A Case for Culture

By Doris Sommer

Dedicated defenders of precarious ground ask themselves how to bring more people into museums, libraries, concert halls, and theaters. This is a life-and-death question for many institutions. How can we safeguard the intrinsic value of the arts and humanities when the general public has lost a taste for the unhurried pleasures of doubt and discussion? It’s time to make the case for culture—indeed, to make cases for culture, cases that can be used to demonstrate how the humanities benefit the public and why society should invest in its practitioners. Today, our responses to urgent challenges, which include inequality, violence, climate change, and migration, should include care for people and for the planet. Sustainable care will depend on the sociability promoted by the arts and humanities.

The case method is common in practically every field of academic research. Cases identify a problem and then evaluate intervention techniques. If we dared, we could use this method to respond to humanistic worries by designing hybrid essays that combine approaches from the humanities and social sciences. A case for culture might include the following stages:

1. Identify a social challenge.
2. Study its causes and context.
3. Speculate on possible interventions.
4. Implement an intervention.
5. Design ways to measure impact and reflect on results.

One advantage of this format over existing essays in the humanities is that it would be more convincing to people outside the field. In addition, the cycle of study and informed intervention would help scholars use their research to effect change, especially in fields where scholarship often uncovers the causes and conditions of abusive power dynamics (Sedgwick). Of course, intervention is risky. Perhaps it has felt safer for scholars to avoid engagement and to build careers on researching problems rather than finding solutions (Chan). It’s time to move on if we want to project a future for the humanities and if we hope to add value to cases beyond academic fields. Humanist participation in public intervention would benefit society and heighten interest in academic disciplines.

Scholars of business, law, politics, engineering, public health, and education have already pioneered the case method and stretched its reach. Some even test conventional boundaries between artistic expression and quantifiable data. At the Harvard Business School, for example, a vanguard case examines the innovative leadership of Miles Davis; another tracks the extent to which public performances by Antanas Mockus, the former mayor of Bogotá, saved water during a drought in city; and still another computes civic benefits of classical music lessons for impoverished youth in Venezuela (Austin and Stormer; Dust and Prokopoff; Khanna et al.). Such hybrid research between
arts and economic development work is possible and productive. As humanists, we should add our part to the mix. To put in plain terms what Friedrich Schiller proposed as nonviolent responses to terror during the French Revolution: The name of change is art. John Dewey, Viktor Shklovsky, Jacques Rancière, and many others inherited this broad definition from enlightened pedagogies. Art means making something new, something that surprises and engages groups of people to reflect together (Sommer 135–56). Humanistic writing about the aesthetic dimension of change promises to demonstrate that thinking like an artist is a condition for confronting social, economic, ethical, and political challenges.2

We don’t yet write cases for culture, and our reticence to do so signals skepticism between the humanities and almost any other field. A few artists, however, have been taking steps across the divide between qualitative and quantitative evaluations (see Animating Democracy).3 In fact, proposals for funding and required reporting may be the genres that come closest to conjuring new humanist cases for culture, though most applicants still consider the granting process to be a necessary evil that endangers or deforms art’s value.4 Humanists have traditionally had less access to grant funding for public-engagement projects than have artists, and we have focused less on public accountability.5 So humanist interpretation lags behind the place where art meets public commitments. Adding the critical edge of humanist analysis would open the way to deeper understanding and broader opportunities.

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The objective of a new humanistic approach that involves case studies would be to learn what works, what doesn’t, and why. Simply put, it would be to learn. This is as relevant for humanists as for everyone. A couple of years ago, Danielle Allen addressed a group of undergraduate “engaged scholars.” She began by affirming that the work of universities is to pursue research and to learn new information. Then she paused to ask, “How does that happen?” Her question returned attention to engagement as an essential element of scholarship; without it, research can remain derivative or academic in the narrow and unengaging sense. Good public humanities programs already move in the direction of service (in prison education, voter registration, after-school programs), though a nagging resistance can prevent humanists from putting their academic work to use when they leave campus. Are standard demands for academic publications to refer to canons and to sample theory in fact incurably elitist and possibly damaging to a public mission (Kester)? Until now we have chosen to explain that the effects of art are practically ineffable and certainly unquantifiable, that instruments for measurement miss the magic of art by reducing aesthetic effects to numerical values. The concern is real only if we remain uncreative about what and how we measure. Designing the standards and methods of measurement is part of the challenge for innovative essays in the humanities. We can learn from artistic practice to be indirect, to ask unanticipated questions, and to elicit fresh responses.6 There are masters of this method; one is Mockus. Featured as a lead artist at the Berlin Biennial in 2013, Mockus was recognized for turning Bogotá into a stage for civic reform—replacing traffic cops with mimes, for example.7 He managed to cut traffic deaths nearly in half in his first year in office (Murrain). Emboldened by the statistic, he multiplied risky moves and measured their impact on reducing homicide, corruption, and waste of resources.

Mockus, a mathematician and philosopher, formulated surprising questions for broad-based surveys that disarmed skeptical citizens. Instead of asking citizens to identify troublemakers, he would ask
why people obey the law. Statistics showed that respondents invariably credited themselves with lofty motivations of morality while they assumed that others obeyed out of fear. Citizens saw the numbers and got the point; they became self-critical about their assumptions of moral superiority and learned to admire lawful behavior in others (Mockus). Admiration became an index for citizenship. Can we in good faith, like Mockus, do anything less than measure what we do? As humanists, we claim to improve human lives by enhancing imagination, understanding, and judgment. How do we sustain that claim in an increasingly skeptical society? How do we confirm even our own assertion that art and interpretation are essential for human development? A strong self-referential strain of scholarship in the humanities has, ironically, generated a kind of scholasticism. Scholarship can cede to a new humanism if we step beyond convenient and conventional limits. From a critical distance, we may see that arts and culture have something to learn from the so-called professional schools, though humanists have often said those words with condescension, as if the professions were too goal-oriented to be intellectual.

Making cases for culture is an invitation to suture the rift between imagination and reason. To do so, we need to break down stigmas that separate humanists and our potential partners. We must add our own scholarly approaches to speculating and tracking aesthetic effects and must advance in a pas de deux with professional partners who are willing to spend time with us to explore twists and turns.

In developing our skills in judgment and artifice, we provide a framework to explore how conditions can change.

Measurement assumes a desired outcome—that is, a purpose. Many humanities scholars may feel that creativity needs freedom from purpose of any kind, finances, fame, and so on. On the other side, most decision-makers consider the creative arts practically irrelevant for policy. Why should this be? It is not a rhetorical question. In fact, the arts provide essential elements for making good decisions, including judgment and artifice. Judgment considers the value of unfamiliar phenomena, events, and objects that don’t conform to reasonable patterns. Progress depends on the exercise of judgment to evaluate ever-changing opportunities and obstacles from the vantage points of particular people. Making something new—an artifice that channels creativity—is a corollary to judgment in the changing environment of modern times; it invents unpredicted but intentional interventions. In developing our skills in judgment and artifice, we provide a framework to explore how conditions can change.

A general term, culture includes the range of inherited and intentional responses to environmental challenges. The very breadth of the word perplexed Raymond Williams when he returned to Oxford after four years of military service in World War II. He puzzled over culture, among other key words, because the English language had changed so much during so short a time that he literally could not follow a conversation. The most vexing word represented his own field of expertise. Interviews, study, deliberation all led him to conclude that culture had two different, almost opposite meanings. For social sciences, culture amounts to patrimony: a set of shared things, beliefs, and practices, a mechanism of convergence and preservation. It is certainly not a promising arena for change and development but rather a collective mind-set that resists change. Culture poses dangers for decision-makers who worry about offending whole groups of people who pray differently or eat, marry, dress, and talk differently. For artists and humanists, on the other hand, culture points to a field of divergent risks, trial and error, experimentation, often unhinging the very paradigms that patrimony defends. “Try again; fail again; fail better” (Beckett). Artists and scientists understand one another, as Schiller knew when he called them the daughters of freedom. Both play
with materials and explore their potential effects without necessarily projecting an outcome (Edwards). The work is process driven, not product oriented.

Decision-makers are not stupid. Understandably, they want to see results from investments, whether the goal is making money or getting elected. If they cut funding for culture in favor of technology or homeland security it is probably, among other possible reasons, because they have been trained to be minimalist regarding culture, to do just enough to avoid conflict with groups of people. As social scientists, they certainly do not learn to identify culture’s processes as ignition for social, economic, or political progress. Artists experiment freely, while decision-makers worry about recklessness and the future impact of their choices.

We have opportunities (that means responsibilities) to suture the divide in culture with projects that assume a double bottom line, a term I learned from the Social Innovation Studio at the Harvard Kennedy School for Government and that has been broadly adopted in business and government. The newly coined bilateral goal is both to generate income and to effect social change. The objectives support one another: money sustains good projects, and social projects ensure that money does some good. Requiring both fiscal and ethical responsibility is a decision that we humanists can make too. It would overcome the nagging double-binds that have for decades paralyzed engagement. An appropriate response to puzzling over a Gordian knot, such as the tangle between thinking and acting, is to cut with bold moves.

The concept of double bottom line conjures for me a particular case for culture, called Pre-Texts. It is a teacher-training program that sustains itself through honoraria and provides a social good. In the process, it sutures the divide in culture between patrimony and experimentation. With Pre-Texts, teachers learn to offer challenging texts as raw material for making art and then for reflecting on the activity. In reflecting and identifying the actions carried out during activities, participants can better understand how they have been affected by the experience. The combination of using texts as prompts to paint, dance, draw, act, sing, and so on and closing with the question, What did we do?, amounts to a protocol for developing high-order reading, innovation, and citizenship—the long-term purpose, or measurement, of Pre-Texts. It works for all ages and tastes, generating endless opportunities for scholarly analyses and theory (reader response, intertextuality, identity construction, filters, multilingual layers, etc.). The steps that practically anyone can master are these: listen to a text, ask it questions, create artistic responses, and think about the process. Participants play freely with texts, but art-making sessions are governed by consistent rules. Irreverently, individuals pull and poke at texts but inside a protocol that obliges everyone to participate in a shared civic culture. Here, culture as divergent art meets culture as convergent practice. Personal expression advances together with shared reflection; emotional intelligence drives and is driven by cognitive development (it’s a mistake to isolate them). An important dividend of this double bottom line for pedagogy is a generalized feeling of admiration for everyone in the group because each artist contributes original work and unscripted reflection. Admiration, we learned from Mockus, is the fundamental sentiment of citizenship. It responds to other people’s particularity and anticipates their valued contributions, unlike feelings of tolerance, respect, or even empathy, which keep speakers at the center of their sentences.

Humanists have resources like Pre-Texts to direct the interpretive work of literary studies toward engagement and accountability. The move assumes responsibilities that we can confirm through cases for culture. To claim, for example, that the case study protocol delivers a holistic pedagogy
requires some proof in measurable results. Humanists may be persuaded by the concept that the invitation to use texts to make art can achieve educational acupuncture. Creative processes press on academic material to fire the pleasures of creative autonomy. It makes sense to us that cognitive and emotional learning go together here; the prompt to play with complex texts fuels critical thinking, enjoyment of one’s own particularity, and admiration for others. But dedicated teachers will also want to know if the claim bears out. Therefore, our next invitation is to colleagues who know how to measure cognitive and socioemotional development. Together, we develop indicators and approaches to evaluation. Then we gather results and learn from them how to improve our practice. This would be the case model that identifies problems and evaluates interventions comparable with those in business and social science. A case for culture is under way now, to report on Pre-Texts in Boston Public Schools. It will represent my collaboration with the distinguished Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson, Paul Tritter (director of professional learning for Boston Teachers Union), James Noonan (project director for school quality measures with the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment), James Quane (associate director of the Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program at the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy of the John F. Kennedy School of Government), and Jahnvi Singh (a cultural agent at a nongovernmental organization). Thanks to their training and interpretive capacity, Pre-Texts can be captured now in a theory-of-change chart (fig. 1).

Fig. 1.
Change in education, and in any other field of human development, relies on thinking like an artist and then thinking together with scientists. Anything less leaves us on one side of culture’s divide between heritage and creativity, to choose and lose.

Notes

1. Alba Aragón, assistant professor of comparative literature at Bridgewater State University, noted in March 2018 that, to revive this taste, especially with first-
generation students who do not imagine that literature is important: “‘Art as Technique’ de Shklovsky es un ensayo que incluyo en casi todas mis clases de literatura, porque me sirve mucho para trabajar con mis alumnos ‘first-generation’ de clase trabajadora, que no traen una appreciación innata de la literatura. Pero entienden el extrañamiento, y llegan a entender que eso que ellos llaman ‘relatability’ no es tan valioso como creen al principio, pues de la mejor manera que puedo les explico la premisa de tu Proceed with Caution..., y les hago tomar conciencia de los placeres de las lecturas difíciles. La respuesta de una alumna: ‘Yo aprendí que un buen cuento te hace pensar, debe ser difícil, que debes pelear con el cuento, debe ser frustrante, que te den ganas de darte por vencido pero al mismo tiempo te den ganas de vencer. Un buen cuento no puede ser fácil porque si es fácil te mata. Matan las ganas de saber más y eso no es lo que Cortázar quiere, sino que te despiertes y veas la realidad, conocer, saber lo que está pasando en el mundo afuera. Tener el conocimiento para luchar contra la injusticia en la sociedad’” (“‘Art as Technique’ by Shklovsky is an essay I include in practically all my literature courses, because it’s so useful for working-class ‘first-generation’ students who haven’t yet acquired a love for literature. But they understand estrangement and come to question the value of ‘relatability.’ I share the premise of your Proceed with Caution and invite them to acknowledge the pleasures of difficult texts. One student commented: ‘I learned that a good story makes you think, that it needs to be hard, to frustrate you and make you struggle with the reading, like a challenge that makes you give up but at the same time makes you struggle harder and get it. A good story can’t be easy; that kills it. It kills your desire to know more than that’s not what Cortázar wants; instead he wants to wake you up to see reality, to know and ask more about the world outside. This is training to take on social injustice’”).

2. Tarun Khanna of the Harvard Business School and the Harvard Kennedy School regularly teaches SOCWORLD 47, Contemporary Developing Countries: Entrepreneurial Solutions to Intractable Problems, where undergraduates and graduate students from the range of schools learn “thinking like an artist.”

3. Also, as described in its Amazon editorial review, Counting New Beans, edited by Clayton Lord, is “[t]he final report on the landmark two-year intrinsic impact theater study from research firm WolfBrown and authors Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin. Contains over 20 interviews with artistic leaders, executive directors, and patrons about the changing relationship of artists and audiences. This research—a comprehensive and expansive attempt to understand and quantify the impact of a piece of art on an individual (and the impact of that individual on the art)—is a clarion call for a new way to measure and talk about the arts experience.” See also Finkelparl; Walker-Kuhne and Wolfe; Tepper and Ivey; Korza and Bacon; Borwick; Lerman and Borstel.

4. See Korza and Bacon: “Some [artists] find it simply overwhelming because they lack evaluation expertise. Others ask: How do you measure such intangible results as ‘transformation,’ ‘community building,’ or ‘social justice’? They may resist the idea of
applying empirical approaches that they believe are ill suited to art and social change. Yet, others see usefulness and necessity in getting ‘more concrete.’ They want to know if they are meeting their aspirations and goals and why or why not” (12). See also the reluctance to quantitative analysis highlighted in Duncombe et al.

5. An exception is Danielle Allen’s HULA (Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment) project at Harvard, which “identifies and illuminates internal logics of humanistic craft in order to develop appropriate tools to assess, evaluate and further develop projects and pedagogy in the humanities” (“Humanities”). See also “Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship” from *Imagining America*. Thanks go to Vialla Hartfeld-Mendez for her work here. The “cases” would frame many recommendations here in a simple protocol.

6. Existing measurement of art’s impact tends to be direct; e.g., questions of increased understanding or empathy. See Korza and Bacon 7.

7. See “Bogotá,” especially minutes 16–18.

8 Brandt writes on stigma as a major obstacle to public health. He observed, during a lecture for Rx: Arts for Global Health at Harvard College in fall 2018, that the arts are also the object of stigma, which limits the range of possible interventions in public health.

9. Thanks to Julia Battilana and Brittany Butler.

Works Cited


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