“Go For Broke”: Teaching in an Enshittified Age

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When James Baldwin spoke to teachers and told them they must be prepared to “go for broke” in 1963, he recognized that “the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty” would be met with “the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance” (Baldwin, 42).

The classrooms we teach in are radically different than the classrooms we were trained to teach in. Technological “innovations” like learning management systems, artificial intelligence, and the explosion in popularity of online instruction creates dynamics and challenges that can feel unrecognizable from the universities in which we were educated. Simultaneously, teaching loads and class sizes are higher than ever, and a number of states have introduced bills that attempt to repress core elements of our disciplines, hoping to scare instructors into shying away from teaching anything even tangentially related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We all work at teaching institutions: community colleges and regional comprehensive universities. We don’t claim to have solutions to the myriad challenges facing higher education in 2025, but below are some observations and techniques we hope will help instructors navigate our present age of enshittification.

The term "enshittification," coined by writer Cory Doctorow, describes a mostly intentional effort to overwhelm systems with algorithmic nonsense and put profit-driven innovation ahead of user satisfaction. "Going for broke" also means, then, not just risking it all, but literally confronting decaying platforms and broken systems–or, the enshittification of online services, which are increasingly part of our academic lives. This phenomenon has ramifications not just for the technologies that structure our communication and classrooms but for the emotional experience of navigating the conditions these technologies produce.

The first section of our piece reflects on attempts to curb AI-use in a writing classroom through discussions of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." The following section explores the challenges and benefits of asynchronous online education. Our final section is most optimistic about the possibilities of media technologies, detailing strategies for teaching complex histories through digital storytelling.

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The cadaverous copyist of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" was proposed and adopted as a symbol for Occupy Wall-Street in 2011. There has yet to emerge a similarly cohesive protest in the United States against techno-oligarchs (even in 2011, one writer for Forbes asked, albeit partly in bad faith, why the protesters weren't occupying Sillicon Valley instead)[1]. Maybe sit-in protest feels unmatched for what Ed Zitron has described as the "Rot Economy," a "noxious growth-at-all-costs mindset" and practice of overvaluation that has, for example, destroyed Google search and inspired our institutions of higher education to hastily make deals with tech companies[2].

Up against an enemy that "pokes and prods and twists millions of little parts of your life," Bartleby has helped my students and I think about techno-corporate education and the hype surrounding generative AI -- especially in relation to how this trend will impact labor. "Let Melville's Bartleby provide the brat slogan of our license to resist," writes Melanie Dusseau in her rousing Inside Higher Ed essay about AI. However, in his own decay over time, his mechanical nature, his iterative refrain, does Bartleby himself not seem more like a Large Language Machine himself? At other times, my students are Bartleby, preferring not to do anything at all, especially not write.

In my Composition II classes this year (in-person) and last year (fully asynchronous online) at the community college where I teach, we started the semester

with Daniel Orozco's short story "Orientation" (2011), a droll series of directions given to a new employee on their first day that oscillate from mundane to violent. Then, we investigated the evergreen "nobody wants to work anymore" discourse, beginning with a video of Kim Kardashian imploring women to "get your fucking ass up and work." We watched the pro-union movie *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018), in which the main character gets hired at a call center and learns to use his "white voice" to climb the corporate ladder. Finally, we read Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* (2016), about an unmarried Japanese woman who prefers nothing but the mechanical pleasures of working her unambitious job.

But I built this unit around Bartleby, the ultimate hero of "nobody wants to work anymore" and its associate, "the students can't x anymore." I also wanted to talk to my students about copies and originals, about automatons, about AI. Like the desperate narrator of Melville's story, many writing instructors have, in the past couple years, overhauled assignments, required more in-class writing, and led frank classroom conversations to encourage AI literacy and/or rejection. And? "It did not matter. The students still used it," admits Victoria Livingstone, who wrote about quitting teaching because of ChatGPT.

So, for their first paper, I required students to use ChatGPT to help them brainstorm, outline, and edit. The idea was one many others have had: require that students use an LLM in the writing process but ask them to do so with full transparency. Students submitted the transcripts of their conversations with ChatGPT after I repeatedly reminded them that they were free to pick and choose from the chatbot's suggestions–or to even reject them wholesale. Admittedly, the assignment felt somewhat like a negotiation, even a surrender or betrayal, and not a form of resistance.

My students were also divided this semester in their reactions to using this tool. In two back-to-back submissions, one student said ChatGPT could be a labor-saving machine while another felt exhausted by having to question and verify its output. Ultimately, then, our conversations surrounding generative AI, especially couched within stories of paid labor and student labor, have been inspiring, frustrating, disappointing, and hopeful. It is, thus, tempting to again prop up Bartleby as the poster-child for the humanities and the Human against a machine promising "PhD-level" human intelligence yet threatening to turn us into "shells of human beings" (as one of my bright and pessimistic students put it)[3].

But Lee Edelman's criticism of corporate-sponsored Humanities and any desire

to universalize the "unaccountable" Bartleby remains a crucial caution. Edelman interprets the narrator's final burst of feeling, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Humanity!" as I typically have for my students: as an attempt to show how "Bartleby's singular impenetrability can speak to a universal condition." But this year, another student argued differently: Melville's narrator was not *equating* Bartleby and Humanity, he was lamenting what Humanity had done to the "wasted" scrivener[4]. As a clear analogy for the student, for the instructor, for the power of Humanities education, or for the tech we struggle against, Bartleby does not quite match.

After students also expressed fear of AI taking over or dictating jobs (I told them about how it may likely be used as a threat against workers' wages and rights), we read about and discussed the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle: "The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it." And I privately thought about the additional work instructors like Livingstone, myself, and others have done in the past few years to *avoid* playing the role of a combative detective–or the role of an overworked scrivener who finds it objectionable that it is part of his job "to verify the accuracy of his copy, word by word."[5]

Erica Stevens

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Last year, one of my MA students asked if I knew of any reputable PhD programs that were fully online. Most of the classes in our MA program are offered only online, as the majority of our grad students teach full-time at local high schools or community colleges. I teach in rural Alabama where there are exactly two PhD programs in literary studies in the state, neither of which are particularly close to my campus or the small town in which my student lives and works. I understand *why* PhD programs in literature need to be in person, but I wished I had a better answer for her. In this section, I discuss how I teach literature in this primarily online modality at the graduate level.

Online education has served nontraditional student populations for decades. Students in rural areas especially benefit from online graduate programs, as they would otherwise not have access to these degree programs due to geographical or financial constraints, full-time jobs, or caretaking responsibilities. I remember my own professors raising their eyebrows when I––a single, childless person responsible only for myself–– took summer jobs or cobbled together part

time work atop my studies instead of devoting uninterrupted time and attention to my MA then my PhD. It would have been ideal to have been a full-time student, but I was not in a position to afford that lifestyle, and neither are my students.

There are numerous philosophical questions about what the goal of a graduate degree in literature should be. Is rigor only possible if we sit together around a seminar table? Who deserves access to a graduate education, and shouldn't it be everyone who wants one and is able to meet the standards of the work it requires? Most of my students are educators, and we share resources and talk about how they might integrate what we are studying into their own classrooms. Thus, allowing broad access to a high-quality education has an immediate and far-reaching impact at all levels of education.

Last winter, I mentioned in a Q&A at an academic conference that I was teaching an asynchronous graduate class that semester and the audience audibly groaned. It is hard to mimic the rich intellectual exchange of reading, thinking, and talking through challenging texts in a fully virtual environment. If we prioritized pedagogical effectiveness above all else, would these modalities even exist? Selfishly, I used to wish they didn't––I graduated in 2018 and was thrust into the chaos of emergency online teaching in the pandemic with the rest of the profession––but my current position emphasized how this flexibility extends access to populations for whom obtaining an education is much more challenging. My students are smart, open-minded, excited, and insightful, should they be denied this opportunity simply because they can't quit their jobs, leave their families, move, and earn $15,000/year for the next 5-10 years of their lives?

The emotional rush I get from our exchanges in an online course is paced differently than in a traditional classroom. I enjoy recording my lessons at the beginning of the week––providing context, posing guiding questions, identifying passages I would like my students to analyze as they read, and providing prompts for the video response they must submit by Sunday at 11:59PM. Then I wait. I teach my in-person classes. Towards the end of the week, the pace picks up again as everyone posts video responses to my prompts and one another. Teaching remains rewarding in a way that largely eluded me when I was reading discussion board posts alone, and we still create knowledge together in a dynamic and personal way even if the tempo is different than a synchronous classroom.

I used to use Flip (formerly Flipgrid) to facilitate asynchronous class discussions and it worked beautifully. The interface was easy to use, and students would be able to see one another's faces, communicate their enthusiasm or chagrin, and

talk amongst themselves with a temporal lag but in a modality that was much more emotionally fulfilling than the cold isolation of mere discussion board posts. Microsoft bought and killed Flip last summer a couple of days before my survey class was scheduled to begin, forcing me to restructure the entire course in a matter of hours. Microsoft suggested I "pivot to Teams," a program fully unequipped for the task at hand. This was a keen reminder that edtech is a business and that facilitating effective pedagogy is not their primary commitment. We are urged to integrate proprietary tools and platforms into our classes, but corporations will abruptly pull the plug on the moment they cease to be profitable. I now have students record their video responses in Canvas Studio and embed the recordings in a traditional discussion board. It's clunkier, but it works.

Finally, there are actual benefits to online instruction unavailable in a traditional classroom. I give my students a basic template to structure their video responses, requiring an introduction and conclusion as well as direct textual evidence with explanations of how the quotations they selected support their larger claims. I've toyed with time limits as well, training students to articulate and support their claims quickly. Who among us has not bloviated at length in a graduate seminar or suffered as one of your peers dominated the class discussion with rambling observations that never seemed to go anywhere? The intentionality of recording a response requires planning, focus, and brevity, and all students are afforded the exact same amount of time to share their thoughts. These are useful skills both for thinking and speaking that create a more democratic environment.

I will admit that I did not think critically about what an online MA would look like before I started teaching in such a program. It turns out that it is possible to provide intellectually enriching educational experiences in a fully asynchronous, online environment, and utilizing these modalities make graduate education accessible to students who could not have otherwise obtained it. My methods are not exceptionally novel, but my hope is that literary scholars can continue to share ways we navigate the realities of what our classrooms actually look like today.

Ashley Rattner

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In his 1963 talk, James Baldwin encouraged educators to rethink the purpose of education and consider how to use intentional pedagogy to help prepare future

generations. He states, “[A]ny citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to ‘go for broke.’” (Baldwin, 42). While the surge of educational gag orders persists, Baldwin’s charge for how educators should proceed continues to resonate, informing my Survey of early African American Literature course.

Inspired by the Following Harriet podcast[6], I designed a collaborative assignment for which students were tasked to create a concept for a podcast series and curate one episode where they would participate in critical conversations that focused listeners’ understanding of the literature we studied from the colonial era through the Harlem Renaissance.

Each podcast project included the following:

- 30 second trailer that promotes their podcast series about a theme studied in this class.
- concept for podcast series that includes a 1-2 sentence blurb about the series and maps out what the focus of the other episodes are by composing a title and a 1-2 sentence description of each episode.
- 8-minute episode that uses one primary text as inspiration to engage the ways three secondary sources explore critical issues about a theme the group selected.

To culminate the project, we had a launch party at which each group pitched their podcast series and debuted their trailer.

I chose podcasts because I wanted to deviate from the traditional research paper and provide a platform for students to not only situate their ideas as part of an ongoing conversation but also create an opportunity for them to reflect on and articulate their individual learning throughout the course of semester.

As students began to brainstorm podcast ideas, they realized that there were key commonalities between the podcast and traditional research essay. Like the research essay, students had to create an argument and present evidence to support their reasoning, while considering the larger significance of their argument.

Challenges students encountered comprised creating an aesthetic that sparked interest as well as maintaining listeners’ attention. Consequently, as they planned, the question students pondered was how should they write for the ear

and not the eye?

To structure their podcasts and meet the aforementioned challenge, students were required to first prepare the audience for what they would expect in the episode. Second, they were instructed to communicate the podcast's argument early on. Then, they had to determine how they would present evidence to support their argument: how would they help their audience understand their reasoning and persuade listeners to agree with them? Lastly, students concluded their podcasts by reiterating why their argument matters: which choices will the audience need to make in the future that might be influenced by the podcast's argument?

One group's podcast series, *The Try Ed*, was intended for K-12 English and Language Arts teachers and the concept involved student-teacher hosts in each episode responding to questions submitted to the forum, ranging from "literature recommendations to classroom management and pedagogy," to broadly characterize the student projects.

In their trailer to generate buzz for the podcast series, the hosts sought to create an aesthetic to mirror the school context through sound effects of the school bell and distinct vernacular (e.g., "class is in session" and "don't be tardy"). In their episode, the hosts shared insights of how "The Passing of Grandison" by Charles Chesnutt might be accessible in introducing discussions about race. They suggested that because Chesnutt's short story is originally intended to appeal to a white readership and raise awareness about the fluidity of social location, it would be a great option to teach in rural, predominately white school settings due to "its literary complexity, dramatic irony, and [resonance] to social issues." To develop their argument, they discussed teaching strategies for introducing the text by suggesting that educators employ The Socratic Seminar method and "foster an atmosphere of respect and open mindedness for heavier, tough topics." Ultimately, the hosts underscored the text's relevance to today's racial dynamics, concluding that "The Passing of Grandison" is "an unpredictable destabilizing text that [invites readers] to think about not only race, code switching, and microaggressions, [but also] varied forms of passing, in an inclusive and respectful way."

As noted in this example, this assignment encouraged students to do the difficult work of translating and navigating dense and complicated concepts into a conversational and easily comprehensible form for their intended audiences.

Though there are apparent constraints around our academic freedoms as pro-

fessors, I aim to find ways to still "go for broke" by employing innovative strategies for teaching African American literature in diverse educational contexts like the classrooms I occupy in rural Alabama (Baldwin, 42). As a Black professor in a predominately white space, I recognize how my visible difference can be affirming for some students yet unsettling for others. Nonetheless, it is important that we, as educators, take creative risks and use intentional pedagogy that encourages "students to be … active participants, not passive consumer[s]" (hooks, 14). It is my hope that through assignments like the podcast project, I can not only learn from my students as much as they learn from me but also create a safe space for students to engage in critical conversations, preparing students to be globally informed citizens and professionals.

Julia Tigner

ENDNOTES

[1] PauseAI may be currently the most visible and active movement, with its origin in The Netherlands.

[2] One of the two bachelor's degrees now offered at Houston Community College is in Artificial Intelligence & Robotics. The degree has only been possible through investment and curriculum in part developed by major tech companies. The degree, as the HCC website states, "includes courses developed by large companies such as Nvidia, AWS, Intel, Apple, and IBM to ensure students obtain the knowledge and finest tools available in most aspects of applied artificial intelligence." With only five bachelor's programs permitted for a junior or community college in Texas, the embrace of AI is quick but not surprising, as the California University System has partnered with OpenAI with the belief in "equitable access" at the cost of $17 million.

[3] Thank you, Lorelei Allysza Frigillana.

[4] Thank you, Kaitlyn Sanchez.

[5] Gilles Deleuze points out that the first time Bartleby "prefers not to" occurs when the narrator breaks his "pact" and asks Bartleby to emerge from his retreat, not to copy or write, but to "verify."

[6] *Following Harriet* (2019) examines the full portrait of Harriet Tubman's life beyond popular historical representations and explores her work as a spy, nurse,

and more. I found this series to be a good model to share with students for curating their podcast project, in particular in producing their trailers and episodes.

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Dr. Julia Tigner is an Assistant Professor of English at Jacksonville State University where she specializes in contemporary African American literature. Her scholarship appesrs in *Outside In: Voices from the Margins* (2018), and *J19*. Her current research explores how Black women writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century use liminality as a trope to negotiate marginal spaces and live at the intersection of race and gender.

CHICAGO CITATION

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