

Literary Technofiles: Replacing Piers of the Past with Bridges to the Future

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Sporting a confident hipster swagger and a friendly smile, Tom Keegan began his plenary address with two infrastructural metaphors: a pier and a bridge. Traditional genres such as the essay, the dissertation, and the monograph are all piers—that is, in walking their length one gains valuable new perspective. Piers can offer breathtaking views. They are time-honored because “they work,” Keegan says. But they have served their purpose; their time is done. Piers are out; bridges are in.

For every pier of academic knowledge production Keegan offers a fresher, sexier, and more technologically innovative bridge to replace it. To move beyond the limited pier-like function of assigning students to write essays Keegan proudly puts forth Archives Alive!—an undergraduate research assignment Keegan and Iowa Rhetoric instructor Matt Gilchrist developed with digital librarians as a result of their “boredom with the essay.” The Archives Alive! assignment asks students to utilize 21st century digital video technology to present early 20th century letters they’ve transcribed and then rhetorically analyzed to their peers and an online audience. For an instructor coming off grading heaps of end-of-semester freshman essays, it’s as attractive as a full night’s sleep, or at least a Netflix binge. In mixing anecdotal evidence of success with accolades for his collaborators, Keegan comes just short of abandoning the essay entirely—at least as a pedagogical tool.

The dissertation—a format that proudly perpetuates “the myth of the singular intellect,” which Keegan accuses the English department in particular of “clinging most ardently to”—can be supplanted by projects like Amanda Visconti’s (Purdue University) Infinite Ulysses. Visconti’s doctoral research resulted in an accessible and engaging website, still in beta, that will allow the public to annotate Joyce’s famous novel. As a currently dissertating PhD student myself, the idea of an

interactive multimedia project is no doubt enticing when I consider the hundreds of pages of blank manuscript glaring at me, like a preemptively disappointed dad waiting in vain for his teen son to clean his room. Yet, for those less technologically inclined—or altogether inept—Keegan admits that a digital capstone project (a still ambiguous proposition) is likely far scarier than writing the traditional manuscript that few beyond one’s committee will ever read. There is security in knowing one’s potential failures are safeguarded from premature public criticism. Keegan is right when he says, “if it’s going to go public it needs to look good,” but he neglects (perhaps intentionally so) to mention the intended audience of such scholarship almost entirely. Online accessibility is one thing; reader engagement is another.

In his last critique of traditional forms of scholarly projects, Keegan presents the opportunities offered by the Iowa library’s recent Digital Scholarship & Publishing Studio—aka “the Studio”—as the bridge-like counter to the pier-like monograph. The Studio oversees the Iowa Digital Library, Iowa Research Online, DIY History, and faculty and graduate student Digital Editions. It has all the right buzzwords and I can personally attest to its great utility as a pedagogical resource, but The Studio’s relevance to busy grad students was perhaps diluted by the wave of Studio names and places and projects detailed in Keegan’s description.

As an Iowa PhD himself, Keegan certainly knows his audience, but has he forgotten their plight? His deliberate dismissal of the essay, the dissertation, and the monograph altogether is part of his strategic attack on what he sees as an outdated and stubborn discipline—the English department is but a synecdoche for a model of academic knowledge, work Keegan sees no longer viable for the 21st century academic enterprise. Using his fascination with the history of American literature and his penchant for poking goodhearted fun at undergraduate egos, Keegan aimed to charm his listeners into rejecting their fate—piers are ultimately planks no one in the academy should be forced to walk. “I invite you to consider how your work could connect with other faculty” Keegan encouraged, preparing to close. “Be willing to pursue the idea that your work could take on another format...you’re poised to do that,” he finished.

For style points Keegan wins big. He is clever, witty, and eloquent as he balances smart teaching tips with fresh ideas. On argument he is persuasive, though not novel. His message not only invokes the contemporary popularity of infrastructure studies and the turn toward phenomenology and materiality, it also speaks to the rise of the digital humanities and the University’s investment in this ubiquitous field. Keegan is more or less securing validation for his new position as the head of The Studio—and his years as a Rhetoric instructor do him well on this front.

What Keegan often forgets, however, is the tenuous position many of his audience members find themselves in. Caught between the demands of TA duties and graduate seminars, the PhD students Keegan aims to persuade are, I believe, unfortunately unconvinced or even uninterested, despite the ease with which he speaks about the shift from piers to bridges—as if architectural achievements happen overnight. After all, a dissertation was never intended to transform a civilization’s infrastructure but to create another capable welder. And yet, Keegan’s lecture

gestures toward a future that promises a place for literature geeks within a neo-liberal academy obsessed with new technology as its solution for maintaining relevance. Many of us fear such a future, fighting for change in the political arena while overlooking how our scholarship might contribute to the cause. For Keegan, the bridge offers a future in which there is promise, if not at least a hope for survival. If nothing else, we all ought to be more conscious of the structures to which our humble welding jobs contribute.