

High-quality material contexts are necessary but insufficient if all students are not fully embedded in the life of a school.

A deeper inquiry into the school's sociocultural context highlights another critical distinction. Sociologist William Trent once stated: "Desegregation is about demographic changes [in schools], and 'integration' is about normative change," a shift in the collective hearts and minds of the people. In a similar vein, legal scholar John A. Powell has written that while desegregation assimilates racial and ethnic minorities into the school's mainstream, true integration *transforms* the mainstream. Relationships between students and teachers are very different under desegregation (proximate contact) versus integration

(deep intercultural exchanges in learning where no group is on the margins). Integration weakens thick social boundaries and fosters empathy among people of varied social backgrounds as they teach, learn, communicate, and interact within a school community in ways that till the soils of a burgeoning democracy.

Empathy is not merely about increasing the civility of one social group toward another. In her book *Talking to Strangers*, political theorist Danielle Allen argues, we should be able to negotiate loss and reciprocity without feeling stripped of our political agency and will when educational institutions step in to equilibrate resources and opportunity. These institutions stand in for a consensus that is hard to achieve in the face of the limitations

of human self-interest. Yet, they have the power to achieve equity.

Today most communities around the nation have forsaken some of the most integral connections between schools and society by ignoring the potential of social integration. To truly shift the tides of social and educational inequality, we cannot afford to give up on an aspiration that the nation has yet to accomplish. Very likely, educational equity inheres in true integration, but its achievement can only be realized in communities with empathic hearts.

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## can new media save the book?

by Laura Stark



The book is dead, or so they say, suffocated in the ether of new media. Twitter, blogs,

MOOCs, and more: there is a fear that people today, including students, are less likely to learn how to deal with—and possibly enjoy—an entire book.

The New Books Network may be evidence against the doomsayers as the university enters the digital age. The Network is an online broadcast of interviews with scholars and scientists who have recently published books. The interviews are with academics, by academics, and for academics—as well as for that elusive fan base of academics' dreams, committed readers of scholarly nonfiction.

Marshall Poe started the Network in 2007 when he broadcast the first interview for the original, single channel, New

Books in History. Four years later, Poe invited colleagues and graduate students in other disciplines to interview authors in their fields—and to do so for free, in their spare time. Poe wrote a brief set of guidelines, interview tips, and some technical requirements. Then he hoped for the best.

The New Books Network has been a monumental success of slow accretion. Almost a decade later, the Network not only still exists, but it has expanded to one hundred channels, each focused on a different academic topic. At the start of 2015, the Network broadcast its 2,000th interview and now averages 8,000 downloads *per day*. Marshall Poe is still in the Network's nerve center, now located at Amherst College. In 2014, Poe relinquished a faculty job at the University of Iowa to run the Network full-time—the grown-up equivalent of dropping out of college to run a start-up. "Having written a book on the history of communication, I can tell you that people

just don't like to read very much." This was his premise, and he bet his tenure line on it. "Reading is hard and takes all your attention. What people like to do is watch and listen." So far, his assessment has proved a cunning anticipation of the book-consumption habits of nonfiction lovers in the digital age.

Typically, the New Books Network has been used as a harvest of fresh ideas: academics conducted interviews about new titles and, when time and interest allowed, gave interviews on their own latest books. Until recently, however, the Network has been peripheral to pedagogy, which seemed a shame for such a hopeful marriage of media, a digital commitment to print culture. The Network seemed poised to make literal the classroom metaphor of putting thinkers "in conversation" with each other.

In 2014, I assigned a final project to undergraduates in my seminar "Medicine on Trial" that involved a group author



Books and new media don't have to be opposing forces.

interview for the Network. The plan was simple: small groups of students would read a book over the second half of the semester, prepare questions for the author, and then interview her. (I pre-selected three books for students, all of which were written by women. See the links below.) The Network would be both the carrot and the stick. Students' author-interviews would be broadcast on the New Books in Medicine channel if all went well, or well enough. I alerted Poe.

I hoped the New Books project could help me accomplish three kinds of goals at once. Intellectually, I wanted to keep myself updated in my fields. It can be hard to make time simply to be aware of, much less read, the bounty of important and interesting new books that colleagues, friends, heavy-hitters, and new-comers produce. Pedagogically, I wanted students' final projects to be an act of learning-in-progress, not just a recollection of knowledge accrued over the past semester. My aim was to craft a project that encouraged students to create good questions based on what they had learned, rather than to find some pre-existing right answer. Logistically, I hoped to have a public resource that I could point to with a URL as evidence of my students' learning and skills, but that demanded only a little additional time outside of class on my part.

The group interviews aired in January. "I think the interview turned out wonderfully," Poe wrote to tell me when the first went live. This was a relief. "It's a model of how to integrate students into what I call 'consequential assignments,'" which he described as, "work

that [w]on't end up being read by one person and then tossed in the round file, that is, papers and such. 'Consequential assignments' reach and teach people."

Like family holidays and other exercises in planned spontaneity, the interviews were energizing and exhausting, both better than expected and imperfect in ways I never anticipated. Though we planned our questions in advance, the conversation also prompted great questions on the fly. Despite my desire to avoid alienating potential listeners, one author dropped the f-bomb (out of political outrage, not personal annoyance). The simultaneous fear and reward of talking with authors and having their voices available for public consumption was a source of motivation for students and, by all accounts, fun.

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In the end, the online Network did not replace books, but promoted them and encouraged reading. It did not thin the content of books, but focused it. Plus, the Network did not abide snark. Because authors responded immediately to our assessments—and mis-assessments—the interviews were exemplars of scholarly debate. Aside from the pedagogical value of the assignment, students now have a publicly available final product—the podcast—that they can, and do, share with potential employers, grad schools, parents, and posterity. The benefits of the New Books project have overwhelmed the pleasant inertia of assigning conventional final papers.

Has new media saved the book? The answer depends on your diagnosis of the injuries suffered by the body academic. When the president of the American Historical Association publicly admitted he had swapped his vast

physical library for a tablet, "[m]embers of the audience had a collective seizure," historian Claire Bond Potter reported in the association's newsletter. "Several commentators vigorously protested the imminent demise of books and, with them, whole fields within history." This is a fear with intuitive appeal. Yet it is also a hunch with sparse evidence. According to the *New Republic*, sales of books in electronic format jumped by 4,500% in five years without depressing sales of hardcover and paperback books to any large extent. The digital age is good for readers, because e-books are both cheaper than traditional forms and more profitable for publishers who need to stay in business.

The New Books Network points to the ways that a lively academic book cul-

ture could look and sound different from the past. It may involve different kinds of reading and more conversations about any given book—an updated oral tradition, new-fangled for a digital age. This may be both terrifying and wonderful—which is to say, just like anything new.

To listen to the student interviews, search New Books in Medicine for: *Pills for the Poorest* (2013) by Emilie Cloatre; *Vaccine Nation: America's Changing Relationship with Immunization* (2014) by Elena Conis; and *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us* (2013) by Lochlann Jain.

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