

Applied Humanities

Vernon Lamb 

What Is Art?

Defining the Humanities

5 Theme: Impact of the Humanities (week 5) / Page 5.1.1 Defining the Humanities

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Objective: Recognize what we study when we study the humanities.

For the past four weeks we've been working through activities to strengthen our ability to do the work of the humanities, but we haven't paused yet to ask, "What are the humanities?" Clearly they involve visual art, music, and literature, but those are three different things—what do they all have in common, and what else lives under that very broad umbrella of humanities?

Like most classifications, "humanities" exists to both group some things together and to exclude some other things. That is, the word "humanities" is not only grouping some similar studies together, but it is also distinguishing these studies from other kinds such as "science."

The scientific mindset excels at measuring, making objective claims, and developing technology—that is, "how to." No discipline can rival scientific methods for identifying types of things (rocks, organisms, stars), describing functional mechanisms (serotonin uptake), and measuring how the world works (boiling point of any substance). Science is the study of nature. But humans are more than just nature, and microscopes are useless in the study of such universal human experiences as love, humor, and meaning. The humanities, as you might guess, focus on the study of the human experience.

Humans are, of course, physical, chemical, and biological. So we are subject to the laws of nature. We use science to calculate the flight path of a man shot from a cannon, but scientific methods have nothing to offer if we are looking into why a man would be willing to be shot from a cannon, or why thousands of people would gather to see such a spectacle.

Exploring human behavior without the methods of the humanities results in reducing humans to nothing more than physical, chemical, and biological phenomena. There are no ethics in physics. There are no noble chemical reactions (though I hear there are some noble gasses). If you seek meaning, relationship, or communication, you'll benefit from an understanding of the humanities. If you want to combat injustice, poverty, or bullying, you'll need humanities. Science provides the tools to build bulletproof glass. But if we want to address tensions before the shooting starts, we need the humanities.

Short-Answer Question

Write a question that is firmly in the sciences. That is, write a question that can be best addressed using the methods of scientific inquiry.

No response saved yet.

Short-Answer Question

Now write a question that is firmly in the humanities. That is, write a question that can be best addressed using the methods of inquiry most often used in the humanities.

No response saved yet.

What does all of this have to do with looking at a painting? Great question. Seeking to appreciate art and literature and music teaches us to consider the act of another and the impact on ourselves. Interacting with art is an invitation to explore your own humanity.

Consider biology labs. They introduce the methods of biological investigation, the challenges of measuring, the uncertainty of knowing exactly what you're looking at, the mechanics of operating a microscope, the variation between individual specimens, and the joy of seeing a hypothesis proven. In a similar manner, considering art teaches us to look closely, to interpret the clues, to generate and evaluate potential explanations, to consider alternative points of view, and to discuss what we're seeing, experiencing, and thinking with others. These discussions can be in person with two people talking or through reading and writing in a much larger conversation that spans time and space.

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$$

This is an image of an algebraic formula. The formula is: F equals G multiplied by the product of m sub 1 times m sub 2 which is divided by r squared.

A traditional scientific perspective on communication is one of information delivery. I can explain that acceleration due to gravity is found through this equation: force equals gravitational constant times ([mass of one object] times [mass of a second object])

divided by the square of the distance between the two objects). We may need to have a conversation for you to fully understand the equation or for us to agree on how we determine the mass of an object (e.g., Earth) and so on, but once you understand what I mean, our communication is complete. More communication would not strengthen understanding of this formula for either of us.

When we are inquiring into the human experience however, there is no formula to be conveyed. For example, if we are discussing what makes the *Walking Dead* television show so compelling, we can't rely on a well established formula such as "The force of a story is equal to the narrative constant multiplied by how different it is from our lives and divided by how well we can identify with it." To speak of a compelling story in scientific terms makes no more sense than explaining gravity in terms of falling objects wanting to return to their mother Earth out of a sense of belonging. Objects don't have intentionality, will, desire, consciousness, self-awareness, angst, longing, pride, or any of the thousands of other experiences unique to humans. Science is the study of things. Humanities is the study of the human experience, often as expressed in our creative acts.

The value of such conversations could easily be underestimated. You could look at an image for literally one second and have something to say about it. But if you look longer and have the internal dialogue with yourself that we call "thinking," you'll have more to say about it. And if you seek to communicate that to a friend, you'll learn more about what you think as you hear what you say. There's a truism that you don't know what you know until you see what you write. This is why writing is so common in college, especially in humanities courses. In part, it enables your instructor to see what you're understanding, but even more powerfully, it enables you to see. The first draft will not be your best effort. And as you work to revise it, to make the writing better and the argument clearer, you'll find yourself having questions and seeking answers to build better knowledge. Reading your own writing critically will help you see where gaps in your knowledge exist and enable you to fill them.

Our thoughts are too often like dreams, seeming to make sense as they flow through our minds but not holding up in writing. Writing holds us to a higher standard than does thinking, and it requires our arguments to be better structured and to hold up over a longer chain of claims. To see something and say to a friend, "Oh yes, I wrote a lengthy paper about that last year" is to really say, "I've done a lot of reading and thinking about that and have come to understand my perspective on it." This contrasts sharply with saying, "Well, off the top of my head I think..." which indicates that we've given something very little thought. That distinction, between things we've given time to and things we haven't, is based on our understanding that time invested in thinking and expressing builds understanding. This construction of knowledge happens in

conversations, spoken or written. Without the conversation (that is, without reading or writing) your understanding is greatly limited. Considering art without thinking, reading, speaking, and writing is a bit like a scientist mentally cataloging types of ants but never gathering specimens, taking measurements, or making notes. You'd be left with wisps of memory but very little solid knowledge.

(By the way, this phenomenon of “write to learn” holds true in science classes as well. You're human, after all, and “knowing” and “writing” are firmly in the humanities. So even if what you're studying is a mechanical system or a computer language, seeing your own description of it will help you assess and deepen your own understanding of it.)

Humans are part of nature, but the human experience is more than just natural. The humanities are an inquiry into those phenomena and experiences that make up what it means to be human, and a reflection upon the things you feel and experience. Art, as we are defining the term for this course, is an expression of some aspect of that human experience. By giving it consideration and discussion, you are expanding your understanding of yourself and others. You are learning how to see and understand the expressions of other humans. You are learning about the degree to which you are like all humans and the degree to which you are unique.

So what constitutes the humanities, exactly? The humanities consist of the consideration of uniquely human experiences, the questions we ask, the methods we use to pursue answers, and the best of all the answers humans have come up with so far.

Art has long been recognized as a very efficient way of starting and continuing such explorations, as creative efforts seem to inescapably combine the personal and the general, the context of a particular moment in time, and the commonality of all humans. Creative works express something about the human experience, which is why scholars in the humanities reach for artistic artifacts to highlight these experiences and help students develop their abilities to observe, reflect, and discuss.

Short-Answer Question

In your own words, what does it mean to “write to learn”?

No response saved yet.

- Response Board

Choose one work of art and explain what it means in terms of being both a product of its specific context and also an expression of the universal human experience.

No response saved yet.