplify Boyer's quest for connecting theory to practice and thought to action, in and out of the classroom. The 2014 Boyer Award was presented to Edward L. Ayers at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The following article was adapted from the acceptance address given by the author on that occasion.*

**We can keep alive the best traditions of the academy by adapting those traditions to the possibilities of our own time**

IN ALL HONESTY, I must admit that it makes me both grateful and nervous to accept the Boyer Award. To be recognized by the New American Colleges and Universities and to be associated with Ernest Boyer, a higher education hero of so many, including me, is humbling. To be recognized, moreover, for work that is not usually considered presidential could raise the suspicion that I must have time on my hands.

In anticipating this critique, I will invoke Ernest Boyer himself, who argued that familiar distinctions between faculty and administration, scholar and teacher, research and outreach, inside and outside, tradition and innovation are often artificial and often counterproductive. In both his writing and in his practice, Boyer showed that our work could be stronger if we took advantage of all the resources within our reach, if we joined different ways of knowing, if we joined service and learning, scholarship and teaching.

When I first became a professor, I discovered to my surprise that I had signed up for three jobs.

---

EDWARD L. AYERS is president of the University of Richmond.

I was a scholar—the role for which I had been frantically rehearsing throughout graduate school; I was a teacher—which I only discovered I could do when I started doing it; and I was a member of a community—which, though I was entering near the bottom, still made room for someone willing to give time and energy to it. Over the next twenty years, those three jobs wove complex patterns through my life, changing when I offered a new class, went on leave to write, or became chair of the faculty senate.

When I rather suddenly found myself converted from a faculty member to the dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia, the pattern became somewhat simpler. No matter how I tried, the teaching and scholarship threads almost disappeared beneath the dense threads of the deanship. Complicated patterns ran within the fabric of the deanship itself—patterns of alumni relations and money raising, of tenure reviews and hiring, of spreadsheets and budget balancing, patterns of new skills desperately acquired and of new friendships unexpectedly nourished—and those patterns left little room for teaching and scholarship.

When, after six years of that weaving, I became president of the University of Richmond, the teaching threads diminished even more; I teach only one course a year, a freshman seminar, and I find it hard to keep the complicated waking dream of a book alive in my head.

That is because a president has, quite literally, to embody the institution he or she leads, and the head is unfortunately usually attached to that body. It is a president's body that has to stand before people and talk, that has to appear at receptions and events, that has to fold itself into airplane seats and taxi cabs, that has to take a



Annual Meeting

place at the head of tables and in the front row of audiences. Such a body spends a lot of its energy simply moving from one place to another, playing one role or another. That body is seldom alone, and seldom free of some device demanding attention when it is. I actually like that hyperkinetic activity, most days, but that life is not the life of a scholar. There is no solitude, no time for reflection.

Fortunately, a fourth thread has woven throughout the fabric of my academic career, improbably tying the other parts together. That is the thread of what I now call digital scholarship. Originally, back in the late 1970s, that thread ran its course through clunky punch cards and mainframe computers; in the 1980s, it struggled through batch jobs and bulky printouts; in the 1990s, it stretched from modems and micro-computers to CD-ROMs and the new World Wide Web; in the 2000s and 2010s, it branched through a borderless online world.

The apparently dominant threads of scholarship, teaching, and community building have woven together around the digital strand. To help make the digital things I wanted to make, I had to immerse myself even more deeply in my own institution. I found myself involved in creating an institute, then a center, then a lab. I bartered institutional service for project support, becoming dean partly so the provost would invest in our center. I have been able to found and sustain the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond because I think it is essential that we keep experimenting with new forms. Trading years of my life for office space

and student wages may not have been shrewd, but it seemed necessary.

### Boyer's model of scholarship

I'd like to think Ernest Boyer would have approved of this desperate strategy. Boyer spoke of four kinds of scholarship. The scholarship of *discovery*, by which he meant what we typically think of as scholarship—journal articles and books. He spoke of the scholarship of *integration*, tying together previous scholarly work in a larger context in a reflective and unifying way. He spoke of the scholarship of *application*, using academic skills for community development and problem solving. And Boyer spoke finally of the scholarship of *teaching*, bringing discovery into the classroom.

This is a generous and humane vision, finding value in all the work all kinds of professors do in all kinds of institutions. That vision has been influential and inspiring. Partly because of Ernest Boyer, we are more self-aware about teaching than we were several decades ago, and service has become embedded as a central part of all kinds of colleges and universities.

Yet, if Boyer were with us today, I think he would be disappointed that our tenure processes still work much the same way they always have, with scholarship, traditionally defined, retaining its dominant role even in teaching-oriented institutions. As those who have served on tenure and promotion committees can attest, book reviews and other integrative work still don't count for much, service is a necessary but not dominant part of any promotion packet, and



Edward L. Ayers,  
Annual Meeting

teaching expertise is not adequate by itself for advancement at many, perhaps most, colleges and universities.

Boyer's book *Scholarship Reconsidered* came out just a few years before the web emerged, and I would love to know what he would have thought of the digital era.<sup>1</sup> It does seem that adding digital scholarship to four other kinds of scholarship could seem cruel. How is a professor supposed to do everything else required of her by the four other kinds of scholarship *and* explore the digital possibilities of networks emerging around us?

The potential of digital scholarship has been bottled up precisely because we can't figure out how we can integrate it with all the other demands on scholars. I've been asked by the American Historical Association to chair a committee to devise ways to help digital work be recognized at hiring, tenure, and promotion. Everyone increasingly recognizes that we could take better advantage of the defining opportunities of our time if we didn't stand in our own way.

We tend to view technology and the established way of doing things as being opposed to each other. Of late, the battle has been view in terms of MOOCs against classrooms, screens against paper, the large against the small, but that need not be the case. As it turns out, and here's my major point, digital scholarship can, perhaps surprisingly, actually *foster* all the kinds of work Boyer sought to recognize. Digital scholarship can serve as the catalytic agent to help make Boyer's vision crystallize into something more tangible than it could be in his time.

My idea for what became the Valley of the Shadow Project, a digital archive of primary sources related to the American Civil War, was quite Boyeresque. The archive makes available thousands of original documents related to the lives of people in Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, during the Civil War era.<sup>2</sup> The idea grew out of my teaching first, for I dreamed of sharing the excitement of discovery with hundreds of my own students and then with thousands or hundreds of thousands of students around the country and beyond. The second goal was to integrate discovery and practice, creating tools that other people could use in their own ways, imagining purposes I would not imagine. Making such tools I also pictured

**The modern system  
of scholarship,  
regardless of discipline,  
is built around specialized  
contributions to  
scholarly conversations  
and debates**

as a kind of service, providing high schools and community colleges with free resources to which they would not otherwise have access.

Ironically, the main category of Boyer's scholarship the Valley of the Shadow did not fill was the scholarship of discovery. Only a scholar who grew up with social and quantitative history, it is true, would have had the wacky idea of choosing two anonymous counties and then transcribing every single record they contained for every single person for a dense twenty-year period. And only a scholar committed to the idea that American Civil War had to be presented in ways that better embraced its nuance, ambiguity, and complexity would have thought of focusing on the boundary between the North and the South, a boundary made sharp by slavery but made blurry by most other facets of life.

But, by itself, the digital archive, as grounded in scholarly understanding and passion as it was, would not have counted for the scholarship of discovery—and it shouldn't have, judged by the prevailing rules of the academy.

**The organizing role of academic disciplines**

All our institutions, no matter their size, history, or purpose, are built around academic disciplines. Our curricula are fundamentally arrangements of disciplines or their derivatives—and even when we depart from that model, we call it “interdisciplinary.” Our faculty fell in love with their disciplines before they fell in love with the place they teach or even with teaching itself. They maintain that loyalty throughout their careers and identify themselves in relation to, and often in (usually) polite opposition to, their fellow institutional colleagues by disciplines. We organize responsibility and authority in our institutions around departments, which are, at their heart, institutional embodiments of disciplines. Conferences where we talk about issues of common concern are the exception. Our largest conferences are built instead around the particular passions of individual disciplines. In those conferences, institutional issues are invisible except in hallway discussions about who has the most intrusive dean or provost or president or board or governor. For those people at those conferences—which, at some point, have included all of us—the disciplines are the reason the institution exists, a kind of shared utility,

taken for granted until the service breaks down.

And, in a historical sense, our disciplinary selves are correct. Our colleges and universities are configured as they are because, at its essence, the modern system of scholarship, regardless of discipline, is built around specialized contributions to scholarly conversations and debates. All forms of research and writing—books, journal articles, research papers, pre-prints, reviews—in all disciplines are fractals of this monographic orientation, fragments replicating the structures of the whole.

This monographic culture and structure bring enormous benefits. Freed by the standardized format, annotation, evaluation, and review of monographic culture, scholars can focus on the one kind of innovation their departments and institutions are built to reward: advancing a meaningful conversation in the discipline. The scholar's challenge is to say something different enough to further the conversation but not different enough to fall outside of it. Successful scholars, as reviews routinely tell us, “make contributions” and “fill gaps,” sustaining the conversation in ways large and small. Print scholarship follows a deliberate path toward publication, with research, evaluation, and revision completed before the scholarship appears before the public. Then, another slow process of dissemination follows; it takes years for a book to be widely read, reviewed, comprehended, absorbed, and debated or built upon. But it is all one conversation, stretching across generations.

Monographic scholarship, precisely because it is routinized in many ways, is restlessly creative in argument and perspective. Research universities have evolved in large part to produce, recognize, reward, and sustain this scholarly innovation. The monographic culture has become the universal language of global higher education, transcending boundaries of language and culture, of politics and political regimes. It has survived profound social conflict, violence, and change around the world. The monograph's very ubiquity, its very invisibility, allows it to endure even when the ideas within that monograph are revolutionary, subversive, or threatening. The monographic form anchors innovative ideas in evidence, in debate, and in accountability—the highest ideals of the academy. As a result,

**The most important challenge for the spread and creativity of digital scholarship, ironically, is for it to embrace more of the role of the traditional scholarship of discovery**

monographic research has never been richer, more wide-ranging, or more inventive than it is today.

Viewing the present-day situation from the perspective of scholarship, we might not be surprised that twenty years into the digital revolution—not so long in the big picture

of the scholarly enterprise—the monographic culture feels little pressure or little incentive to change. In fact, the new digital networks have adapted themselves to print culture more than the other way around, with some of the most important digital innovations amplifying and strengthening traditional monographic scholarship. JSTOR and Google Books, for example, make the vast work of prior generations available to a digital audience.

Digital scholarship will have greater impact as it takes fuller advantage of the digital medium and innovates more aggressively. Digital books and digital articles that mimic their print counterparts may be efficient, but they do not expand our imagination of what scholarship *could* be in an era of boundlessness, an era of ubiquity. They do not imagine other forms in which scholarship might live in a time when our audiences can be far more vast and varied than in previous generations. They do not encourage new kinds of writing, of seeing, of explaining. And we need all those things.

**The future of digital scholarship**

Digital scholarship could take many new shapes, many of which we are just now glimpsing. It seems likely to take advantage of new forms of visualization, certainly, and become more supple to the reader's curiosity. Arguments will be tied more closely to the documents and data on which they are based, allowing readers to test ideas in real time, for themselves. Text will continue to become less bounded and self-contained, more branching and interwoven with other texts, images, sounds, and video. Scholarship will appear on smartphones as well as on supercomputers and kinds of screens for which we don't now have names. Scholarship will become increasingly unbundled and unbound, escaping into the world to do work it now cannot now do, reaching people who will not particularly care whether it counts for someone's tenure.

Digital scholarship, more fully realized, will increasingly do many of the things Ernest Boyer

encouraged us to do. It can integrate vast scholarly literature into more useful forms, it can enliven teaching in unprecedented ways, and it can reach audiences previously beyond the reach of even the most influential scholarship.

But here is the surprise, I think: we can keep alive the best traditions of the academy by adapting those traditions to the possibilities of our own time. For digital scholarship to do the things it might do, it must retain its connection to its hard-won accomplishments. The most important challenge for the spread and creativity of digital scholarship, ironically, is for it to embrace more of the role of the traditional scholarship of discovery.

Rather than disrupting or displacing the accomplishments of generations for disruption's sake, digital scholarship needs to feature interpretation, explanation, and explication—the defining attributes of what disciplines and departments recognize as real scholarship—more than it has so far. Scholarly arguments must be an integral and explicit part of the fundamental architecture of new efforts, whatever shape they end up taking. Colleges and universities will need to broaden their standards and definitions of scholarship to make room for new forms of digital scholarship. For its part, digital scholarship must do the work we have long expected scholarship to do: contribute, in a meaningful and enduring way, to an identifiable collective and cumulative enterprise. If we don't, no one else will. Integrating Ernest Boyer's four kinds of scholarship into one is possible in a way it was not before, using what I have called *generative scholarship*. That is scholarship built to generate, *as it is used*, new questions, evidence, conclusions, and audiences. Generative scholarship is framed with significant disciplinary questions in mind, offers scholarly interpretation in multiple forms as it is being built, and invites collaborators ranging from undergraduate students to senior researchers to public historians. Generative scholarship can work across all disciplines, in big-data projects in science and social science, as well as in focused humanities projects. By using carefully monitored crowdsourcing, institutional collaboration, and social media, generative scholarship can greatly accelerate and deepen the scholarly conversation.

In the spirit of Ernest Boyer, let us imagine, and determine, that we can free faculty and students to participate in disciplinary creativity and conversation more efficiently, more democratically,

and more creatively. We can share tools in the spirit of scholarship itself—the original open source technology. Schools of all types can build something at which they are especially good and then share it freely, creating a new commons of digital scholarship that was also digital teaching. Disciplines can extend their gifts beyond the walls of the institutions they have built in their image, into the civic life of the nation and beyond.

We might turn the current argument between technology and teaching upside down, empowering what we know works rather than trying so fervently to disrupt and displace it. Used this way, technology could enhance all the high-impact practices the Association of American Colleges and Universities has so helpfully defined and promoted: capstones, undergraduate research, community engagement, first-year seminars, and learning communities. We can build tools that reach massive audiences, but on a human scale. Rather than being simply open, new courses can be collaborative, with both students and faculty invested in the outcome.

Those of us who care about institutions as well as disciplines can take steps to make our schools more exciting, productive, and efficient by aligning our policies so that people who want to experiment with digital technologies can do so. The threads of scholarship, teaching, and community can be woven together more tightly than even Ernest Boyer could have imagined if we encourage our faculty, chairs, and deans, our librarians and our technology leaders—and ourselves, whatever role we may play—to take advantage of the new opportunities all around us. We can find new coherence and purpose in the very forces that threaten to disrupt and displace us. To build a future we want to live in, we must ensure the survival of the sustaining spirit of scholarship. □

*To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author's name on the subject line.*

---

#### NOTES

1. Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
2. The Valley of the Shadow Project is housed by the University of Virginia Library at <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu>.

Copyright of Liberal Education is the property of Association of American Colleges & Universities and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.