Speculating on the liberal arts: Exploring possible futures for humanities education

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Abstract
The article draws on concepts from speculative design to explore an alternative educational group existing outside the boundaries of an accredited university. Inspired by the imaginative approach of speculative design, I propose a small-scale reading and discussion group as a pathway to explore possible futures open to aspects of humanities education. The concept aims to reposition elements of the humanities from within the degree-granting Canadian university space to engage the wider public through a network meant to ideally foster an interconnected community of learners. This rhizomatic network would provide avenues for those without the means, access, or desire to pursue post-secondary education in the humanities to engage in questions that are relevant to their lived experience. I use an inquiry-based model of learning to explore probable, plausible, and preferable futures for liberal arts education as a way to challenge some current modes of thinking and provoke further discussion and research.

Keywords
humanities, liberal arts, speculative design, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, post-secondary education, alternative education, rhizomatic education, reading and discussion groups

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Introduction

The world of post-secondary humanities education is changing, and particularly in light of recent global developments, university education is undergoing a dramatic shift. Within the context of these changes, I want to take the opportunity to explore alternatives. In this article, I present an outline for a small-scale, community oriented reading and discussion group that would exist outside the boundaries of a post-secondary institution as a way to provoke discussion and reflection on the possible, plausible, and preferable futures available to the changing landscape of the humanities. I believe that new approaches can help address some of the issues facing post-secondary liberal arts education in Canada. These new approaches can look outside the boundaries of the current university system to explore and experiment with alternative models. There is a need for students to become increasingly flexible in a rapidly changing landscape of work and education. Today’s students need to develop interpersonal collaborative skills, the ability to critically read, write, discuss, and research in an age of proliferating sources of information, and the ability to remain proficient with technological advances.

In this article, I draw on ideas from speculative design to explore one possible alternative model that would exist outside the university system. I propose a small-scale reading and discussion group that would exist outside a university or college program or department that draws on theories and methods from the humanities to engage people in critical dialogue. Using an inquiry-based approach, the groups would be composed of members of the community who may lack the means, motivation, or time to attend a humanities course at a university, but who are interested in addressing complex questions through a combination of reading, writing, and conversation. Free of the rigors of an accredited course or program, these reading and discussion groups would be given ample room to devise questions and explore them by drawing on approaches from within the humanities. In this sense, the proposed group is less a radical alternative and more a repositioning of aspects of university humanities education models to a more publicly engaged setting.

After outlining the concept of speculative design, I describe the reading and discussion group. This proposal is informed by an inquiry-based approach to learning, so I next turn to unpack what that means, how it relates to a problem-based approach, and why I think it is important. I then use inquiry-based learning to explore differences between probable, possible, and preferable futures for humanities education. The article ends by exploring speculative alternatives to provoke further thought and reflection. Given the current historical circumstance—the reality of in-class sessions canceled or postponed for an extended period of time—I believe this is an ideal time to use the playful, imaginative tools of speculative design to rethink aspects of humanities education. I believe there is a need for places and spaces that help facilitate individual critical thought and reflection while also making connections and collaborations possible, and that drawing on concepts and approaches from within the humanities can be conducive to cultivating such environments. This article is an attempt to explore one such pathway and (hopefully) stimulate further discussion.
Speculative design and the liberal arts

Speculative design is a concept with roots in the world of conceptual art which brings together design approaches and the act of speculation. Speculation is defined as an activity involving the “forming of a theory or conjecture without firm evidence.”¹ To design is both “to conceive and plan out in the mind” and “to create, fashion, execute, or construct according to a plan.”² In both cases, design involves a prior planning stage which is followed, however closely, in order to achieve a desired outcome. By combining the two terms, speculative design outlines a practice of using design concepts within a theoretical framework without the requirement of firm evidence. As Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby outline, “[t]his form of design thrives on imagination and aims to open up new perspectives…to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people’s imaginations to flow freely” (2013: 2). Speculative design is “interested in…the idea of possible futures” (Dunne and Raby, 2013: 2), and ideas derived from the practice of speculative design are “by necessity provocative, intentionally simplified, and fictional” (Dunne and Raby, 2013: 3). The idea is to create a simplified fiction that provides a narrative through which to (typically) view a particular aspect of society. In this case, I am speculating on ways that aspects of humanities education can exist beyond the boundaries of the degree-granting university system. By allowing elements of playful imagination to flow freely without being overly encumbered by concrete plans, speculative design provides pathways into imagining such potential alternatives (see Nørgård et al., 2017).

I am not drawing on concepts from speculative design to propose any changes to current humanities courses, nor am I mapping out possible pathways of change that existing institutions and departments might take. This article is not the “space for experimenting with how things are now, making them better or different, but about other possibilities altogether” (Dunne and Raby, 2013: 12). Through the practice of freely imagining a different venue and format to explore aspects of humanities education, I am primarily reimagining as an exercise in pure possibility. That being said, such practices do not preclude an inability to reorient current trajectories. At the very least, they might offer alternative pathways for members of a community to collectively reframe the broad purpose and goal of exposure to theories and methods within the humanities. In fact, such reframing can be part of the conversations encouraged through the small-scale, community-oriented group I propose below. If these alternative pathways seem potentially unrelated to the historical trajectory of humanities education at the post-secondary level, this is all the more reason to celebrate. Speculative design can aid in locating preferable futures within a network of possible and probable futures, a point I return to below.

As Dunne and Raby point out, “[c]ritique is not necessarily negative; it can also be a gentle refusal, a turning away from what exists, a longing, wishful thinking, a desire, and even a dream” (2013: 34–35). In this article, I propose a desire to see how some of the approaches I have been trained in—critical reading, writing, thinking and civil discussion—might be repositioned and made available in a different public setting. My focus at this stage is to share my enthusiasm for such modes of open-minded yet critical
engagement without worrying too much about providing a concrete roadmap as to how to get there. But implicit in my longing for other ways to provide people with the opportunity to engage in the empowering activity of learning is a positive form of critique. I am deliberately turning away from the pragmatic, career-oriented paradigm of the contemporary university and turning toward a space in which the very principles of speculative design—freedom, creativity, imagination, and playfulness—are precisely the aspects of a learning environment I want to encourage. I have no intention of remaining within a world of speculation, but believe it is a useful and productive starting point to explore and discuss alternative visions of what liberal arts education might look like in the future. As Erik Olin Wright describes, “what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions” (2010: 4). By speculating on a different set and setting for humanities education, I wish to call attention to the importance of imagination in envisioning positive and fruitful alternatives (see Greene, 1978; Stanley, 2019).

Before describing my proposed alternative model, its inquiry-based learning approach, and the ways speculative design can aid in the activity of imagining alternatives and working toward preferable futures, it is first important to define what is meant by post-secondary liberal arts education. The liberal arts refer to a wide umbrella of disciplines that include the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics. The liberal arts thus study the wider way that humans have attempted to understand their world, including the natural world. According to the liberal arts college at Concordia University, a “liberal arts education equips you for life…[and t]he Liberal Arts program teaches you to think critically, enhance your communication skills and become a more resourceful, innovative and self-confident person.”3 The humanities are a subset of the liberal arts that include philosophy, history, literature, religious studies, and the arts. I have been using the two terms somewhat interchangeably so far, but the focus of this article is the humanities. Simon Fraser University’s humanities department website states that:

Students read and study the great texts of Western and Eastern civilizations from Ancient Greece to Modern Germany, from Taoism to Christianity, from the Italian fresco to Chinese film. Humanities courses appeal to students who are curious about many diverse areas such as classical and medieval studies, modern thought and culture, Renaissance humanism, and eastern and western religions. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, students will learn to pose questions and address concerns central to understanding the human condition.4

York University’s departmental website describes the humanities as “the study of culture…[involving] history, art, literature, music, architecture, politics, food—all aspects that help to define and express a specific group of people…[and that t]he study of the Humanities serves to challenge our common understanding of issues and events, and helps students to develop valuable critical, analytical, and communications skills.”5 The humanities comprise a wide-ranging world of disciplines and knowledge-sets. There is a dual focus on understanding various cultures and developing communication and critical thinking skills, which James Côté and Anton Allahar describe as “defining questions and problems, evaluating evidence and arguments, and arriving at a defensible judgment on a matter” (2011: 94).
According to Victor Ferrell, a liberally educated individual develops “a set of skills that are broadly useful, fully transferable, and applicable to any challenge, vocational or other – skills that serve society as well as the individual” (2011: 17). The humanities can provide grounding in the broad process of research, reading, writing, and learning, bolstering the activity of thought with a meta-level awareness. To think about thinking may be an awkward phrase but speaks to the kinds of higher-order cognitive awareness that can be developed through exposure to theories and methods within the humanities. More idealistically, humanities education can be viewed as “what the Greeks meant by schole – leisure for the pursuit of insight” (Illich, 1969: 118). But over the last several decades, the institutions that house liberal arts colleges have been moving away from such a leisurely pursuit of insight toward exclusively vocational skills training. Many students now view post-secondary education as a step toward getting a job rather than an opportunity to explore other cultures and develop critical thinking and communication skills. Such pursuits still exist for those few with the privilege to afford such activities, but the exclusionary aspect of such non-pragmatic humanities education has increasingly had to make room for a more inclusive student body whose primary interests are gaining valuable (or even necessary) accreditation to enter a career. As David Stanley writes, “[a]t one time, higher education was about the acquisition of information. As information exploded and became easy to access, higher education became focused on skill development” (2019: 128), but this emphasis on skill development arose to the detriment of a humanities education centered on enrichment, discussion, and higher-order critical thinking.

I am not in any way defending the exclusionary basis of prior forms of university education, but merely acknowledging that humanities education was, until the massification of universities (see Côté and Allahar, 2011) over the last several decades, an activity only open to those individuals with the privilege and resources occupying the upper strata of Western societies. The inclusion of less privileged students (i.e., individuals from lower-income households) does not need to be inexorably tied to this vocational turn. Instead, I wish to protect a more inclusive approach while maintaining a small pocket of education that moves the practice of humanities education forward into the future. In part, this means using theories and methods that are historically part of a predominantly white, male, privileged Eurocentric project to problematize these very historical origins and critically engage in a project of revision. This project would give necessary space for previously underrepresented or marginalized voices to contribute to conversations about social and cultural histories, thereby challenging an approach to the humanities as the progressive study of canonical texts written by (largely) white male, Western European, and North American scholars. This, however, remains beyond the abilities or desires of most students, who lack the privilege or opportunity to engage in such leisurely pursuits of insight.

Instead, students more often progress through three or four years as a cumulative skill-building exercise leading to employment. But as the carrot of guaranteed employment in many of the career streams organized by university disciplinary boundaries continues to evaporate, this progression to advanced knowledge in a specific field may continue to lose its luster. An interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary model may be more aligned with the
needs of employers in a rapidly changing world of work, and such movements between and across disciplinary knowledge-sets can be activated through an inquiry-based model. The pedagogical model of the course described in the next section is based on such an approach. After describing the idea, then, I unpack the reasons behind this method and how it can guide elements of the humanities into possible and preferable futures.

The proposed group

The proposed idea is based on two examples of small-scale community groups that draw on ideas from inquiry-based and problem-based models of learning. Both of these groups are focused on a free-form exchange of information and knowledge through conversation. The first is the Shams community organization. Originally based in the city of Amman, Shams now has gatherings in London and Washington D.C. As it states on one of their websites, Shams fosters “[c]onnected, engaged, & empowered communities” through the creation of “[s]afe spaces for collective learning, dialogue, and social change.” Members host talks based on a theme, and sessions often involve preparing a meal, eating together, and talking about the proposed theme. Through the act of sharing food together, each group is brought into a more intimate space of sharing and learning. Recent themes for these events, which are often called Shams Tables, include “Your Career Journey,” “Migration and Cultural Diversity,” “Political Participation of Women,” and an online dialogue on “Positive Masculinity.”

The other example that inspired my idea was a result of the global pandemic. With their daily movements curtailed, a group of artists began to meet online on a monthly basis to have unstructured conversations based on a prompting word that was collectively decided a week before each meeting. Called “Salons,” these sessions encouraged participants to come prepared to share anything related to the word. Past words have included phenomenon, humor, and adaptation. Through the Zoom virtual video application, participants could share their screen and show images or videos, play music, or speak about essentially anything related to the word. Each session lasted several hours, and the development of a theme gradually emerged. I myself took part in these “Salons,” which contributed to my inspiration behind researching alternative spaces where aspects of humanities theory and methodology could be mobilized in ways that inspire critical thinking, reflection, and community development.

To bring together these two examples, the proposed group could be considered a kind of curated book club that is collectively oriented around themes that grapple with complex social, economic, political, cultural, and historical questions. The books could be used as a starting point to focus the conversation, but by no means would the sessions have to stick to analysis of the text. For example, a group could meet on a bi-weekly basis for several months to address and explore questions related to social inequality. Several of the sessions could focus on racial inequality as a complex problem situated within the broader issue being addressed. Over several sessions, the group might read Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952) as a way into the conversation of the Black experience in America.
Each session would be prompted by a series of questions posted on a group website before the meeting. A rotating facilitator for each session might post a question or two, and then open the online forum for participants to post additional questions they would like to discuss during the session. In the case of the Black experience in America, questions could include “how have things changed in America since Ellison wrote Invisible Man? How have things stayed the same? What are some of the reasons behind any perceived changes to the experience of being Black in America? And how are things both similar and different in the Canadian context?”

Participants would be encouraged to arrive at the session having read chapters of the book and ready to contribute to the conversation. A series of additional resources could also be posted online as a way for participants to dig deeper into the topic if they have the time and desire. In the example chosen, selections from Franz Fanon’s work (such as “The Fact of Blackness” (2000 [1952])) or Toni Morrison (such as “Black Matters” (1992)) could be provided as ways to enrich the conversation and add depth to a reading of Ellison’s book. Ideally, these groups would be composed of people from various socio-cultural backgrounds, age groups, occupations, and interests. One of the most enticing aspects of the idea is to potentially create a space where a variety of people can come together to share their perspectives and learn from one another.

Another cluster of sessions could focus on the relationship between social inequality and access to education. Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) could help focus the discussion for these particular sessions, with additional material—such as chapters from bell hooks’ Teaching to Transgress (1994) or Teaching Community (2003)—offered as resources for deeper learning. In keeping with the participant-directed focus of inquiry-based learning, which I discuss in the next section, the group would continue to collectively generate their own guiding questions for each session. These participant-led sessions could include returning to questions previously posed if there is an interest in delving deeper into a particular aspect of social inequality. Besides social inequality, other broad themes could include the environment, climate change, and the effect of humanity on the natural world, or discussions surrounding the positive and negative relationship between humans and technology, with a focus on the impact of the internet on human relationships (both personal and professional).

Logistically speaking, a room big enough for approximately 12 people would be needed for the sessions. Similar to the Sham community, these could be supplied by members who host on a rotating basis. If members are unable to host due to space considerations or other living situations, then a communal space would be required. An example in Toronto would be the Centre for Social Innovation which provides accessible spaces for members. Such a communal space would require a small amount of funding to reserve the room and for hosts to be members. An online facilitator would also be required to coordinate meetings, arrange a schedule of hosts, and plan any necessary details pertaining to the sessions, but this could also be supplied by members taking on the role for a week or month on a rotating basis.

To act as a capstone to the sessions, and to encourage connection between these small groups and the wider public, an annual (or bi-annual) event could be organized that would allow participants to write, edit, and present their ideas pertaining to any of the topics
explored by the group. This event would require a larger venue that would need to be incorporated into logistical and budgetary concerns. Similar in format to a TED talk conference, participants could present for five to ten minutes on a topic previously discussed by the class. The presentation format would remain open, such that participants would be encouraged to tell a personal story related to a topic, describe their experience with the group, or deliver a more academically oriented short article. This event would be open to the public and ideally include a series of additional participants to contribute to the conversation. A scholar, artist, or journalist could be invited to speak on the topic explored by the event. The presentations would be followed by a question and answer period involving participants and the audience to promote the continuation of critically reflective dialogue and to carry the conversation forward. To this end, a social dinner afterward could be organized to allow the dialogue to continue in a more informal manner.

Rather than viewing the proposed group as a radical alternative to humanities courses available in colleges and universities, it might be best to view it as a continuation of prior attempts to widen the reach of the liberal arts and engage with the public outside the world of departments, programs, and courses. Because sessions revolve around engaging with core texts, the groups are similar to the Great Books Programs that begin in America in the post-WWI era. These programs arose in liberal arts colleges in North America alongside the more publicly oriented Great Books movement—composed of off-campus reading groups—and sought to resist growing disciplinary specialization. Beginning at Columbia University in 1921 and spreading outward, Great Books Programs were based on a series of canonical texts spanning from Ancient Greece to the modern era and were meant to provide a solid grounding in the humanities (see Adler and Wolff, 1959). A dominant criticism of the Great Books Program has been the white, Western, Eurocentric bias inherent in the texts on the list, and the groups I propose would have the mobility to not only move beyond such a perspective, but to use an inquiry-based approach to directly challenge this history. More recently, Kathleen (2019) has done work to connect (or reconnect) the private realm of the university with the public to which it ostensibly serves. The small-scale reading group described here contributes to this by hopefully attracting members of communities who otherwise lack the resources, time, access, or motivation to take university level humanities courses.

A more expansive layer of the proposal involves the development of a network of such reading and discussion groups across Canada and beyond. The metaphor of the rhizome, described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, provides a model for how this might evolve. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome provides a way to explore non-linear forms of connection. Rhizomes send out shoots in multiple directions to take root and establish growth, and “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 21). Opposing the linear life-cycle of a tree growing vertically from a seed, a “rhizome has no beginning or end” (Courmier, 2011), which Dave Courmier compares to the learning process. Because the proposal outlines open-ended discussion groups that periodically gather to explore guiding questions, a connection can be made between these small-scale temporary learning communities and a form of rhizomatic education which can establish networks without clearly defined beginnings and endings to promote assemblages where learning can emerge. The proposed group
opposes the cumulative approach of university courses leading to a degree in the same way Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome: “In contrast to centered...systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is...acenttered, nonhierarchical...[and] defined solely by a circulation of states” (1987: 21).

For Dave Cormier, “[o]rganizing a conversation, a course, a meeting or anything else to be rhizomatic involves creating a context, maybe some boundaries, within which a conversation can grow” (2011). From the books chosen to the guiding questions focusing the conversation, the proposed groups could take a rhizomatic approach where emphasis is placed on the conditions for conversation to blossom. This approach also encourages the development of an interconnected network, and this speaks to a broader aspiration of the proposal. The larger idea would be to have each group of sessions emerge among a web of similar sessions existing in disparate locations. My wider ambition would be to gradually develop these groups throughout Canada and beyond. Again taking my cue from the international Shams community, the idea would be for people to be able to attend these sessions anywhere in the world. If I were to travel to Istanbul, or Hong Kong, for example, the hope would be to join a group as a way to meet locals, develop a wider sense of community, and perpetually expose myself to different perspectives. The broader idea, to put it rather optimistically and somewhat idealistically, is to make the global local.

From a rhizomatic perspective “knowledge can only be negotiated, and the contextual, collaborative learning experience shared by constructivist and connectivist pedagogies is a social as well as a personal knowledge-creation process with mutable goals and constantly negotiated premises” (Cormier, 2008). In this way, the reading and discussion groups I have proposed can have the freedom to “construct a model of education flexible enough for the way knowledge develops and changes today by producing a map of contextual knowledge” (Cormier, 2008) grounded in the pedagogical approach of inquiry-based learning.

**Inquiry-based learning and the pursuit of preferable futures**

Throughout the course, participants “must be discovery-oriented and the content under investigation must be meaningful” (McCaughan, 2015: 62) if those involved are to find the experience personally and socially enriching. If participants are asked to pursue questions that have no meaning in their life, the thrill of discovery may be absent. The questions and associated problems should be related to the lives of members. Because the group sessions are based on questions of interest to participants, the pedagogical approach of inquiry-based learning is most suitable. In an inquiry-based environment, learning occurs through the articulation of guiding questions and the subsequent exploration of ways to research and address these questions. Inquiry-based learning privileges process over product, and the pathways toward possible solutions take precedent over the identification of clear and distinct answers. This is particularly true of the proposed group, because the questions derived are meant to be complex and far-reaching. Inquiry-based learning starts “with a question followed by investigating solutions, creating new knowledge as information is gathered and understood, discussing discoveries and experiences, and reflecting on new-found knowledge” (Savery, 2015: 11). This form of
learning “places the outcome of the learning process in the hands of the student” (McCaughan, 2015: 62) or participant by promoting the pursuit of ideas as ways to address guiding questions. And because these questions and associated problems are related to the passions and interests of participants, there is ample room for each to bring their unique lived experience to the topic.

A related approach is known as problem-based learning (PBL), a “learner-centered approach that empowers learners to conduct research, integrate theory and practice, and apply knowledge and skills to develop a viable solution to a defined problem” (Savery, 2015: 5). Questions explored in inquiry-based learning typically indicate the boundaries of a problem, so the two approaches overlap and inform each other. As John Savery indicates:

The primary difference between PBL and inquiry-based learning relates to the role of the tutor. In an inquiry-based approach the tutor is both a facilitator of learning encouraging/expecting higher-order thinking and a provider of information. In a PBL approach the tutor supports the process and expects learners to make their thinking clear, but the tutor does not provide information related to the problem – that is the responsibility of the learners. (2015: 11)

The open-ended format of the proposed course is flexible enough to take either of these approaches. For example, members could take on the role of the facilitator for one session, which would require more preparation but would give individuals the opportunity to trying leading discussions. Regardless of what active or passive role facilitators take, both inquiry and problem-based learning support “the ability to think critically, analyze and solve complex, real-world problems, to find, evaluate, and use appropriate learning resources; to work cooperatively, to demonstrate effective communication skills, and to use content knowledge and intellectual skills to become continual learners” (Savery, 2015: 8). The development of such skills contributes to a more critically engaged individual better able to formulate questions, discuss ideas, and opinions in a respectful and inclusive environment, and move toward strategies and approaches to address them.

To formulate problems through inquiry does not necessarily mean solving them, and questions explored can be approached as wicked problems which “defy complete definition and cannot be solved using existing modes of enquiry and decision making...[such that no] final solutions for such problems are possible since any resolution generates further issues” (Bernstein and Hillel, 2015: 7) or further questions. The inquiries and problems explored in the course are predominantly meant as a way to orient the group toward possible futures. Each group can work through historical, social, and cultural issues to experiment with alternative pathways that a particular community, city, or country might take. In this way, I believe that inquiry and problem-based learning parallel characteristics of what is called futuring. Futuring is an aspect of speculative design that uses imaginative exercises of envisioning and designing prototypes or models with a view to various possibilities and potentials. These different futures are arrayed between those that are possible, those that are plausible, and those that are (for the designers or participants) preferable. This taxonomy can be productively used by the session groups to direct their inquiries toward both a deeper understanding of current trajectories leading to probable futures and an understanding of changes that might lead toward possible or even
preferable ones. Additionally, I draw on this taxonomy as a strategy for envisioning a future where groups such as the one I propose would exist within a rhizomatic network of short-term learning communities. The range of possible futures is the widest. There are many directions humanities education might take over the next few decades. Second in width of potential are the plausible directions that humanities education could take. Plausible futures are tenuously connected to current practices, ideas, and institutions, but there is room for different perspectives. Probable futures are those most closely connected to current practices, ideas, and institutions. Such probable futures trace the most logical extension of current social and cultural trajectories. Preferable futures involve taking steps to challenge, critique, or alter these probable trajectories by exploring alternative practices, ideas, and institutions. Preferable futures are both possible and plausible.

The growth of open-source online education provides one interesting pathway into possible and preferable futures. As Charles Muscatine writes, the “growth of an ‘open-source’ culture – such as exemplified by MIT’s Open-Courseware, Rice University’s Connexions, and the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities directed by Regis University – suggests that a whole universe of excellent educational materials will soon be out there for the taking” (2009: 48). I agree with Muscatine but contend that many people are unable to successfully navigate this wealth of knowledge. How, then, can learners be motivated with these resources so close at hand? How can their learning be focused to establish structures and goals that are realistic, exciting, and inspiring for each individual? One way is to recognize the potentials of such open-source platforms and to draw on this wealth of disciplinary knowledge-sets as part of the proposed group. The aim is to provide participants with the personal and collaborative skills to better navigate the profusion of information available online, and develop the ability to productively navigate these channels. For Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown “learning is taking place in day-to-day life through the fusion of vast informational resources with very personal, specific needs and actions” (2011: 16). It is important to recognize the “potential of MOOCs [massive open online courses] to advance values we share – broad access to knowledge and education – along with perceptions of their failings – passive learning, the lack of faculty-student mentoring, and their tendency to convey information rather than help students learn to create knowledge” (Porterfield, 2014: 117). Social groups like the one proposed above could help support a collaborative exploration of this massive repository by focusing inquiry into particular channels and pathways. Course material available for free online could be incorporated as additional resources for interested participants insofar as it directly addresses aspects of the collectively established guiding questions. The networks established could provide a learning community for individuals to pursue lines of inquiry (akin to rhizomatic offshoots) by navigating the wealth of resources.

The changing nature of work is another example of using the exercise of probable, possible, and preferable futures as an instigator of inquiry-based learning. The landscape of work is rapidly changing, with many sectors evolving into what is being called a “gig economy.” The term “gig economy” refers to the broad “increase in short-term contracts rather than permanent or stable jobs” (Woodcock and Graham, 2020: 13), and the “rise of the ‘gig economy’ has become symbolic of the way that work is changing” (Woodcock
This change will only increase, and the rate of change seems to be progressively speeding up. Education needs to change alongside shifts in relations between employees and employers and companies and corporations. Working in a gig economy “entails workers spending less time at one job, a risk of time spent without income, workers undertaking more jobs (possibly at the same time), and unpaid time spent searching for tasks or gigs” (Woodcock and Graham, 2020: 12). The proposed sessions could help in the development of flexible skills for people to successfully navigate and (hopefully) thrive within collaborative groups whose diversity of experience works for (rather than against) the ability of the team to produce within a gig economy framework. Rebecca Chopp points out that “[w]hen surveyed, employers indicate that the top skills they want in new employees include critical thinking, the ability to innovate, and the ability to work on teams with members of diverse groups” (2014: 16). The proposed group seeks to cultivate, facilitate, and support the acquisition and/or development of these skills.

The diverse makeup of each small group, combined with the collaborative nature of inquiry related to the lived experience of participants, will ensure that members have the opportunity to draw on their own lives while developing their ability to listen and process other perspectives. This includes meeting people where they are at in terms of reading, writing, and critical thinking abilities. Stanley writes that the “majority of employers agree…that having both field-specific knowledge and skills and a broad range of skills and knowledge is most important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success…[a]nd f ew think that having field-specific knowledge and skills alone is what is most needed for individuals’ career success” (2019: 100). There is a balance between gaining knowledge that is specific to a disciplinary field and knowledge that cuts across specific skill-sets. The proposed group could thus provide space for both college graduates and those who have not had the opportunity or desire to attend college to develop their critical thinking and communication skills. Through discussion and collaboration, new possibilities can emerge to help participants think about their own goals in relation to others.

**Speculating on the humanities**

In this article, I have sought to imagine an updated repositioning of prior groups such as the Great Books movement that sought to stimulate broader public engagement with the humanities. By relocating liberal arts theories and methods into these small-scale reading and discussion groups, I seek to bring ideas contained in foundational cultural texts to a contemporary context that problematizes the white, Western, Eurocentric bias inherent in this very history. As John Seely Brown points out, “[o]nce I imagine something new, then answering how to get from here to there involves steps of creativity…I can be creative in solving today’s problems, but if I can’t imagine something new, then I’m stuck in the current situation” (2014). Through imagining an alternative to an aspect of liberal arts education, I am encouraging “a renewed curiosity about ways of living as being contingent, constructed, and transformable” (Kjaersgaard et al., 2016: 13). Such
transformations look to a series of possible futures and help guide aspects of society, however subtly, toward preferable futures.

The goals of small-scale groups like the one described above are not about lofty social change but community-based connections meant to foster a series of overlapping conversations that unfold in productive, respectful, and enriching ways. I believe many people would benefit from exposure to some of the tools of critical reading, writing, and thinking I have gained as a result of my privileged position as a student nearing the end of a doctorate in the humanities. I seek to make some of the theories and methods more accessible and more flexible in their aims. Inquiry-based learning promotes the emergence of rhizomatic networks of learning communities who generate and collectively address questions that pertain to their immediate lives and the wider world in which they live. By using speculative design, I have freed myself of overly pragmatic concerns and have allowed myself space to playfully imagine an international network of short-term, small-scale groups who are able to bring aspects of the humanities outside the realm of the corporate degree-granting university system. Beyond the limited realm of knowledge production within the context of contemporary universities—here I am thinking of the publication of articles, book chapters and monographs, and the presentation and participation in scholarly conferences—are other possible avenues to render transformative ideas more available to be used to explore questions and concerns that affect people’s everyday lives.

Unlike certain other scholars (Côté and Allahar: 2011, Barnett, 2013, Newfield, 2016), I have not focused on using my proposal as a way to critique or criticize current institutional practice. The university can be a place that houses radical reform, but as an institution will not likely be open to major structural reformation. For many people, there are benefits and advantages to the current system, not least of which is the seeming necessity of post-secondary education for many careers. At the same time, I believe that there are opportunities to explore alternative models that exist entirely independent of this framework. But “[s]o persuasive is the power of the institutions we have created that they shape not only our preferences, but actually our sense of possibilities” (Illich, 1969: 160). I feel there is a “need to create a new institution, rather than expect to redesign or reorganize an existing organization, since resistance to change is endemic in higher education” (Stanley, 2019: 19). The word institute connotes a pervasive social system, and institutes tend to solidify into standardized sets of practices. The beauty of using speculative design concepts to freely and playfully imagine alternatives—such as the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) at Warwick University or the one proposed in this article—is that such ephemeral social groups can retain a high degree of flexibility. After all, speculative design is not meant to provide a concrete, meticulously planned roadmap for how to travel from the current model to a possible (or even preferable) alternative. Instead, speculation is a freer exercise meant to ignite the imagination. Holding to such an idealized view, Ferrall writes that:

A liberal education defines the relationship of its holders to the world around them. They are seldom satisfied with their level of knowing. They wonder, and bring their analytical resources and knowledge to bear on their wondering. The life of their minds is
The proposed group could provide some community support for interested participants to connect, collaborate, and learn in an open-ended environment that draws on concepts and approaches within the liberal arts.

As Jane Dammen McAuliffe points out, “[t]he very concept of community now has dimensions, both local and global, that move us far beyond our campus boundaries” (2014: 144–45). A liberal arts education does not need to “be a campus-contained institution, but [can be] a broadly networked one” (McAuliffe, 2014: 151) that includes those who may lack the finances, time, or desire to pursue accreditation in the humanities. Financial and pragmatic barriers to post-secondary learning will continue, but I believe there are a number of people interested in pursuing questions through disciplinary knowledge-sets grounded in the humanities who would benefit from access to such groups. The “theory of alternatives tells us where we want to go; and the theory of transformation tells us how to get from here to there...[and] how to make viable alternatives achievable” (Wright, 2010: 17). To this end, realizing the project proposed here would take collaborations, a small amount of funding, and a generosity of time and energy from all members. But such groups serve a need that I have noticed in my community of students, friends, and colleagues who seem eager for opportunities to engage in critical dialogue without wondering whether they will be tested, evaluated, or awarded for what they say or how they read and write.

According to Muscatine, “[t]he smorgasbord of courses, the random accumulation of credits, the lectures and exam system, the emphasis on memorization at the expense of other mental activities – seem designed to produce people who will be merely compliant, tolerably efficient subordinates, submissive to authority, and practiced in the passive consumption of pre-digested ideas” (2009: 124). This is precisely what my speculative proposal is designed to resist and push against. In a culture moving toward micro-credentials—in which all skills are assessed and verified by a proliferation of credential granting courses and institutions—my proposal offers an alternative that is conspicuously and consciously free of any such credentialization. As more people feel pressured to consistently add to their list of credentials as a display of competency, the proposed reading and discussion groups are meant as a space to temporarily escape such structures, as well as offering a space to critique such cultural shifts. I believe that with humanities education, what most people “are really looking for is ideas that would make the world, and their own lives, intelligible to them” (Schumacher, 1973: 68), because “[w]hen a thing is intelligible you have a sense of participation; when a thing is unintelligible you have a sense of estrangement” (Schumacher, 1973: 68). After 6 years as a Teaching Assistant in a liberal arts department at York University in Toronto, Canada, I have the impression that many students experience a deep sense of estrangement when it comes to their education. These students do not seem to be actively participating in the exploration of ideas, but rather fulfilling requirements deemed a prerequisite to any sort of enriching, rewarding, or financial sustainable employment.

I agree with William Bowen when he writes that “[w]hat counts is both the acquisition of broad-gauged, problem-solving skills and knowing how to function effectively in
collaborative settings [that] involve all kinds of people” (2014: 191). Pushing against the pragmatic career-oriented state of the current university system in Canada, I believe that “it is the nonvocational, non-career-based ‘uselessness’ of the subject matter that opens the door to appreciating knowing for the sake of knowing and that drives home the fact that learning is of value in and of itself, without regard to whether it is directly linked to a marketable skill” (Ferrall, 2011: 18). Through short-term exploration of humanities theories and methods used as part of an inquiry-based approach to aspects of life most important to participants, the “uselessness” of critical reading, writing, and discussion can become part of a broader valorization of learning as a playful process of creativity, imagination, and the gradual acquisition of transferable skills. I believe that “it is no longer useful to make a sharp distinction between learning to enlarge, appreciate, and enjoy one’s personal experience, and learning to have a successful career” (Muscatine, 2009: 10). The group I propose will not directly lead to any particular career, nor will it necessarily necessary directly impact the current career path of an individual participant. It can, however, help to enrich the personal and social lives of those who take part by heightening an enjoyment of the learning process. The approach here is meant to emphasize play, creativity, and free inquiry by drawing on aspects of disciplinary knowledge sets as a way to engage participants and allow their experiences to inform this engagement and encourage personal investment.

The value placed on accreditation and the pursuit of credentials as essential to the acquisition of well-paying work sets limits on the belief people might hold about any inherent value on a free-form pursuit of questions grounded in the theories and methods of the humanities. For Wright “the actual limits of what is achievable depend in part on the beliefs people hold about what sorts of alternatives are viable” (2010: 15), and I am interested in opening up new possibilities about viable situations where casual, collaborative learning can take place. The group proposed may appear to work against the pragmatic values placed on an accredited university education, but it is important to keep in mind that, as Ivan Illich wrote many years ago, “[m]ost learning is not the result of instruction…[but] rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting” (1970: 9). I work to “embrace open-ended speculation and concrete proposals for changes as modes of inquiry” (Kjaersgaard et al., 2016: 6) into educational alternatives in today’s world (see also Miller, 2015; Miller and Linder, 2015). Such speculative inquiry also points toward the distinction between possible, probable, and preferable futures. I agree with Dunne and Raby that “[u]ltimately it is positive and idealistic because…change is possible…things can be better; it is just that the way of getting there is different; it is an intellectual journey based on challenging changing values, ideas, and beliefs” (2013: 35). My proposal works toward the belief that “imaginative horizons can be given articulate but tentative form” (Halse, 2013: 191). The reading and discussion group I have sketched out in this article is clearly not for everyone. It may not be for most people. But for those who might find it appealing, I cannot quell my desire to see such alternatives made available for people who want to read, write, question, discuss, provoke, play, and explore a world of ideas in an inclusive, curious, free-spirited environment.
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Notes
1. www.lexico.com-definition/speculation.
2. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/design.
3. https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/liberal-arts-college/liberal-arts-ba.html.
4. http://www.sfu.ca/humanities.html.
5. https://futurestudents.yorku.ca/program/humanities.
6. https://www.flowcode.com/page/shamscommunity.
7. https://www.instagram.com/shams.community/?hl=en.
8. https://socialinnovation.org/.
9. For an introduction to the Great Books Program see Adler and Wolff (1959). For a contemporary example see: https://www.georgebrown.ca/preparatory-liberal-studies/liberal-arts-sciences/global-great-books-certificate.
10. A helpful diagram of these future possibilities can be seen here: https://www.noosphe.re/post/618610484269154304/pppp-illustration-by-dunne-raby-speculative.
11. In this way, I align with the BLASTER project (https://www.ecolas.eu/eng/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Learning-and-Teaching-in-the-Liberal-Arts-small.pdf.), or the recent study What Liberal Education Looks Like (https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/publications/what-liberal-education-looks-what-it-who-it%E2%80%99s-and-where-it), that both seek to renew the ideals of a liberal education.
12. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/sharing-practice/formative/playfulnessinhighereducation.

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