Public Humanities (2025), 1, e119, 1–14
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.33

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Teaching an Introduction to Public Humanities: A Pedagogical Experiment

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(Received 07 August 2024; revised 19 February 2025; accepted 10 March 2025)

Abstract

In the spring of 2024, I taught an *Introduction to Public Humanities* course at Yale University, with the support of a teaching fellow. My primary aim was to expand student understanding of how the humanities could be practiced beyond the walls of the university for a wider public. However, to accomplish this goal, we first needed to situate the more abstract concepts of the "public" and the "humanities" historically and conceptually. This stimulated us to divide the course into three parts. The first, *The Humanities and Publics in Context*, focused on the history of the humanities within the broader American discourse. The second part, *Humanities in Public Life*, brought guest speakers from various areas of the program's concentrations: *Place and Space, History and the Public, Museums and Collections, Public Writing, Documentary Studies, Arts Research, and Digital Humanities.* Finally, the third part, *Public Humanities: Making It as We Do It*, provided students the opportunity to engage directly with the public humanities through hands-on projects, allowing them to put their learning into action. This paper captures the lessons we learned, the challenges we encountered, and the work we created throughout the course. My hope in sharing this process is that it can serve as a useful resource for others looking to explore or develop their own public humanities projects.

Keywords: design thinking; digital humanities; pedagogy; public humanities; sociology

1. Designing an introductory course on public humanities

"What is a public?" is a fundamental question. Yet, when teaching an introductory course on public humanities, answers to this question cannot be taken for granted. This makes teaching *Introduction to Public Humanities* a transformative experience. For example, a course on physics does not need to ask, "What is a force?" Similarly, a course on history need not question what time is, nor does a course on sociology need to define what is meant by "social." Like physics, history, and sociology, most college courses can proceed with their subject matter without examining these foundational concepts. However, teaching *Introduction to Public Humanities* requires us to pause and reflect: What is public humanities? What is the relationship between the public (or a public) and the humanities? And, if such a practice exists, what does it mean to be a public humanist?

These were the kinds of questions that brought our teaching fellow, Estelle Guéville, and I together in the fall of 2023 to discuss our vision for the upcoming term. Earlier that fall, the

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directors of the Public Humanities Program at Yale, Matt Jacobson and Karin Roffman, had asked if I would be interested in teaching the course again.[1] Having worked outside of academia for over a year, I was excited to share what I had learned. Estelle, a PhD candidate in Medieval Studies, had also recently completed the Public Humanities Program and offered to be the teaching fellow for the term. We both have non-academic experience: she has worked in museums in Paris and the Gulf before her graduate studies, and I, on the other hand, am a sociologist and a design researcher. When I am not teaching or writing, I apply my public humanities training to help philanthropic, private, and governmental organizations design services in health, education, environment, and equity. We both brought not only unique skills and a global perspective to the class but also hindsight and foresight, grounded in our experiences navigating life both within and outside academia.

As the snow replaced the fall leaves on the ground, of the many things we discussed, some stood out more prominently: first, the need to provide context for the course so that student inquiries, including projects, would be situated within the surrounding dialogues on the significance of the humanities, its connection to the idea of a public, our assumptions about the public, and the role of the university; second, the anxiety that plagued students, especially graduate students, as they realized that tenure-track roles within academia were shrinking, leaving them to contemplate what careers outside academia might look like and what skills they would need; third, our personal experiences, where public humanities expanded our possibilities beyond the traditional either/or academic outlook, raising the need to demonstrate what these possibilities might look like and how we could teach some of these skills; and fourth, how, within the 14 weeks of a term, students could create a public humanities project.

These realizations were central to the course because of the sense of urgency that drives them. Universities and colleges, as many know, have increasingly been transformed by neoliberal governance, which, as Matt Jacobson, also a historian, writes, has "eroded the very idea of a collective destiny upon which broad 'publics' are necessarily founded."[2] Under this influence, education, which is essential for the development of an informed and engaged citizenry, has been turned into a commercial product, with decisions increasingly driven by corporate demands rather than by the public good or the needs of society. Keeping this reality in mind, I believe that it is foundational for a course on public humanities to interrogate what may initially seem obscure: the concept of a public, the tradition of humanistic inquiry, the connections between them, and the role of the university.[3]

In the same vein, under the shadows of neoliberalism, the sense of insecurity, fear, and doubt that besiege students (and faculty) are also symptoms of the commercialization of education. Like any commodity traded in the marketplace, an ethos of conspicuous consumption regulates the pursuit of education, placing emphasis on rank, revenue, prestige, and commercial viability (e.g., it's common to hear students refer to education as an ROI or return on investment, much like how realtors talk about property).[4] This kind of value exchange creates pressure on universities and educators to train students based on the

[1] The Public Humanities Program at Yale is offered through the American Studies Department and provides students with a certification. For more information, see "Public Humanities Program" 2025

[2] Jacobson 2021, 169.

[3] By public, I mean both "a public" and "the public."

[4] Conspicuous consumption refers to the act of buying and using goods or services to publicly display wealth, status, or social prestige, rather than for their intrinsic value or function. Introduced by economist Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, it highlights how individuals or groups in society engage in

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

market viability of ideas and skills. Since the humanities and liberal arts are often seen as pursuits that do not yield immediate economic returns, they are often sidelined in favor of more commercially viable fields.[5] Given this harsh reality in higher education, we felt that it might be constructive for students to not only revisit the place of the humanities in sociocultural life but also illustrate how they might apply their humanities education meaningfully, both within and outside of academia. This also meant coaching them in the skills that proved helpful in our own experiences. An example of this is our design thinking workshop, which, as discussed later, helped overcome the challenge of completing a public humanities project within the short span of a 14-week term (Figure 1).

The culmination of our discussions over the winter resulted in a roadmap that structured the course into three parts: Part One, *The Humanities and Publics in Context*, situated the history of the humanities within the broader American discourse; Part Two, *Humanities in Public Life*, brought practitioners from the areas of concentration in the program: *Place and Space, History and the Public, Museums and Collections, Public Writing, Documentary Studies, Arts Research, and Digital Humanities*; and Part Three, *Public Humanities: Making It as We Do It*, was where students put into action the lessons learned throughout the term.[6]

2. Putting public humanities in context

In the spring of 2024, 10 of us gathered in a small classroom in The Humanities Quadrangle on the Yale campus. The group included our teaching fellow, me, six PhD students, a master's student, and an undergraduate student, all from disciplines across History, English, Comparative Literature, and Art History. (In the past, we also had the occasional sociology student.) As we went around the room introducing ourselves, each student briefly discussed their intellectual interests, and a common sentiment emerged. Despite our individual scholarly agendas, there was a shared view that the kinds of knowledge produced by academics and researchers often remained siloed from communities outside the university. To the students, it was important that knowledge be made accessible, for they saw it as a necessary feature of an equitable society. This was an early lesson for the class. The students who were drawn to this class (and perhaps to public humanities in general) held a normative view of a humanities education. In an age of narrow specialization and expertise, they were, surprisingly, interested in the ancient Greek idea of *paideia*, where academic training and civic responsibility were linked, a concept that presented itself through their explorations of art, history, politics, and literature.

Our initial class focused on two selected works: "The 'Doing' of Doing Public Humanities" by Matt Jacobson and "Putting Your PhD to Work – for the Public Good" by Katina Rogers.[7] Jacobson's chapter tells the founding story of the public humanities program at Yale in 2008 and includes the North Eastern Public Humanities Consortium's (NEPH) white paper, which for us, served as a living memory – not only of the public humanities program at Yale itself but also as the larger moral source from which the university draws its existence. Rogers' work parallels themes from NEPH's white papers but makes the abstract experiences of

consumption behaviors to signal their social position, often through luxury goods or extravagant spending (Veblen 1899).

[5] See Heller 2023.

[6] The course syllabus was also modeled on pre-existing syllabi from Karin Roffman, Matt Jacobson, and Laura Wexler. For example, inviting public humanities practitioners was inspired by Karin's course, the historical positioning of public humanities from Matt, and the idea of "doing" public humanities from Laura.

[7] Jacobson 2021, 167–73; Rogers 2020, 1–18.

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Figure 1. Introduction to public humanities, design thinking workshop.

anomie, historical amnesia, dissonance, and atomization more concrete by framing them in the contemporary practical challenges faced by PhDs. These challenges range from a lack of recognition for community-based work in academia to the rise of exploitative adjunct labor in a shrinking academic job market, leading graduate students – especially those from minority backgrounds – to opt out of academia.[8] While it isn't possible to fully discuss the book here, it nonetheless highlights potential possibilities in a gloomy scenario. For instance, according to the Modern Language Association, she states that only 0.1% of

[8] Rogers (2020) describes a common scenario in higher education which in her view creates a challenge to both education and social justice. In this scenario, she tells a story about a PhD student Eva, a first-generation college graduate and a woman of color. She begins her graduate work inspired and sees a way to bring her humanities training to community-based organization and educational policy work. However, when her mentors and peers express disapproval or confusion, and aren't able to provide any models, she pursues the academic job market. With an increased PhD enrollment and a small instructional tenure-line faculty position, she teaches courses as an adjunct. Without time for professional development or research which would make her a competitive candidate for tenure-track positions, she's now in a cycle of adjunction. If someone like Eva was aware of all this at the start of her graduate career, Rogers asks, "Does she decide to take five or ten years out of the workforce, relocate, and possibly go into debt in order to pursue a graduate degree?" Many like Eva decide the odds are against them and opt out before they even begin, Rogers states. On the other end, observing the slim odds, faculty and administrators instead of taking a risk on students with unconventional backgrounds put their energies into recruiting conventionally high-achieving students with pristine academic pedigree who have a higher chance of getting tenure-track jobs. While they may not see this link, Rogers writes, as years pass, the university has a harder time meeting their diversity goals among both students and faculty. In this scenario, according to her, no one win, including the public (4–6).

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humanities PhDs are unemployed and that the humanities have significant value to offer both within and outside of academia.[9]

Some students in the class found the white paper idealistic, which Jacobson is aware of since he describes the public humanities as a way for universities to fulfill the highest *ideals* (italics mine) of their missions. Yale's mission, for example, states: "committed to improve the world today and for future generations through outstanding research and scholarship, education, preservation, and practice."[10] Rogers' work, on the other hand, drew more silence, as students seemed acutely aware of the challenges ahead. But our lesson was that if we expand our definition of success, meaningful work with impact exists outside of tenure-track faculty positions as well. This was something Estelle and I also emphasized, pointing to both our works as examples, hoping that as the term progressed, greater possibilities would come into view.

Since the early part of the course was designed to provide context for public humanities, our coursework relied more on scholarly research, so students read extensively during the first four weeks. To begin, we decoupled the idea of the public from the humanities so that we could explore each concept independently. The logic behind this approach was to ensure that the class as a whole would have the same foundational knowledge, providing them with the necessary framework to consider the possibilities of what bringing the two concepts – "public" and "humanities" – together could initiate.

In one seminar, for example, we dedicated time to exploring the many ways in which people throughout history have come together, including why and how scholars have studied their behaviors and motivations. This exercise helped us identify conceptual distinctions between crowds, mobs, and masses, leading us to isolate the idea of "the public" as a distinct entity. To facilitate discussion, I asked, "How do publics come into being, and what role do they play in social life?" We concluded that publics are social forms, bound not by space, but by discourse. To quote one of our readings, "publics are autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, websites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed."[11] It was the circularity of communication that brought publics into being and gave them their identities – identities that we could not presume to know ahead of time, before being addressed.[12] This led us to our next lesson: public engagement is always a stranger engagement, and discourse is its lifeblood. While I cannot account for all the conversations here, these ideas are highlighted due to their formative role in the course. The first lesson led us to ask, "How might we evoke publics in our projects?" and the second inspired the theme for our final project: *Stranger Engagements.*

Next, we explored the history of the humanities, mainly through the former Director of the National Humanities Center, Geoffrey Harpham's *The Humanities and the Dream of America.*[13] Although it was a broad overview on many levels – from the historical roots of the humanities to its American form – it was a fruitful starting point, offering a place for our contemporary impressions of the humanities to be situated within historical memory. The text, which recounts a series of discoveries, became our own as we traversed the complex

[9] Roger 2020, 3.
[10] Jacobson 2021, 170.
[11] Warner 2002, 67.
[12] Warner 2002, 67.
[13] Harpham 2011.

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and lengthy origins of the humanities, moving toward its more current contentious position in society. We recognized that the humanities began as deliberations over the purpose of the academy. These traditions, too vast to fully cover here, can be distilled into two views: deriving from Isocrates – education as a means of training virtuous citizens – and Plato's philosophy of education as an end in itself.[14] These two traditions, which continue to compete for the university's soul, have evolved into what we now consider the humanities: philosophy, literature, the arts, and history. At the same time, recognizing these ideological differences in both the mission of education and the university allowed us to unravel the crisis in the humanities. A crisis neither new nor acquired, we realized, because (1) even the culture wars in the United States, where the humanities are viewed as obscure, a liberal indoctrination, and delegitimized in favor of rational or utilitarian education to create an elite class return to the debates of Plato and Isocrates and (2) the eternal quest for truth, originating from Plato, reserves a particular place for restlessness which is seen not only as human but an inherent feature of the humanities.[15]

After discussing the text, students observed that an American provincialism dominated the more common view of the humanities, leading us to ask, "What do traditions of the humanities in other parts of the world look like? Were they always conceived with such a close relationship to the republic?" Further discussions about the crisis of the humanities, including funding cuts for humanities research programs, allowed us to place these efforts within the larger debate on the role of the humanities itself. As the class drew to a close, we concluded that if crisis constitutes the humanities, we might view it as latitude rather than obstruction. After all, "crisis" – or the restlessness of the humanities – is what generates discourse, giving vitality even to those who, in doubt, question its efficacy for society.

To close the first part of our course, we brought the two concepts together by examining their usage starting in the 1980s. Robyn Schroder's chapter on "The Rise of the Public Humanists," picked up where we left off with Harpham's discussion on the humanities in America – a time when the humanities were upheld as an answer to the republic's crisis in national leadership.[16] In this light, the humanities were seen as important as national security, as their aspiration for humanity provided mankind with a resource to strive for the ideals of freedom, liberty, and justice.[17] In the context of a threatening world, the humanities were argued to be the best hope for democracy and the world. It seemed to us that, around this period, the humanities expanded its audience beyond the academy, bringing the humanities into dialogue with a new constituency. This union, as Schroder's text showed, bridged what many had long considered oppositional ideas: the public and the academy. It provided those in the academy and outside of it, as she states, "words and vision to the hope of making humanistic knowledge more accessible."[18]

To complement this text, we also read sociologist Robert Bellah's paper, "The Humanities and Social Vision."[19] The paper demonstrates that the idea of "applied humanities" or "applied social sciences" is redundant for its motivations are a reflection of an ideology of

[14] Harpham 2011, 10–17.
[15] See Cole 2016.
[16] Schroder 2021.
[17] Harpham 2011, 162.
[18] Schroder 2021, 9.
[19] Bellah 1984, 6–15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

utilitarian individualism and its dominance in universities.[20] According to Bellah, the humanities are inherently applied and an end in themselves because all inquiries aim not to discover some universal law for its own sake, but to pursue a higher moral good.[21] The danger he sees with the dominant view is that tradition and memory are considered inexpedient or unscientific, which denies what any institution needs for survival: a creative and imaginative integration of its past narrative, equipping it with social vision.[22] Bellah concluded by asking whether if it is too late to alter the course; meanwhile, Schroder provides a list of ways in which a cultural economy of public humanities is developing: ranging from those who believe the university's mission should carry a moral worldview, to the vertical (top-down) and horizontal (participatory) approaches to public humanities, to the digital disruption of the humanities, to the labor of it – rarely legitimized by universities – and its fieldification, where degrees and certifications are now offered in public humanities.[23] Based on all our readings, the class concluded that public humanities is about carrying over the tradition of mediation from the humanities and making that discovery possible through collaboration with publics both within and outside the academy.

3. Humanities in public life

The second part of our course was designed to challenge the belief that students' careers were limited to either academia or being outside of it. To demonstrate that public humanities could be practiced in many different ways and highlight the types of skills required, I felt it would be most effective to bring in people who apply these concepts in their daily work (even if many of them don't think of themselves as public humanists). The goal was to broaden students' frames of reference, equipping them with the knowledge to apply their public humanities education in diverse and meaningful ways. With the support of our academic and non-academic communities, we invited speakers to share their work, discuss the rewards and challenges they face, provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, and foster relationships that would continue to serve the larger mission of public humanities. Additionally, each speaker's area of work reflected one of the public humanities concentrations.

Among our many generous guests, the first was Libby Van Cleve, an oboist and the Director of the Oral History of American Music (OHAM) Collections at Yale.[24] Libby shared how the OHAM project began with a conversation between Charles Ives and Vivian Perlis, a harpist and part-time librarian at Yale, who had the foresight to bring a tape recorder to preserve their conversation. Perlis later said, "I did not know that the act I was about to commit was called 'oral history'."[25] Today, Perlis's work at the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library contains over 3,000 recordings, from Duke Ellington to Aaron Copland. In the beginning, Libby explained that only about 80 people a year would visit OHAM to study transcripts and recordings. However, by 2023, with the advent of streaming, there were around 54,000 streams per year. Libby also discussed the process of developing a collection, cataloging, and

[20] As a sociologist, public humanities to me embodies many of public sociology's characteristics but practices it in a more democratic fashion and with greater flair. Notable figures in public sociology are the late Michael Burawoy who passed in a tragic accident while I was writing this paper and W.E.B. Du Bois who had to leave academia to practice public sociology. Bellah 1984, 14.

[21] Bellah 1984, 13.

[22] Bellah 1984, 13.

[23] Schroder 2021, 19–21.

[24] "Oral History of American Music Collections Guide" 2025.

[25] "Introduction" n.d.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the legal considerations necessary to make this work accessible to everyone, while also protecting the privacy of interviewees.

Our next speaker was Elihu Rubin, a city planner, architectural historian, and filmmaker who teaches in the Yale architecture department. Elihu discussed his work on the Yale Urban Media Project (YUMP), an initiative that houses public scholarship by faculty, students, staff, and local organizations.[26] He shared the Interactive Crown Street exhibit, where they occupied unused storefronts in New Haven, Connecticut, and invited community residents to share their narratives.[27] The goal was to create a participatory history, produced interactively with multimedia, to tell stories about the meaning of urban space and change. Additionally, he brought student projects, printed as newspapers and pamphlets that highlighted the need for the preservation of public buildings in decay, such as the Goffe Street Armory, which hosted public art shows and a community garden.[28] We also benefited from Elihu's candidness, as he noted that while some universities were beginning to recognize public scholarship – especially in the context of tenure – it was still in the minority.

Another week, we left the classroom for a screening of the documentary film *In Transit* which we organized and opened to the community.[29] We invited Nelson Walker, a filmmaker and director of development at *The Maysles Documentary Center* in Harlem, New York.[30] Nelson directed the film with the late Albert Maysles and his colleagues Lynn True and Ben Wu. Filmed in the style of cinema vérité, *In Transit* moves through parallel pictures. It foregrounds the film with a series of interconnected stories: a young mother-to-be heading home to Minneapolis; a woman returning from New York after meeting her daughter for the first time in forty-seven years; a man who left his job at an oil field to rekindle a romance with his high-school sweetheart, among others; in the background, is the American landscape from cities, farmlands, and oil fields. All in close intimate portrait. All traveling on the Empire Builder aboard Amtrak. In a plain and eloquent fashion, the film creates a space for reflection, for those on the train and those in the theater seats, about what connects us all. During the Q&A session, some students asked Nelson how he and his team built trust with the passengers who allowed strangers (the filmmakers and other passengers) so close to capture their dreams, fears, and hopes. He mentioned that the cameras only came into view after some conversation, that initially it was just chatting as everyday people and getting to know one another. Something others in the audience pointed to as what was unique about the film since it was produced in 2015, asking if this kind of "stranger engagement" would be possible today.

Next to join us was Jordan Hammon, a public historian. I had met Jordan a few months earlier during a tour of The Whitney Plantation Museum in Louisiana and asked if she would be interested in speaking to my students.[31] By the time our term was in session, Jordan had taken on a new role as a producer for the podcast *Ben Franklin's World*, so we were fortunate to learn from both her former and new responsibilities.[32] Jordan discussed how The Whitney Plantation tells the story of slavery in America from the perspective of those who were

[26] "About" 2022
[27] "Interactive Crown Street" 2025.
[28] "Armory Newsprint #11" 2025.
[29] "In Transit Film: About" 2025.
[30] "About Maysles Documentary Center" 2025.
[31] "Whitney Plantation" 2025.
[32] "Ben Franklin's World" 2025.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enslaved, restoring agency to a group often portrayed as passive victims. The discussion also highlighted the concept of a living history museum, which connected to our readings on incorporating history and its relationship to social vision. The class was also intrigued by the controversy surrounding The Whitney Plantation, as many people in the state resisted the idea. However, due largely to private funding, the museum was able to be built. We also explored how digital technologies, like podcasts, have enabled public humanities to reach a broader audience. In the case of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast focused on history, and in the case of the episode we listened to, *Jen Manion, Trans-ing Gender in Early America*, it brought marginal histories often forgotten in the public consciousness.[33] Jordan also shared some of the unseen work involved in producing a podcast, such as fact-checking, research, editing, and coordinating guests.

We also went on a tour with David Walker, who designed the exhibition *Shining Light on Truth: New Haven, Yale, and Slavery*. The exhibition, curated by Michael Morand and Charles Warner, was presented by the Yale Library and hosted at the New Haven Museum, where it remained free to the public for its duration. A celebration of Black students and history at Yale and New Haven, part of the exhibition revealed something many students didn't know: that the first Black college was planned to be built in New Haven by abolitionists and Black intellectuals, but it was halted by local residents in 1831, including many of Yale's leaders. Walker also took us to a room, entitled "1831 College," that displayed black-and-white portraits of former Black Yale students. On one of the walls stands an empty bookshelf with a sign that reads, "bears witness to the books not written by the students who did not go to the Black college not built in New Haven."

In the final week of guest speakers, we were joined by Nancy Escalante, who discussed her work on building a community archive.[34] Nancy is a PhD candidate in American Studies and part of the Public Humanities program, where she also serves as one of the organizers of the Public Humanities Working Group. She shared the story of María Guardado, a well-known activist in Los Angeles who passed away in 2015. María, as Nancy told us, distributed her handwritten poems at rallies and protests throughout the 1990s. To preserve this important history, in 2020, Nancy and 15 members of her community formed a committee to create an archive dedicated to Guardado's life and political activism. Nancy's work gave us valuable insight into the challenging task of not just conducting archival research, but also of creating an archive – especially for histories that are often unrecorded and untold. As she explained, her project was focused on collectively reflecting on the choices they made so that the historical provenance of the archive would become a crucial part of the historical memory and the conditions against which Guardado wrote.

4. Making it as we do it

Following the conclusion of the first part of the course and in tandem with guest speaker visits, students began thinking about their final projects. To facilitate this process, I led a design thinking workshop aimed at helping students develop creative solutions to the following questions: (1) How can we make our projects accessible to diverse publics beyond the academy? (2) How can we engage with the theme of "stranger encounters"? and (3) How can we complete the project in 14 weeks?[35] Additionally, these questions were framed by the

[33] "Episode 359: Jen Manion, Trans-ing Gender in Early America" 2024.

[34] Escalante 2021.

[35] A design thinking workshop in an educational context is a structured, collaborative methodology that facilitates the exploration and resolution of complex, real-world problems. Rooted in principles of empathy,

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requirement to address the following categories: exhibitions, historic places, and humanities discussions. These categories were borrowed from The National Endowment for the Humanities' award guidelines, which aim to "bring the ideas of the humanities to life for general audiences through public programming" by analyzing "significant themes in disciplines such as history, literature, ethics, and art history."[36] I also believe this exercise provided students with an opportunity to view their class projects as something that could be expanded upon after the term ended, potentially seeking grants and awards for their work in the future.

We began the workshop by placing the three NEH categories in individual rows and the project questions in individual columns. For example, starting from the top left and moving to the right, the first activity was to answer: when it comes to exhibitions, how can we make our projects accessible to diverse publics beyond the academy? The second question, for exhibitions, was how can we engage with the theme of "stranger encounters?" and so on. Each student, in 3-minute sprints, answered each question, using a different color of Post-it note for each area, and then moved on to the next until everyone had answered every question. We then collected all the Post-It notes with their ideas and mapped them on a coordinate plane, organized based on impact (defined by an idea's ability to meet the guidelines set forth) and feasibility (based on a project's ability to be completed in 9 weeks). Once the students prioritized which ideas were both impactful and feasible, these became the resources from which they could choose and build prototypes of their projects.

For some students, this exercise proved counterintuitive. Much of the work in the humanities requires contemplation. Design thinking, on the other hand, is more action-oriented. While I don't need to explain the merits of contemplation, deferral, and deep reflection, design thinking can help pull students out of what may feel like the extreme end of academic work: retreating into their heads and writing papers for a limited audience, often in a solitary manner. Since the goal of public humanities is to extend beyond the classroom and engage publics, this exercise offers a way to break free from that habit when necessary. It has also been my observation as a teacher that many students struggle with perfectionism and a fear of failure, which can create roadblocks to progress. The speed of this exercise forces them to stop overthinking and start somewhere. To their surprise, as one student remarked, "I didn't know I had so many ideas." Moreover, the collective nature of this exercise also demonstrates a participatory approach to creating collective knowledge.

Given the limited time a semester has, most students chose to create a digital repository to exhibit and share their projects with the larger community (although my vote was on the pop-van exhibition that would travel around New Haven!). They engaged with multiple aspects of public humanities, and the results of their projects, described below, included digital exhibitions, public writing, digital humanities and Geographic Information System

iterative design, and multidisciplinary collaboration, this process typically involves five key stages: empathizing with stakeholders to understand their needs, defining the core problem, ideating diverse and innovative solutions, prototyping tangible representations of ideas, and testing these prototypes to gather feedback and refine the approach. When applied within educational settings, design thinking encourages students to move beyond conventional, siloed approaches to problem-solving, fostering both critical thinking and creative capacities. It enables them to integrate theory and practice while engaging in systemic, iterative processes that yield practical solutions to pressing societal issues. Furthermore, it cultivates an understanding of how educational practices can be enhanced through the design and implementation of student-driven, collaborative projects.

[36] "Public Humanities Projects" 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(GIS), oral history, and several other facets of public humanities. The following is a brief synopsis of student projects in the class[37]:

- *Hidden in Plain Sight: Yale's Forgotten Memorial to Robert E. Lee* by Colton Klein turned its attention to a memorial of Robert E. Lee on the University's campus and its temporal presence as a stranger in the context of the university and the nation's history. The project sought to understand "what historical context encouraged the commission, design, installation, and seemingly unproblematic reception of two memorials sympathetic to the Confederate Lost Cause in the early twentieth century at this Northern institution of higher learning."

- *Censoring the Canon: Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"* by Emma Hodgdon explored censorship in the United States, focusing on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* "the ALA's sixth most banned title in 2023 and [...] the organization's 100 Most Challenged Books of the Past Decades since 1990." For her project, she developed her competencies in data collection, digital humanities and GIS, public writing and digital exhibition using StoryMaps.

- *Along an Aqueduct: A Local History of Xochimilco, Oaxaca* by Jacquelyn Davila combined oral histories, archival work, and public writing to create a digital exhibition. She included the voices of the community members in her narrative while using the aqueduct and its history as a metaphor to creatively explore larger tensions around urbanization, globalization, modernity, disenfranchisement, and gentrification.

- *A Public Intervention into Yale Museum Accessibility: Visitor Service* in a team effort by Sabina Mahoney and Qiyuan Liu explored museum accessibility and what "free and open" meant for local residents, particularly minority groups such as Black, Latinx, low-income, and houseless people in the neighboring areas of Yale. The resulting project created a website, which included a manifesto, as well as statements from their interviews with members of the New Haven community, including a contact form to keep the project alive well after the end of the course.

- *New Haven Soundscapes* by Omer Pshititski asked, "How well do you know New Haven, just by listening to it?" In his project, he developed a platform to explore our aural connection to space. Using a QR code displayed across the university campus and its neighboring areas, he made the project available to a broader community. Omer's goal was for residents and strangers alike to engage with their surroundings and community in ways that would encourage them to gain a new perspective toward their lived environment.

Lastly, the students benefited from Estelle and my background in digital humanities, design, research, and museum curatorial work through various stages of prototyping their projects. They also relied on the help of Miriam Olivares who is the geospatial (GIS) librarian at Yale and developed new skills such as project management, team work and collaboration, the development and implementation of technical aspects of a project (e.g., data collection, management, and presentation), accessible content writing and design thinking which are

[37] The projects mentioned here are those for which I received permission from students. Unfortunately, I no longer have access to the projects to share them due to the temporary nature of my role as adjunct faculty. However, for those interested in past examples of digital projects for public humanities, see https://guides.library.yale.edu/c.php?g=1160737&p=8473219.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

increasingly necessary whether a students want to pursue a tenure-track or a non-profit role. Additionally, they also learned to consider the ethical impacts of their work.

5. Conclusion

Our class was an ambitious experiment in the pedagogy of public humanities. We began with the comprehensive goal of revealing the larger and more abstract ideas that have contributed to the development of the public humanities such as "What is a public? What does the public have to do with the humanities? And what does it mean to do public humanities?" These lines of inquiry led us to discover that, unlike crowds or mobs, publics are the result of discourse which gives them their identity. At the same time, this idea of discourse is deeply linked to the humanities. While there are two competing ideas of the humanities, from that of an end in itself and one as a means of creating an informed citizenry necessary for the leadership of a republic, they both continue to co-exist, albeit contentiously at times, in the modern academy. One way this tension has manifested in the university is a utilitarian view of education that has created an overly technical training often with a perceived lack of the applicability of the humanities for modern society. The utilitarian view, of course, as discussed, ignores the fact that the humanities are inherently applied as it is aimed at solving and creating the moral source from which the university and society draw their social vision. In this regard, for the university to fulfill its highest ideals, it must be a steward for the humanities, for without it, there is neither a public nor a republic. The current challenge, as we realize, discourages individuals from engaging in public humanities, as one student said, "it's not because there isn't any interest, but there is no reward for it in academia and it doesn't count towards your tenure." So, if universities are to survive themselves, such labor should be nurtured, for they provide the moral impetus that any lasting institution needs.[38]

As the other half of our course focused on what public humanists do, students learned how the humanities and the public can come together in creative and imaginative ways to offer mediation, reflection, and transformation. They learned about oral history, filmmaking, archiving, curating, art and design, public writing, digital humanities, podcasts, and museums while thinking about telling stories from new perspectives, preserving, and sharing them. Seeing that theorizing can take place in vernacular forms expanded their views from seeing themselves as arbiters of knowledge and instead as co-creators with various communities.[39] They discovered that to create new paradigms of knowledge, they need to leave their disciplinary shores and participate in what is often a stranger engagement. On a more personal level, design thinking taught them to be more forgiving of themselves – that all work begins as prototypes and is iteratively improved over time. Most of all, as they brought to life the abstract ideals they learned early in the term, they

[38] I am not making the naïve argument that the university's role is to advance certain moral positions (including disengagement) or that the technical specialization of the university is not justified. Both of these points and their contentious positions cloak the reality that academic life is ruled by a rationality that is not value-neutral. Here, I turn to Alexander's (1988) argument that the impersonal standards of judgment and evaluation on the basis of which we give power as empirical fact and upheld as cognitive rationality is after all, a norm committed to a morality of truth (177, 179). It is this commitment to morality that gives the university its legitimacy, and from which, it draws its own ontological security. Since morality cannot be agnostic to the values of the world outside the university, the public humanities will always be an important bridge for the university as long as it does not become an ideological tool for the state.

[39] Jacobson 2021, 171.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press

uncovered, to practice public humanities is to create, as Bellah writes, "a living link between us as humanists and the republic we live in."[40]

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Author contributions. Conceptualization: D.Y.; Data curation: D.Y.; Formal analysis: D.Y.; Project administration: D.Y.; Methodology: D.Y.

Acknowledgements. The authors wish to express gratitude to Matt Jacobson, Karin Roffman, and Laura Wexler for their exemplary leadership; to Libby Van Cleve, Elihu Rubin, Nelson Walker, Jordan Hammon, David Walker, and Nancy Escalante for their unwavering solidarity; to Colton Klein, Emma Hodgdon, Jacquelyn Davila, Sabina Mahoney, Qiyuan Liu, and Omer Pshititski for their boundless curiosity; and to Estelle Guéville for her dedication and invaluable collaboration. Finally, the authors would like to honor the memory of the late Michael Burawoy, whose legacy as an inspiring teacher and public sociologist continues to influence and inspire.

Conflicts of interests. The authors declare none.

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[40] Bellah 1984, 13.

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Cite this article: Yangzom, Dicky. 2025. "Teaching an Introduction to Public Humanities: A Pedagogical Experiment." *Public Humanities,* 1, e119, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.33 Published online by Cambridge University Press