



## The Potential for Online PhD Programs in the Humanities

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### 1. Introduction

The Spellings Commission of the U.S. Department of Education reported in 2006 that, “Too many of our colleges and universities have not embraced opportunities to be entrepreneurial, from testing new methods of teaching and content delivery to meeting the increased demand for lifelong learning” [2]. However, little research, if any, has been done into the possibilities and effectiveness of an online PhD program in the humanities. In the United States, Texas Tech University offers an online Doctor of Philosophy in Technical Communication and Rhetoric (TCR); although, the program does require an annual two-week residency for doctoral students [3]. There are many facets of writing in the Texas Tech TCR degree that are similar to a traditional PhD program in English. However, the TCR program does not include any of the research and study in literature (drama, fiction, poetry) or literary criticism like a traditional English program.

Improving access through technology and innovation is a major initiative for improvement in Higher Education over the last few years. The successes and weaknesses of existing online doctoral level degree programs, like Texas Tech University, can be studied and developed to be comparable to the strengths and weaknesses of a traditional PhD program in the humanities. This data can be analyzed and used to develop online doctoral-level degree programs in the humanities.

Every institution in America has an English requirement of some kind for their students. Therefore, instructors teaching college English will eventually need a doctoral level degree in English either as professional development, for marketability, or to obtain tenure. There are many high school English teachers who could be seeking advancement by getting a PhD as well. However, with only 149 institutions offering a PhD in English, there is likely to be a large percentage of these potential degree seekers who are not able to attend English classes at one of those traditional PhD granting institutions. In terms of humanities programs around the world, there can be a problem attending classes in a traditional PhD program because of geography, teaching obligations, or family commitments. Online PhD programs in the humanities fields would certainly offer more access to more students.

### 2. Review of Literature

Many colleges and universities offer online doctoral level degree programs, and there is research supporting the need for increased use of technology in distance education graduate programs going back to studies like Rhonda Martin Eppers', “Coordination and Competition in Postsecondary Distance Education: A Comparative Case Study of Statewide Policies”. Eppers pointed out an issue in higher education that is still going on today when she stated:

Faculty and administrators, preserving their market niche or carving out new ones, search for the proper balance between face-to-face and technology-enhanced instruction. While institutions wrestle with the appropriate place and use of technology, state governments press them to accommodate more students at a lower cost [4].

There is relevant research with regards to online learning and teaching in various subjects, fields, and levels of education. Research has been done on the use of technology in teaching English Composition online in “full emersion pedagogy” at the undergraduate level [5]. One project joined graduate students from a writing course with graduate students from a reading course in virtual communities to discuss the processes of reading and writing [6]. The Chronicle of Higher Education published an article on a professor’s use of tablet computers in grading student writing in his English course at City College of New York [7]. A literature review was published on the “E-Mentoring Possibilities for Online Doctoral Students,” which will be quite useful to doctoral faculty [8].

In terms of the implementation of distance learning programs, a study was conducted on whether e-learning policy drives change in higher education [9]. In addition, Susan Peterson Thomas conducted a study for her dissertation entitled, “An Investigation of the Mission, Vision, Funding Strategies and Student Services for Distance Learning in Land Grant and State Universities,” which would provide guidance for the process and policies relevant to establishing distance education programs in the average land grant and state university for a doctoral program in the humanities[10].

Another aspect of online courses as compared to traditional courses is the quality of assessment that can be given to students in both formats. Ronald Yates and Ryan Beaudrie conducted a quantitative study on the quality of assessment in online math courses at the College of Southern Nevada. Their study found that there was no significant difference between traditional and online grades based on the assessment tools in the math courses, which would be a good basis for similar hypothesis and study in humanities programs [11].

The social interaction and student learning environment in an online course or program is also an area of concern and study. Yu-fen Yang, Hui-Chin Yeh, and Wing-Kwong Wong recently published a study, “The Influence of Social Interaction on Meaning Construction in a Virtual Community,” in which the researchers found that, the peer review process provides additional benefits compared to simply submitting a final draft [12]. Jean Darcy, Joan



Dupre, and Michele Cuomo published an article on an ePortfolio course program that is being used quite successfully to combine core courses like reading and writing with elective courses like nursing, education, and acting in a virtual learning community at Queensborough Community College in New York [13]. These articles further support the success of collaboration between students and faculty in an online course or program, particularly in terms of reading and writing skills.

Trevor Heath conducted a quantitative study on supervision in PhD programs in order to analyze the graduate students' perspective [14]. Then in 2007, Tricia Vilkinas conducted a similar study from the faculty perspective in her, "An Exploratory Study of the Supervision of Ph.D./Research Students' Theses" [15]. These reports give perspectives from both sides of the student-faculty relationship in a PhD program that could help in developing best practices and recommendations for supervisory relationships in an online PhD program in any of the humanities fields.

### 3. Tools for Online PhD's in the Humanities

There are online PhD programs in business, education, health and human services, and public administration. The tools exist for successful online PhD programs in the humanities fields. Steve Jobs stated, "Technology alone is not enough...It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that make our hearts sing" [16]. The following are some of the tools available for a successful online PhD program in the humanities:

- Computers and Internet Connection.
- Digital Humanities
- iPad or other tablet computers.
- iBooks, iTunes, Google Books, Amazon, pdf files.
- PowerPoint
- Video Conferencing / Lectures
- Audio Files
- Asynchronous Discussion
- Email

On January 19, 2012, Apple, Inc. launched iBooks 2, iBooks Author, and iTunes U applications to complement iBooks. The iBooks 2 app allows students to download interactive textbooks. The iBooks Author app allows publishers and writers to make their books available to users in the iBookstore [17]. The iTunes U allows students to open and download course materials, textbooks, presentations, and lectures [18].

In the United States, State Senator Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) proposed that California be the first state to create an open-access, digital library providing free online textbooks [19]. Google's plan to scan millions of copies of books was stopped by a federal judge, but that doesn't mean the expansion of digital libraries will stop. Entire libraries are becoming available nearly entirely online, as a case in point, "2 million volumes of Stanford's 8.5 million volume library have already been scanned" [20].

### 4. Conclusion

We need more access to modern learning in the humanities using technology. As Dr. Rugg, Director of the Digital Humanities at UCLA explained, "this will help reinvigorate the message and bring the humanities into the 'real world'" [21]. The humanities are just as important now as they ever have been in the past. Business, education, and politics are all based on humanistic views. Rugg, goes on to explain, "It is definitely possible to have an online PhD Program in the humanities or the Digital Humanities. There would just need to be plenty of organization" [22].

This can be accomplished with the use of online course platforms, like Blackboard, eCollege, and Angel, which are already being used from undergraduate to doctoral levels in other fields. Research and course materials are available to faculty and students in the humanities through various sources like online/digital libraries, databases, museum collections, etc. There is human interaction online, leadership, tech support, and discussion, in addition to participation from students across the country and worldwide through synchronous and asynchronous lectures and discussion.

Online PhD programs in the humanities offers solutions to many graduate students who are qualified to advance their studies and their careers through doctoral course work in the humanities. Greater access to more graduate students in the humanities through innovation and technology is possible. Various systems of course delivery, student-faculty communication, electronic texts, video, and other multi-media, can be used in a completely online doctoral-level degree program in the humanities.

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