

Visiting Scholars Shape Thought

The Role of Humanities and AI in an Uncertain Future

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Year after year, graduates cross stages to receive their diplomas; a simple piece of paper that encapsulates years of learning. Yet beyond classwork and grades lies a deeper meaning shaped by the humanities-- the arts, history and communication-- that define our identity and understanding of the world. In an era where humanities subjects are written off as impractical due to the increase in Artificial Intelligence, visiting scholars at the College of Charleston are proving their value--shaping the way we think, communicate, and write about the world.

Kathleen Béres Rogers, professor of English and chair of the Visiting Scholars Committee at the College, described how visiting scholars create a sense of community on campus. By sparking discussions that expand beyond the classroom, visiting scholars create a campus wide curiosity that encourages students and faculty to explore new ways of thinking and learning.

The Department of English's visiting scholars for the 2024-2025 school year, Annette Vee and Eric Hayot, discussed changing literacy and the relevance of humanities - topics that are relevant to college students' education and future.

Our fall Visiting Scholar was Annette Vee, associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh and author of *Coding Literacy: How Computer Programming is Changing Writing*. Vee's niche in Artificial Intelligence and its interaction with the writing world was the basis of her Visiting Scholar talk in September where she laid out the history behind AI in tandem with digital writing and composition.

By inserting the "newness" of generative AI into the historical context of eighteenth and nineteenth century writing technology, Vee brought up the notion that writing--a uniquely human activity--has been engaging with technology long before ChatGPT came on the scene. As ChatGPT has been the most rapidly adopted Generative AI model, Vee went into the history behind humanity's urge to automate writing.

To tip off her talk, Vee posed the question: "Why automate writing?" in order to understand the desire to automate writing from a philosophical standpoint. Vee expressed how one can come close "to be as a god" by mastering technology in a way that replicates human writing composition. The pursuit to automate writing is not a new desire. Starting from the emergence of AI, Vee remarked how early chatbots have been in use since the 1960s.

Is it a human need to create life? Is artificial intelligence a way for humans to mimic life? Vee pondered answers to why humanity seems to crave godlike status in the realm of creation through technology, and in a world so largely comprised of artificial intelligence, Vee questioned what it means to be human, and what the trajectory of technology means for writing studies and humans alike. Vee closed her discussion by answering her initial question with: "to solve the problem of language," as if there is an innate problem in the social activity that is language.





On March 10, 2025, Eric Hayot, professor of Comparative Literature and Asian Studies at Penn State, gave a lecture on the importance of valuing liberal arts and humanities. In a time where these topics are viewed with increasing skepticism, Hayot believes humanities scholars should take intrinsic pride in the necessary work of humanities, playing offense rather than defense.

He pushed back against the idea that science is more effective than humanities. "It's not a contest. We live in a world characterized by a hierarchy of knowledge that is partly produced by the stunning effectiveness of the scientific fields. We don't make fast or easy progress and history is constantly changing." Our problems are not solved once and completed, because humans are complex beings.

Vaccines, he discussed to illustrate this, are a marvel of human technology and medical research, but the work of science is done once they are developed and tested. Humanities then tackle the arduous task of convincing people to accept the vaccines. The idea that humanities seem to be less effective is not from weaker methods, but from the difficulty of the challenges they address.

"Humanities create effective knowledge, and effective knowledge is democratic." Our knowledge is quickly and accessibly disseminated from a researcher to the public. Art, for example, is something that has "never not been" a part of humanity and can be interacted with as ordinarily as wearing jewelry to work. With this accessibility, humanities open the door to widening societal capabilities. The more a person thinks and engages with a thing or idea, the more they can receive and learn about it. Humanities provides a framework for people to understand the world and broaden the scope of what is possible.

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Mike Duvall, associate chair of the Department of English, places significant value in these talks' ability to represent and remind English scholars what they know to be true. "There's a kind of communal aspect to it. It brings us together in a way, it sort of helps us think about not just representing [the liberal arts mission] to other people, but to remind ourselves of it, too."

Beyond classwork, grades and crossing a stage to accept a piece of paper symbolizing years of learning, there is an underlying connective force that unites the student body. The study of humanities—art, history and culture--serve as a shared language.

