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Literary Studies and the Formation of Good Judgment

As a person who teaches literature and took over as director of a writing center just this last year, I've spent a lot of time thinking about how AI is changing my professional identity. Unlike many people, I don't think LLMs spell disaster for the teaching of writing or literature. They may even open conditions for renewed seriousness about the value and purpose of the humanities. The humanities form capacities that prove hard to mechanize or automate: value deliberation, deference to particular situations, and normative reflection. Together, these make up what I want to call good judgment. As machine learning transforms whole sectors of the economy, good judgment is at a premium. Higher education has been one of the places where good judgment gets formed, where people learn to weigh evidence and respond to those affected by their decisions. How higher education trains and transmits good judgment is a pressing question. How LLMs might disrupt or support that work is one that many will attempt to answer in the years ahead. In my view, literary studies should be central to that conversation because it is a discipline with pedagogical methods and interpretive tools well suited to reckoning with the complex cultural and cognitive impacts of LLMs and future AI systems.

The primary threat to the formation of good judgment I see on campus today precedes the rise of AI. Costs are rising. The messaging about the purpose of college keeps shifting. For decades, higher education has been advertised in terms of discrete skills and market-ready credentials. Many students arrive with a transactional view of their education and unrealistic

assumptions about what a degree will do for them. That mindset leads students to use LLMs to speed-run the very processes designed to prepare them for professional life. Professional expertise is not stored in documents and procedures. It is formed through practice, apprenticeship, correction, and the kind of accountability the classroom can supply. The mixed messages around AI on campus and the inflated claims of advocates and critics are amplifying long-standing problems in higher education.

When a student submits an LLM-generated draft without having wrestled with the process, the conditions for forming good judgment have been bypassed. A generation encouraged to offload that work to these interfaces may arrive at professional life looking competent because the outputs look competent. But the underlying capacity to evaluate, revise, and take responsibility never gets built. This worry hits close to home. Using LLMs well demands exactly the sensitivity to language, genre, value, and context that I am professionally responsible for teaching. The debate in my field about AI is understandably heated, but it too often trades on hyperbole and speed, pushing participants into metaphysical claims that foreclose more useful conversations.

Alison Gopnik and her collaborators have offered a way out of this impasse. They argue that the standard debate, the one about whether large language models really think or understand, is asking the wrong question.[1] These tools are better understood, she argues, as a

[1]Henry Farrell, Alison Gopnik, Cosma Shalizi, and James Evans, "Large AI Models Are Cultural and Social Technologies," *Science* 387.6739 (2025): 1153–56. See also Eunice Yiu, Eliza Kosoy, and Alison Gopnik, "Transmission Versus Truth, Imitation Versus Innovation: What Children Can Do That Large Language and Language-and-Vision Models Cannot (Yet)," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 19.5 (2024): 874–92. Cosma Shalizi, "Aware of All Internet Traditions: Generative Models as Information Retrieval and Interpolation," talk delivered at Cultural AI: An Emerging Field, NYU, March 2026. Shalizi's "stored intellect" draws on Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect* (Harper, 1959).

new kind of cultural technology, like writing, print, markets, and libraries. But they differ from earlier cultural technologies in one crucial way. What they preserve of our cultural traditions — our accumulated conventions of writing and thinking — is statistical: patterns of a corpus larger than any human reader could touch, compressed at speed into weights. As Cosma Shalizi has argued, that kind of compression cannot hold the difference between convention and judgment, because it has no principled grasp of what is relevant to a particular case. Such technologies don't just transmit information. They change how transmission happens. Print didn't just copy manuscripts. It restructured who had access to knowledge, and on what terms. New professions, institutions, and legal frameworks developed over centuries in response to what print made possible and what it disrupted.

My own discipline is a case in point. Literary studies professionalized in the mid-twentieth century in response to mass print culture and a transformed American university. Its founders organized to teach the interpretive capacities that mass access to texts required but did not automatically produce.[2] Close reading, the practice that defined the field, brought first-generation students into a tradition of critical literacy. New technologies always change the conditions under which good judgment is transmitted, and it falls to living communities of experts to take responsibility for what comes next. These tools will be no exception. For those of us in higher education, that work will require interdisciplinary cooperation, openness to student input, and a lot of good judgment.

[2] I.A. Richards, Brooks, and Guillory.

Ask a large language model for an essay about a theme in a sonnet, or a Marxist analysis of Death Note, and you will get one. Thesis, citations, and formulas all in place. Whether what the model produced is any good is another matter. That judgment is not transmitted by the model. Good judgment is formed in sustained and challenging conversations. In the literature classroom, this happens by reading texts together, slowly. The instructor models careful attention to what the text actually says, and to what the conversation is doing as it unfolds. The text surfaces questions; the conversations in the room produce ideas no one could have arrived at alone. Over time, the individual student develops the capacities good judgment requires: a sense of the limits of any single point of view, a habit of testing readings against the text and against other readers, and a feel for how easily we can blow past the ambiguities and complexities of language. When a teacher assigns an interpretive essay, the point is not the product. It is the work of learning to reflectively draw on that conversation in an analysis of a text or artifact. The essay isn't dead. But the future doesn't belong to Bluebook exams either.

This year, AI has sharpened my sense of how relevant my discipline is to what's coming. It has also pushed me into conversations with colleagues about reimagining the literary studies classroom as a laboratory: interactive, experimental, oriented toward the formation of good judgment. We've been asking how assignment design and digital tools can develop that capacity rather than displace it. We've been rethinking writing as a tool of discovery rather than an exercise in convention. And we have been adapting close reading itself, so it can continue to flourish under new and changing conditions.

When I step into the classroom, I want my students to understand that their professional lives won't be secured by mechanical aptitude or credentials. They will need the kind of good judgment we have been talking about: the capacity to take responsibility, to imagine far-reaching consequences, and to improvise under pressure. These capacities cannot be automated. They develop in a community of inquiry. What I'm trying to give my students, and students who visit the writing center, is a space that offers some distance from the demands for efficiency and optimization. Much of my work now goes to facilitating slow, collaborative close reading of literature and art, a practice that keeps language in contact with experience and forms the disposition to participate in a community that revises its own understanding through argument and mutual respect. I take it that that is what we are doing here tonight.