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HISTORY AND HUMANITIES DEGREES ONLINE: POSSIBILITIES, LIMITS, PROSPECTS FOR STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS



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Synopsis:

This paper will address the challenges that online education poses for students and instructors, especially in History and the Humanities in general, fields that have so far not been stalwarts of internet-based programs, but which are a staple of Liberal Arts.

*History and Humanities Degrees Online: Possibilities, Limits, Prospects for Students and Educators*¹

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It was only about a decade ago that I took up a position as a tenure-track Assistant Professor of Ancient History at the University of Illinois – Springfield. One of the terms of my appointment was the obligation to teach one online course per semester, my remaining teaching load being two “on ground,” as we call them, or traditional, or on campus classes per semester. This was an exciting prospect that allowed me to explore this novel at the time teaching venue. In the context of the well-developed, sophisticated, and rich UIS online program and in the course of nine and a half years then, I was the instructor of 12 different online classes that I have now taught for a total of 28 times. These have ranged from the lower- to the upper division and include General Education, History core curriculum, and History elective courses (see Appendix I). At least two of these are cross-listed with the Departments of Political Science and Visual Arts respectively. While my students mainly come from Illinois and the midwestern United States, I have had the pleasure of teaching inquisitive minds from all over the country, indeed from all over the world, including American soldiers deployed overseas or students that lived as far as Europe or the Philippines.

About a decade ago, online teaching was virtually unknown in my field of Classics, which is still poorly represented in the MOOC world, while some Classicist colleagues, especially those teaching in R1 institutions, would routinely refer to these classes as “learning by correspondence” and showed little interest in them.² To the best of my knowledge, the earliest Classicists that had considered the internet as a possible platform for teaching, were my colleagues at the Massey University in New Zealand, who constantly sought innovative solutions back in the mid-1990s for the education of their large number of extramural students.³ One of the first, if not *the first* Classics MOOC was Gregory Nagy’s celebrated *Ancient Greek Hero*, that has been offered several times by Harvard University through edX. Over the years, Professor Nagy, who is also a pioneer in online publications, has offered the course as part of the Harvard Classics Curriculum, as well as through the Harvard Extension School. At one point, he had also uploaded it on the website of the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies before moving it to edX.⁴

¹ This paper will only discuss online education as offered by not-for-profit institutions.

² A disclaimer is necessary: my presentation reflects my personal experience and in no way aims at attacking colleagues and their programs in any way, sort, or form. Like any other innovation, online education is still in its early stages and is changing constantly in a rapidly changing world.

³ During my 1994 trip to Massey University, I had the opportunity to discuss the challenges and rewards of making tertiary education accessible to students that lived in remote areas of New Zealand. Today Massey University is New Zealand’s leading university in distance learning. Cf. http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/learning/distance-learning/distance-learning_home.cfm

⁴ Cf. <http://chs.harvard.edu>. For Professor Nagy’s MOOC, see here: <https://www.edx.org/course/ancient-greek-hero-harvardx-cb22x>. Important Classics MOOCs that have been offered at one point or other by distinguished colleagues include: Guy MacLean Rogers’s (Wellesley College) *Was Alexander Great? The Life, Leadership, and Legacies of History’s Greatest Warrior* (<https://www.edx.org/course/was-alexander-great-life-leadership-wellesleyx-hist229x>), Diana E.E. Kleiner’s (Yale University) *Roman Architecture* (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/roman-architecture>).

On the other hand, Classicist colleagues have been particularly active in the world of podcasting. Diana E.E. Kleiner's *Roman Architecture* lectures are available through iTunes as part of the Open Yale Courses, while the Collège de France, the renowned higher education and research institution that brings together the most prominent professors and public intellectuals aiming at educating the public, as well as their students, also makes its own treasure of talks available in podcast form.⁵ Last, but not least, Classics courses have been made freely available by such projects as MIT's OpenCourseWare and UC BerkeleyX.⁶ Teaching the ancient languages, which is vital for most Classicists, is still a challenge according to most, but in the past, the University of Florida at Tallahassee offered a few self-paced Greek and Latin classes as part of its Classics Graduate Distance Learning.⁷ Clearly, Classics has a significant online presence, and it is hoped that more will be offered in the future.⁸

Indeed, online learning is no longer a novelty and is now almost universally accepted as an important player, while one may argue that it may exclusively shape the future of Education. Students have long become savvy consumers, seeking the right program in the right modality, that will allow them to prepare successfully for the job market. Developments in technology, the flood of information, and countless offers by institutions and companies, from mainstream universities to venture-backed enterprises like Coursera, edX, Udacity, or Lynda.com, offer endless, indeed often mind-spinning possibilities. This paper will only scratch the tip of the iceberg that is online learning and address the challenges that online education poses for students and instructors, especially in History and the Humanities in general. So far, these fields have not been stalwarts of internet-based programs, but they are a staple of Liberal Arts Education that forms the basis of the first two years of tertiary education in the US. These classes also appear to be particularly important for students coming from the non-Western world.

Presenting our UIS History online program here is important because I believe that it is a model for online education. Indeed, it differs significantly from many other academic institutions that offer online classes, whether as part of a regular online program or in the form of MOOCs. These usually differentiate between online and traditional students citing their different admissions criteria. For example, a graduate who received an M.A. degree from Harvard's Extension School wrote:

and Peter Struck's (University of Pennsylvania) *Greek and Roman Mythology* (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/mythology>). There are obviously several others.

⁵ Cf. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/course/roman-architecture/id594492962>; <http://www.college-de-france.fr/site/listes-infos/Podcast.htm>. To the existing important podcasts, I would also add Robin Pierson's superb *History of Byzantium* podcast series: <https://thehistoryofbyzantium.com> It was modeled after Mike Duncan's podcast series entitled *The History of Rome* (<http://thehistoryofrome.typepad.com>).

⁶ Cf. <https://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>; <https://www.edx.org/school/uc-berkeleyx>.

⁷ <https://classics.ufl.edu/programs/distance-learning/>. The online instruction of foreign languages presents its own unique challenges. To the best of my knowledge, the best website that pulls together the best available such classes, all self-paced, is the Yojik Website (<https://fsi-languages.yojik.eu>). In the past, I offered online independent studies in Latin which worked without issues, but I did meet with the students in my office from time to time. If I were to teach Latin online again to students that do not reside in Springfield, Illinois, I would hold conference calls over Skype.

⁸ Important Classics scholarly blogs are not referenced here, as they are beyond the scope of this paper.

“I have a master’s degree from Harvard obtained through the HES. My diploma says Harvard University (in Latin no less). I have had headhunters and recruiters question me on it and state that it was misleading for me to list Harvard University as my school. My diploma says Harvard University, my classes were all taken on campus at Harvard (before online classes were popular), so many had to be taught by Harvard professors and not instructors, I completed all the degree requirements. I don’t see anything misleading and I don’t know how else to list it on my resumé.”

Due to the HES’s lower admissions criteria, compared to Harvard College, and the large number of students enrolled, Harvard University indeed considers such a resumé misleading, and it appears that many universities offer a two-tier education, a practice that newcomers in the online tertiary education world also seem to follow.⁹

At the UIS Department of History, we adopted the opposite approach: all our majors receive the same degree, i.e. a University of Illinois – Springfield Bachelor’s.¹⁰ Moreover, while, as a state university we prioritize enrollment of local students, we have adopted stricter criteria in admitting online students, especially transfers, having initially set our minimum GPA at 3.0 (we have now lowered it to 2.5).¹¹ Classes are generally smaller than on campus (20-25 vs. 25-35 students enrolled) and are exclusively taught by regular, full-time faculty. When we first introduced the program over a decade ago, we only admitted junior and senior transfers, although lately we have begun to expand our program to include freshmen and sophomores. This was not entirely our choice, as the UIS General Education curriculum offers courses that are not always possible to transfer online. As our program grows, that changes, but we are still able to offer a great variety of History classes that allow online students to earn degrees as smoothly as our on campus students. Appendices I and II list no fewer than 53 different courses that include two lower-division General Education Comparative Societies, 13 upper-division General Education ECCE (Engagement Citizenship Common Experience), 4 History Core-Curriculum, 31 upper-division History Electives, and 3 Study Abroad classes.¹² These are taught by 10 regular faculty members, 9 of whom are tenured and one still on tenure track.

While recorded lectures are generally associated with online learning, they are not indispensable in our online classes, as we seek to combine student engagement and good structure, while at the same time maintaining flexibility.¹³ Students are required to log on Blackboard, our learning management system of choice, at least three times a week and contribute to the class discussion that is carried out on the Discussion Board, the backbone of the course, at least three long posts of 200 words each. The idea is not so much to answer questions, but rather engage in a lively class discussion, treating the Discussion Board more like a favorite bulletin board, rather than a chore. Crucial to the development of critical thinking, is the idea that posts have to be thoughtful, well-researched, and relevant. In order to make sure that the discussion moves along, students

⁹ Cf. <http://blogs.harvard.edu/lamont/2013/09/18/harvard-extension-school-resume-guidelines-are-bogus/>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/did-i-really-go-to-harvard-if-i-got-my-degree-taking-online-classes/279644/#comment-1046591290>.

¹⁰ At this point, our M.A. program is only available on campus.

¹¹ The same practice of awarding the same degrees to both online and on campus students has been adopted by UIS from the start.

¹² The lists in Appendices I & II do not include independent studies.

¹³ At the same time, we do post online powerpoint presentation with our own narration.

are required to have posted at least once by Wednesday, and on Sunday I lock the discussion of the week to ensure that the following week's class interaction does not get derailed if students, who may not have posted in previous weeks, may go back to topics that have been covered in previous weeks and are now closed.

As an instructor, I post discussion topics during the first three weeks out of a 15-week semester. After that, the students take turns moderating the discussion by writing a facilitator draft paper, summarizing their assigned portion of the material, then uploading it on the Discussion Board under the week they will be moderating, and opening three to five threads with their discussion topics to the class. I obviously remain an active poster, even though the students take center stage as they facilitate the discussion. Once they have received my confidential feedback on their paper by email, they have to revise it on the basis of my comments, or indeed of any ideas that may have been triggered out of their week's discussion, and eventually submit it as one of the numerous assignments of the class. Once all students have served as facilitators, I take over as moderator for the remainder of the semester, and the discussion ends during the last week of classes, when students are asked to reflect on what they have learned, assess their progress, discuss/present their research papers, and offer further insights on the class and on how it developed their critical thinking.¹⁴

The class assignments are typical of our traditional classes: to ensure that all students read all posts, online quizzes are deployed once a week, and their material is based on the class discussion. Furthermore, besides their facilitator paper, students have to write the typical papers historians are required to produce: a primary source review, a book review, a short research paper, and a short response paper to one out of three important general topics that have been covered throughout the semester. The research paper is usually written in three stages: a) proposal and preliminary annotated bibliography, b) draft, and c) final product. For their research, students rely on the UIS Brookens Library's electronic databases and interlibrary loan services, while they also learn how to use Google Scholar and related resources. In the event that they need additional books, they can use any public library near them, or we may ask their local colleges to allow them to use their libraries.

The above model represents a 400-level, i.e. an upper division seminar which is usually directed at seniors. Our online lower division (100-level) classes involve, besides the online discussion, weekly quizzes, three short essays, and two take-home exams: a midterm and a final. In general, I have been able to offer almost every class I teach on campus online with few exceptions, and the same is mostly true for my colleagues of the History Department (see Appendices I & II).

In comparing mine and my students' experience online vs. learning in a traditional classroom, I would argue that my online classes seem to be much more lively. All teachers obviously deal with the issue of non-responsive, shy, or reluctant students, but my online rules force everyone to take part in the class discussion. During a typical semester, there may be about 1500-2000 Discussion Board posts, while particularly successful and enjoyable courses in the past have induced our online community to post as many as 4500-5000 times in total! On the other hand, the main limitations of online teaching generally center around the very few students who find

¹⁴ As part of class assessment, I always deploy online midterm evaluations to supplement the usual evaluations students fill out at the end of the semester.

the medium difficult and its structure challenging. Additionally, certain classes partly depend on the viewing of documentaries, and it is not always possible to get streaming rights, thereby missing the opportunity to include this vital part of the class online. It has been particularly distressing, for example, that Disney has never consented to allow us to stream their movies, which we would obviously make available with their permission and after paying for their intellectual rights. Sadly, this practice has prevented Professor Peter Shapinsky to offer his superb and much-loved by his on campus students upper-division General Education class on *Anime, History, and Memory* (HIS 483). The same is true for other owners and distributors of documentaries and films, and in my case, this translates to not being able to offer my *Antiquity in Film: Star Wars Freshman Seminar* (HIS 124) online, among others. My *Egyptology* class has similarly suffered because we may not acquire rights for streaming a unique documentary on the DNA Analysis of the mummies of the 18th Dynasty, including that of King Tut-Ankh-Amun.¹⁵ Relying on YouTube videos has its advantages, of course, however, this is not a reliable source, as too many videos often disappear.¹⁶

One of my department's most innovative teaching initiatives involves co-teaching (and co-training) with colleagues from partner universities, especially those that are particularly active in the emerging field of Digital Humanities. UIS is a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), and Professor Kenneth Owen, our specialist in Early American History, has been particularly active in the COPLAC Digital Teaching Program, which was funded by the Mellon Foundation to develop best practices in distance liberal arts mentoring in digital humanities. Before teaching the specific courses, Dr. Owen underwent grueling training at the University of North Carolina-Asheville and the University of Mary Washington, familiarizing himself with digital methods, digital pedagogy, evaluation and assessment, and syllabus design. The resulting course, entitled *Divided Houses: Secession and Separatist Movements*, was offered by Kenneth Owen and Professor Mary Beth Mathews of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Mary Washington. Similarly, the UIS faculty is continuously rigorously trained in the latest trends in both on campus and online learning and pedagogy, sometimes with the help of external grants, while the History Department continues to forge relationships with other institutions worldwide that offer further opportunities for faculty and student collaboration, including jointly-taught classes.¹⁷

In a recent report, *The Online College Students 2017: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences* has drawn attention to the fact that more than 20 million students attended college in 2016, and one quarter of them were enrolled in online classes.¹⁸ In an era that college enrollment is declining, online education is very much in demand and is here to stay, as it triggers profound changes in tertiary education globally, not only as it transforms into a platform of innovation, but as it also brings together students and promotes cooperation in an era of globalization. The key findings of the report on student demands and attitudes toward higher education suggest that:

1) Rather than isolating themselves by taking online classes, students consider these as opportunities to be part of a community. Indeed, student interaction with instructors and

¹⁵ *King Tut Unwrapped* 2010.

¹⁶ Similarly, the UIS CAP Scholars Honors Program, which is separate from the History Department's Honors Program, is not available online.

¹⁷ For example, the Sloan Consortium has generously recognized Sloan-C Fellows.

¹⁸ <https://www.learninghouse.com/knowledge-center/webinars/ocs2017-webinar/>

classmates produces a stimulating learning environment and better learning outcomes. The report also finds that these students will often happily travel to their campuses in order to meet their instructor and classmates, an experience that we, too, have had, especially at the time of graduation. Indeed, we always make a point of picking our two marshals, who participate in the commencement ceremony, out of both our online and on campus students..¹⁹

2) While most students prefer to enroll remotely to their local colleges, the current trend is to expand their search to more schools.

3) Not searching for schools, particularly in an era when comprehensive online programs that are equal to their institutions' on campus ones, often produces buyer's remorse. For that reason, students tend to "shop around" and try different classes in several institutions, especially when they can easily transfer their credits to the college from which they eventually choose to graduate.

4) Students have a high interest in competency-based education. In an era when the debate about the value of college and the proposed revival and expansion of vocational training is increasingly gaining ground, students explore classes that offer practical skills enabling them to be successful in the job market. Being savvy consumers of online education, also allows them to become excellent time managers, and define, discover, and evaluate competency-based programs in an emerging world of alternative credentials.²⁰ A case at point involves data scientists who are particularly in high demand today, and, according to statistics, 59% of whom made a case for taking effective charge of their own learning by teaching themselves skills on their own or via MOOCs, including Open Source courses. Besides the obvious advantages of a low cost education, aspiring data scientists are sophisticated enough to understand that skillsets across their field differ, and the "mix and match" approach in designing their education program actually works.²¹ Creative students like Laurie Pickard have even been able to create their own "no-pay-MBA," which *Fortune Magazine* considered serious enough to include in an article, while emphasizing Pickard's ability to understand the limits of such studies that can nevertheless be valuable and prove effective in the job market.²²

¹⁹ One of our challenges ca. 2013 was persuading *Phi Alpha Theta*, the National History Honors Society, to remove their restrictions that barred our online students from becoming members, after presenting them our online program.

²⁰ <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2013/10/01/the-emerging-world-of-alternative-credentials/>

²¹ <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/report-59-of-employed-data-scientists-learned-skills-on-their-own-or-via-a-mooc/>

²² Cf. <https://www.nopaymba.com>; <http://fortune.com/2015/03/16/how-to-get-an-mba-education-for-less-than-1000/> The University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign has recently introduced a cheaper version of their MBA program, the iMBA, at a fraction of the normal cost (about \$20,000). Students can study for it by taking free UIUC courses that have been made available online, but have to pay if they wish to earn the actual degree. It is noteworthy that, while this one is an accredited MBA, Pickard's suggested program is not and therefore does not lead to an MBA. Cf. <https://onlinemba.illinois.edu> Traditional, highly selective schools like Harvard will remain, and their business model will continue catering to a certain group of students. However, moving forward, universities will eventually have to reconsider their business models. Online education is not an opportunity for schools to make money out of offering a two-tier education, while at the same time undermining their online students by not offering value in the end. For example, Harvard can definitely survive in the 21st century and beyond based on its current, long-standing business model, but those who wish to be serious players in online education will have to change their business model and offer flexible, modern courses and degrees that represent value. In the end, the school awarding the degree does not play the most important role in the job market, as statistics clearly show. Skills and experience are far more important.

Despite the high demand for specialists in technology, a Liberal Arts education, that allows students to learn to use language effectively and develop critical thinking, will continue to be essential to education, as long as institutions appreciate our changing times in a timely fashion and provide strategies for addressing all major aspects of teaching and learning in a rapidly changing world.²³

APPENDIX I

(Online Courses Offered by Elizabeth Kosmetatou at UIS)

1) Lower Division/GenEd/Comparative Societies:

- a) *Western Civilization* (formerly *Making of the West*) – HIS 118
- b) *Amazons and Warrior Women* (planned) ; HIS 117

2) Upper Division/GenEd/ECCE (Engagement Citizenship Common Experience) Classes

- a) *ECCE: Cleopatra's Egypt* (cross-listed with the Department of English) – HIS 414
- b) *ECCE: Democracy & Democratic Theory* (cross-listed with the Department of Political Science) – HIS 411

2) History Department Core Curriculum

- a) *The Historian's Craft (History of Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Holocaust)* –HIS 301
- b) *Understanding American History: Classics, the Roman Empire, and the American Founding Fathers* (now defunct) – HIS 303
- c) *Senior (Capstone) Seminar* – HIS 401

3) History Electives

- a) *Topics in Military History: Sparta and the 300* – HIS 330
- b) *Alexander the Great* – HIS 412
- c) *Rise of Rome (History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Republic)* – HIS 416

²³ On teaching and learning in the modern world, I have always favored the following publications: P. C. Brown, H.L. Roediger III, and M.A. McDaniel, *Making it Stick. The Science of Successful Learning* (Belknap: Cambridge, Mass. 2014); B. Gross Davis, *Tools for Teaching* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco 2009); S. Yancy McGuire & S. McGuire, *Teach Students How to Learn. Strategies You Can Incorporate Into Any Course to Improve Students Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation* (Stylus: Sterling, CA 2015);

- d) *Egyptology* (cross-listed with the Department of Visual Arts) – HIS 419
- e) *Ancient Sport & Spectacle* – HIS 424
- f) *Ancient Greek Religion* – HIS 480

4) Study Abroad

Ancient Greece (planned) – HIS 480

Appendix II

(UIS History Department Courses Offered by the History Faculty Except from Elizabeth Kosmetatou)

1. General Education ECCE Courses

- a) ECCE US Women's History (HIS 345) – Holly Kent
- b) ECCE: Reading Arab Pasts (HIS 373) – Kristi Barnwell
- c) ECCE: Conflict in the Middle East (HIS 375) – Kristi Barnwell
- d) ECCE: Christian & Muslim Encounters (HIS 378) – David Bertaina
- e) ECCE: Politics & Religion: Culture Wars (HIS 422) – Co-taught by Heather Bailey & colleagues from the Departments of History and Legal Studies
- f) ECCE: Civil Rights Movement of the Twentieth Century (HIS 429) – Kamau Kemayo
- g) ECCE: Rebels & Revolutionaries: Female Activism in the US (HIS 456) – Holly Kent
- h) ECCE: Conflict in 19th Century Europe (HIS 462) – Heather Bailey
- i) ECCE: The Pacific War: World War II in East Asia (HIS 471) – Peter Shapinsky
- j) ECCE: Nationalism & Imperialism (HIS 475) – Kristi Barnwell
- k) ECCE: From Vikings to Hackers: A Pirate's World History (HIS 479) – Peter Shapinsky

2. History Department Core Curriculum

- a) *The Historian's* (HIS 301) – Rotates among faculty
- b) *Senior (Capstone) Seminar* (HIS 401) – Rotates among faculty
- c) Honors Research Seminar (HIS 402) – Rotates among faculty

3. Upper-Division History Electives

- a) Popular Culture in US History: From Barnum to Beyonce (HIS 341) – Devin Hunter
- b) Native American History (HIS 347) – Kenneth Owen
- c) Islamic Civilization (HIS 371) – David Bertaina
- d) Revolutionary America (HIS 432) – Co-taught by Kenneth Owen & Peter Shapinsky
- e) The Sixties (HIS 437) – Devin Hunter
- f) Missions/Early America (HIS 440A) – David Bertaina

- g) Hiroshima/Historical Memory (HIS 440B) – Michael Hogan
- h) Kennedy's (HIS 440C) – Michael Hogan
- i) Camelot-Kennedy/White House (HIS 440D) – Michael Hogan
- j) American Political Tradition (HIS 440E) – Kenneth Owen
- k) Early Republic (HIS 440F) – Kenneth Owen
- l) The Roaring Twenties (HIS 440G) – William Siles
- m) Women in American History (HIS 440H) – Holly Kent
- n) American Urban History (HIS 442) – William Siles
- o) Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution (HIS 445) – Kenneth Owen
- p) America Revivalism and Christian Religion (HIS 452) – William Siles
- q) American Political Thought from the Revolution to the 20th century (HIS 446) – Kenneth Owen
- r) American Westward Expansion (HIS 449) – William Siles
- s) Fashion History (HIS 455) – Holly Kent
- t) Europe in the 20th Century (HIS 463) – Heather Bailey
- u) Imperial Russia (HIS 472) – Heather Bailey
- v) History of the Soviet Union (HIS 473) – Heather Bailey
- w) Modern China (HIS 476) – Peter Shapinsky
- x) Women in Chinese & Japanese History (HIS 481) – Peter Shapinsky
- y) Samurai in History and Romance (HIS 482) – Peter Shapinsky

4. Study Abroad

- a) Renaissance Rome & Malta (HIS 480) – David Bertaina
- b) Medieval Japan (HIS 480) – Peter Shapinsky