

# I. A. Richards's Failed MOOC

An odd, ruffled little man with oversized glasses sits behind a desk. Looking up from his papers into the camera, he invites us to consider what “sense of poetry” might mean. What “sense” might poetry make? How might we “sense” it? A feeling for poetry, we are assured, will be important to understanding it, although it is impossible, at the outset, to know exactly how. Through eight half-hour episodes, the burden of conveying both feeling and meaning falls heavily on the talking head’s distinctive Oxbridge voice. The program avails itself of few other resources to make poetry sensible.

Although he has a certain retro charm, “Professor and Lowell Television Lecturer at Harvard University” I. A. Richards could not be called a dynamic performer. He gets little help from the camera: its relentless medium close-up is interrupted only by the text of poems Richards reads at length, which scroll in white characters down a black screen. On rare but memorable occasions, Richards offers a chart, a device also employed in his classroom lectures at Harvard (the *Crimson* references his “famous diagrammatic slides” on [May 11, 1964.](#))



The program’s vococentrism is partly the point. In episode six, which discusses Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Richards explains that “Poetry, like music, is a sound art.” Hearing this, one cannot help but wonder whether *Sense of Poetry* might

have worked better in its radio rebroadcast, where Richards's memorable diction for favored terms like "beauty" would not have competed for attention with his unruly hair and cramped visage. No getting around it: however important the subject matter, this is not good television. Our admiration for public media notwithstanding, had we been living in Boston in 1957, we would almost certainly have turned the dial from *Sense of Poetry* on WGBH (Channel 2) to NBC's *Dragnet* on WBZ (Channel 4).

Produced by Lewis Barlow, who went on to have a long career in television, *Sense of Poetry* and its sequel *Wrath of Achilles* belong to a pioneering set of televised lectures featuring professors from a range of disciplines. Funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation, the lectures were organized by the Lowell Institute Cooperative Broadcasting Council, of which WGBH, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Harvard, MIT, and other major area colleges and universities were members. Richards's lectures represent a historical conjuncture, like ours, in which major philanthropic, cultural, and educational institutions united in efforts to use a young, but rapidly maturing medium to broaden educational access.

If today's digital humanities appear strikingly innovative, this is in part because we have forgotten their precedents. As we have noted repeatedly on this blog, a long history of humanities research and teaching across media presage more contemporary efforts. Thanks to generous funding from the Mellon Foundation designed to improve digital access to historical public television, we have had the opportunity to conduct archival research at WGBH-Boston on one largely unacknowledged precedent for the MOOC, namely, 1950s and 60s mass education efforts on TV.

In the WGBH archives, we were able to view televised lectures on psychology, science, and art aired in the same years as Richards's shows. Many of these shows will soon be available online. We found the science and art series notably more

televisual in style than Richards's poetry appreciation class. The art program *Open House*, for example, took advantage of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, which had been wired and lit for television broadcasting by 1956. In this show, the camera is free to guide the viewer's attention by roaming the surface of the artworks being described—a technique now termed the “Ken Burns effect.” Of all the shows we watched, *Of Science and Scientists* clearly had the biggest budget. Its episodes used stock footage to illustrate key points, employed a cast of scientists as opposed to a single lecturer, and staged dynamic lab experiments to punctuate the professors' explanations. In their formal conventions, the art and science shows struck us as extending traditions of educational filmmaking and, rough as these early programs were at times, anticipating PBS staples like *NOVA*.

Richards's programing in contrast looks like a televisual dead end, an immature or ill-conceived vision of what the medium could do for education. True, *Wrath of Achilles* (based on Richards's abridged translation of *The Iliad*) makes a concession to visuality by deploying Greek sculptures as “springboards for the imagination.” Yet little effort is made to dynamize the statues. They appear not as three dimensional objects but rather as still slides projected alongside Richards's talking head. Moreover, Richards reliance on handheld notes, which required him regularly to look down from the camera, differed notably from the practice evident on other shows, which used cue cards held offscreen. Although our research has yielded no conclusive explanation for this distinctly leaden visual style, it is easy to imagine that constraints of time, budget, and imagination conspired with Richards's principled commitment to the spoken word.

Despite all this, Richards earned a primetime slot, got not one but two programs on the air with WGBH, and in so doing furthered his longstanding ambition to use mass media to teach. His shows were kinescoped to allow recirculation on the

fledgling National Education Television network (ancestor to PBS), suggesting a broad possible audience. The information NET provided its distribution centers touts Richards's "background and insight," as well as his "dramatic flair" ("Individual Program Data"). That said, our search thus far has yielded no concrete evidence of showings outside Boston.

Notably, the NET bulletin also identifies Richards as "co-director of Language Research, Inc., producers of *French Through Television*." Although we haven't seen this show, WGBH was certainly involved in its production and aired 159 half-hour broadcasts in its first year of television broadcasting (September 1956 – August 1957).

Educational programs devoted to literature, and poetry specifically, were not uncommon at this time. In its first year, WGBH-TV devoted more than one-hundred and eleven program hours to literature, 8% of the total. "Linguistics" programs, like *French Through Television*, accounted for 7% of the total hours, and the most common type of programming, news, accounted for 23%. One-third of the literature programs that first year were produced by WGBH itself, and these included *From Shakespeare to Auden*, *The Poet Speaks*, and *Poetry in the Great Hall*. WGBH-FM had previously broadcast poetry programs, so presumably these shows developed strategies that worked on the radio. We didn't have the opportunity to watch the other poetry programs, however, and cannot appraise their similarity to Richards's televised appreciation lectures. Harvard provided no other "Lowell Television Lecturers" from its English Department, but this may have been because Ford Foundation support for faculty release time was limited and soon ran out (*Lowell Institute*).

What seem in retrospect to be failings of Richards's TV programs—their visual poverty, lack of imitators, and dubious distribution—only deepen our interest in the conundrum identified in [John's post](#) on Richards and elaborated in our article forthcoming in [differences](#).

**What sense to make of the fact that Richards derides mass media, often in hyperbolic terms, while also working seriously to produce it?**

John proposed that “Richards personified” a historical divide: “His very practice of working with and against Hollywood is what we presented in the Redbook’s wake, after which engagement with Hollywood was replaced by the set of oppositions (Unity/Difference, Humanities values/Commercial values) that [organized] the English department and its discontents from the mid-1940s onward.” Richards’s two WGBH series confirm that hypothesis. Moreover, from the broader field of view suggested by the Boston station’s collaboration with Harvard and other institutions, we can see just how overhyped the English-centered narrative has become. The terrain of humanist media experiment in the late 50s and 60s was so much richer than the story of comfortable New Critical hegemony suggests.

Richards’s career both affirms this hegemony and complicates it. Three decades before his work with WGBH, he established what would become a New Critical conceit. In *Practical Criticism* (1929), he argued that “mechanical inventions, with their social effects, and a too sudden diffusion of indigestible ideas, are disturbing throughout the world the whole order of human mentality, that our minds are, as it were, becoming of an inferior shape—thin, brittle and patchy, rather than controllable and coherent” (320). To this familiar problem—for what mass medium has failed to prompt comparable complaints that it stupefies and disturbs its users?—Richards offers a now-familiar solution: “Poetry, the unique, linguistic instrument by which our minds have ordered their thoughts, emotions, desires . . . in the past” offers “the most serviceable” means to right our thinking in the present (320).

A decade after his work for WGBH, Richards argued that TV was the best available means for building global education in

English. In *Design for Escape* (1968), he declared that “the most capable channels for such teaching are film, film-strip, tape, records, picture text, TV—modern media, extant or to be—computer-handled” (3). He cautioned, however, that a “new, severe, and most exacting puritanism of purpose” would be required “to keep the distracting temptations of these media at bay” and to counter TV’s “powerful sedative action” (20). Retrospectively, the WGBH shows do seem like they might have resulted from a “puritanism of purpose.” Perhaps the severity of Richards’s tone is best understood as an attempt to steer between the Scylla of distraction and the Charybdis of sedation.

The situation in 1968 is clearly complicated by the fact that Richards denounces the very medium he deems “most capable”: “Who in the habit of watching much current TV,” he asks, “or of studying typical devotees under the spell and the expectations it has taught them to bring to it, can feel any great upsurge of hope when TV is mentioned as a major instructional force?” (19). In phrasing his rhetorical question, Richards makes an interesting distinction between skeptics “in the habit of watching” television and the “typical devotees” enchanted by it. For the question to make sense, the group of skeptical viewers must include both himself and his readers—habitués familiar enough with the medium to lament its devotees’ educational prospects. So what was Richards watching in ‘68? Who knows? Perhaps his guilty pleasures included *Star Trek*, finishing its second season that spring, or the long-running *Gunsmoke*, which had been on since ‘55 and was completing its second season in color.

Regardless of what he was actually watching, Richards’s conviction that television would be good for us only if it could be something else recalls early-century efforts to develop film as an art form. Around the time Richards was inveighing against mechanical reproduction in *Practical Criticism*, imagist poet H.D. and her [Pool Group](#) collaborators

were at work on their landmark avant-garde feature film *Borderline* (1930). Like so many modernists of the interwar period, the Pool Group's hostility to mainstream commercial cinema inspired calls for greater attention to the distinct possibilities of different media forms. They did not mean to save poetry from film, but to explore the expressive possibilities of each medium through their work in the other. Similarly, although more devoted to instruction than poetic expression, educational filmmakers had by 1930 developed stylistically distinct films for classroom use as well as a system for distributing them (see Orgeron, et al. and Achland and Wasson). In contrast to these efforts to expand what media can be and do, Richards insists upon prophylaxis; either poetry counteracts mass media's mental derangement (1929) or, if media are to provide privileged pathways for literary education (1968), their naturally seductive tendencies must be controlled by a sternly literary super-ego.

Just as Richards's 1929 approach eschewed modernist engagement with mass media, his 1968 approach eschewed new waves of televisual experiment. One example of such experiment, the artists' collective cum think tank [Raindance Corporation](#) was founded 1969. Though its journal *Radical Software* and how-to manual *Guerrilla Television*, this organization promoted a host of activist video and television projects bridging educational institutions and community groups. Richards can perhaps be forgiven inattention to these upstarts. Their artistic, political, and scholarly predilections seem so very different from his own. Still, the example of *Practical Criticism* suggests that disinterest in media experiments outside poetry (or after Pound) characterized Richards's entire career. He seems supremely confident in his ability, first, to make sweeping pronouncements about audiovisual mass media and, second, to evaluate them primarily by assessing their capacity to transmit selected literary accomplishments of prior epochs.

Should we take up a position prepared for us by the

interminable cultural wars and caricature this Richards along with the sort of English departments that he helped found? It would be easy to do so. He plays the part of the literary traditionalist so well: the appeal to timeless truths transmitted from Plato through Keats to You, the Student; the insistence that the sense of great poems may be discovered simply by listening, really listening to them (in circumstances carefully controlled through professorial selection and guidance); and, of course, the conviction that civilization will fall if we don't all learn Homer.

In the seventh episode of *Wrath of Achilles*, Richards challenges viewers to appreciate that Homer has historical relevance beyond its stature as great poetry: "These nightmare horrors, however ancient *The Iliad* may be, are with and in us today." He cautions that we must remember what the epic tells us about who we "most deeply are" because "We'll help men in the future best if we don't forget ourselves." By long conditioned reflex, our inner voices cry out: "What do you mean 'we'? If it's abiding human themes you're after, why insist on *The Iliad* and not . . . fill in the blank, but Kurosawa's 1958 *The Hidden Fortress* comes to mind? And honestly, must 'we' search out in our depths truths manifest on the page?" Enough: we will never be Platonists, and these obsessions of Richards's are not what most concerns us. We are happy to affirm that poems have value and to agree that *The Iliad* is worth contemplating. We are eager to engage arguments about when, where, and how "the human" may be discovered. We just think poetry, as a form, no more nor less interesting than any other. No form of human expression simply transmits content; each *informs* it. Media make sense differently. We wish Richards could have discovered this and avoided tying himself up in knots, treating TV both as poetry's enemy and its instrument of salvation, if only the professors could learn to control the technology's contaminating power.

Thus we prefer a different Richards, a bona fide media



experimenter whom we also like to imagine as a closeted Trekkie. This Richards failed productively. By providing negative examples, his televised lectures helped clarify what educational programs would become.

For the next decade, Harvard and WGBH continued to collaborate, producing a variety of shows, among them for-credit course programming under the aegis of the Commission on Extension Courses, a cooperative open-enrollment effort led by Harvard but also involving the other institutions comprised in the Lowell Institute Cooperative Broadcasting Council. The first TV courses for college credit were offered in the fall of 1959: *European Imperialism*, taught by Harvard history professor Robert G. Albion and *A Study of Revolutions*, by Harvard history professor Crane Brinton. Students taking these courses for credit were "expected to attend occasional conferences and the final examination" (Commission 21-22). Throughout the 60s the Commission on Extension Courses continued to use television to expand the audience for its general education program. Brinton's course, for example, was offered on Polaris submarines as part of an arrangement with the U.S. Navy ("Atom Submarine's"). From this start Harvard and WGBH would build PACE (Program for Afloat College Education), a two-year degree that would record 6,000 registrations for forty courses by the time it ended in 1972 (Shinagel 223).

Meanwhile, WGBH became more interested in drawing larger audiences to its programs. Although the station shared with Harvard an investment in producing television that improved audiences while also attracting them, it was increasingly clear where the institutions' audiences and broader programming goals diverged. In order to preserve Channel 2 for shows addressing a more sizable audience, WGBH in 1966 began planning to move its K-12 educational programming, "The 21 inch Classroom," to its new UHF channel (Glick). Technical difficulties delayed Channel 44 until 1967 (*Lowell Institute*).

By the fall of 1968, however, WGBH was offering the Commission on Extension Courses four half-hour segments of prime time on the UHF channel at no cost in order to move the taped lectures off Channel 2. As WGBH General Manager Hartford N. Gunn, Jr. explained in a letter to Harvard's Reginald H. Phelps, Chairman of the Commission on Extension Courses, the station had already scheduled the cultural events show *On the Scene*, the demonstration program *Exploring the Crafts*, and the appreciation program *Meet the Arts* for 7:00-7:30 time slots, where Louis Lyons and Bob Baram's news programs had already seen ratings boosts of 50%. Lyons, curator of Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism from 1939 to his retirement from Harvard in 1964, had pioneered televised news criticism and commentary with his show the [\*Press and the People\*](#) in 1958.

Although much of the programming from the 1960s is not available, the documentation we have seen suggests that Harvard's for-credit shows continued the ultra-low-budget "taped lecture" approach, while WGBH's public affairs, how-to, and cultural interest shows developed the genres and styles that have grown familiar to viewers of public television. In November of 1969, the premiere of *Sesame Street* began a new chapter in televisual education. Supported by the two-year old Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Ford Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation, the well budgeted show drew upon a decade's worth of experience in TV education to build a new audience: preschoolers. Indicatively, it called upon Harvard psychology professor Gerald S. Lesser not as a talking head but rather as an advisor behind the scenes. Serendipitously, at some point in the 1970s (we haven't been able to determine exactly when) Richards's former producer Lewis Barlow worked on the show.

By negative example, we are arguing, *Sense of Poetry* and *Wrath of Achilles* assisted in the discovery of what U.S. public television would be. If Richards failed to set a New Critical approach to Romantic poetry on the path that lead from *Press*

and the People and Of Science and Scientists to the *The NewsHour*, *NOVA*, and *Sesame Street*, the fault may lie partly in his appropriation of a communications model developed by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver's 1949 *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. The introduction to the book *Wrath of Achilles* (1950), concludes with Richards's port of this influential approach, complete with a diagram. In the model, information has a "source" ("Homer" with all the uncertainty that entails), passes through a "transmitter" (Richards), takes form in a "signal" (the printed word), which necessarily involves the incorporation of "noise," before finding a "receiver" ("certain subsystems . . . in you"), and "destination" (your consciousness, a mystery comparable to "Homer"). Richards trusts poetry to get the message through, despite the attendant noise (25).

Richards's interest in this type of approach almost certainly precedes the framework appropriated from mid-century information theory. His pioneering 1920s survey research for *Practical Criticism*, for example, demonstrated that students weren't interpreting great literature in the ways their professors expected them to, and called for new (noise-canceling?) pedagogies to correct the problem. "That the one and only goal of all critical endeavours, of all interpretation, appreciation, exhortation, praise or abuse, is improvement in communication may seem an exaggeration. But in practice it is so," wrote Richards (11). In any case, the signal/noise metaphor stuck. He references this communications model and repeats his hope that the signal will be received in *Sense of Poetry* episode five, the second of two installments devoted to Andrew Marvell's "The Garden."

Theories of mediation reject the transmitter-as-encoder, receiver-as-decoder communications model, and instead emphasize the noisy "signal" as the source. Doing so makes it possible to investigate the social and semiotic relations different forms of mediation afford. From this point of view

(ours), it is a mistake to think of *The Iliad* as a “message” that has to defy noise-inducting encoding in order to be properly received. It is also a recipe for bad TV, since it requires one to treat that medium as an enemy, a vehicle whose properties must be resisted rather than exploited. In transposing his lecture style from classroom to television studio, Richards behaves as if trying to demediate his programming content, the better to distill its Platonic essence. Instead of making poetry a television sensation, he professed a more modest (but recognizably paradoxical) aim of preserving its sense.

It is impossible for us not to regret this approach, however much we admire Richards’s experimental efforts. His media innovation would be easier to champion if he were willing to compare television with the printed page rather presenting the former as a noisy channel for the latter. Because he cannot think in terms of the media experiments he conducts, his efforts have many of the same flaws we find in contemporary MOOCs, which treat the TED talk as if it were state of the art.

Which brings us to Richards’s successors. The 1970s witnessed a dramatic expansion of Harvard’s extension program. In 1971, it added a two-year Associate of Arts degree track with a more vocational orientation. With the retirement of Phelps in 1975, the enterprise was reorganized and a new Dean, Michael Shinagel, appointed. Harvard Extension withdrew from the Commission on Extension Courses consortium and began developing an array of graduate programs. Its distributed learning component went online as early as 1984, when the Teleteaching Project used Annenberg Foundation funding to develop a calculus course that could be offered by computer modem (Shinagel 177). It only makes sense, given their long-standing support of distance education, that Harvard and MIT would in 2012 announce edX, an effort to provide quality education for free worldwide over the internet. Many of the

questions being asked by participants in the MOOC debate have precedents in late 50s educational television. Professors, students, administrators, investors, and interested observers want to know: What kinds of classes will work in the form? How will it be possible to certify completion and grant credit, to preserve the brand of elite institutions while marketing increased access to them, to generate a sustainable funding model? These questions are pressing, but the answers often appear to miss the mark in much the same way that Richards's shows did. The lecture form, albeit with new and improved equivalents of "diagrammatic slides" has leapt from the classroom to the computer screen. It can be found on YouTube, iTunes U, Udacity, Coursera, and their competitors.

**MOOC innovation will not look like a hyperlinked version of the traditional classroom, nor will it resemble a PBS show.**

At some point in the not-too-distant future, mainstream "Massive Open Online Courses" will remind us of how thoroughly *NOVA*, *Sesame Street*, and *Guerrilla TV* reformulated "education" for the medium of television. These initiatives did not assume TV to be just another delivery system for the same old content. As a result, they ended up creating new types of educational experiences and new audiences to go along with them. To do this at scale required new institutions, like WGBH, the CPB, and the Children's Television Workshop. Professors certainly contributed to these institutions, and continue to participate in their activities today (one notes, for instance, that even humanists get a hearing on [The NewsHour](#)). Academics do not control what goes on at PBS, however, any more than they manage affairs at NBC. As such we can add public television to a list of institutions where humanists work collaboratively but without the kind of autonomy generally privileged in the humanities wing of the academy.

Although MOOCs have not yet arrived at their *Sesame Street* moment, experiments in developing the form are well underway.

Players like Udacity, edX, and Coursera have invested heavily in the format of short prerecorded lectures supplemented by quizzes. As we are writing in September 2013, the Udacity home page touts an [Intro to Physics](#) taught by Andy Brown, who, while lounging in what appears to be his backyard, entices students by promising they can “Study physics abroad in Europe – virtually! Learn the basics of physics on location in Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, by answering some of the discipline’s major questions from over the last 2000 years.” (As yet, Udacity offers no humanities courses. *Funders: we would like to announce our interest in developing an overview of global media culture and feel that extensive location shooting worldwide would really make this work. Please contact us for a proposal.*) Overall, the MOOC format seems to be figuring out how to reconcile television tropes such as location shooting, fun demos, and talking-head interviews with segments of prerecorded lectures and various approaches to algorithmically-mediated evaluation and teacher-student interaction.

Redesigning the classroom experience in ways that do not simply reproduce unidirectional models from educational film and television remains a challenge. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* [article](#), Georgia Tech professor Karen Head reports that in teaching a writing composition MOOC her team “found our pedagogical choices hindered by the course-delivery platform we were required to use . . . Too many decisions about platform functionality seem to be arbitrary, or made by people who may be excellent programmers but, I suspect, have never been teachers.” Head usefully calls attention to a central division of labor issue—who gets to say what the software will do?—while also foregrounding the kind of failure that might, like Richards’s programs, generate more innovation. “Despite the challenges,” Head writes, “being part of the early process of testing new pedagogical approaches was instructive” because it promises to abet efforts for “integrating new technologies into our traditional classes.”

Such integration will no doubt continue to occur (Computing and Engineering Dean Jonathan Tapson [predicts](#) that we are 10 years out from the moment when MOOCs actually vie with “traditional classes”), but humanists like Head also may find themselves well positioned to help develop entirely new forms of education, perhaps for types of audiences they have not yet imagined.

It will be difficult to talk intelligently about such innovation if commentators in and outside the academy think of digital media as (noisy) vectors for existing educational material and goals. The first lesson of Richards’s failure should be that media matters, and matters as a form, technology, and institution. The internet no more qualifies as a new delivery system for the same old content than television did. Both ought to encourage us to value experiments with form such as, to pick just one example, Alexandra Juhasz and Anne Balsamo’s feminist DOOC, or Distributed Open Collaborative Course (which has been covered [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

The second lesson of Richard’s failure, then, is that we must reject the story of the humanities that requires us to imagine the English department as the central pillar of general education. Although we are still accumulating evidence, it seems pretty clear that history and art history, for example, found it easier than literary criticism to contribute to educational television. In any case, there was much more going on in the humanities at mid-century than New Criticism and there was much more going on in humanities television than *The Wrath of Achilles*. So much more, in fact, that the predominance of English departments in internet-age accounts of the humanities can only appear self-serving.

Finally, the media savvy cannot afford to think in terms of academia vs. culture industries or to strongly oppose scholarship to journalistic or documentary work. Questions about who will decide what to do with MOOCs are vital and, at the moment, relatively open to a wide range of administrators,

faculty, students, entrepreneurs, and policy makers. Online ed seems to be in a moment more like television education's 1966 than its 1957. It is clear who many of the players in online education will be, but a counterpart to the Children's Television Workshop has not emerged. This is why educational television in the decade following Richards's WGBH shows holds so much interest. Despite his often hostile stance toward the medium, Richards clearly felt it was important to join a debate about TV's future. And yet his sweeping antagonism can only have placed him at a disadvantage when it came to working with the increasingly professionalised individuals who produced television. It is worth learning from this mistake. Conspiratorial collaboration, rather than "puritanism of purpose," strikes us as the appropriate attitude.

—Mark Cooper and John Marx

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