

KRISTINA A. BICHER | JAN 7 2015, 12:00 PM ET



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of the attendees actually majored in English, though many were repeat offenders to ModPo. After reading Dickinson's poem aloud, we each received our assignment—a word or phrase from the text for discussion. (Someone even got the word "I.") This meetup proceeded just like any of ModPo's online sessions, the main difference being the time spent on each poem and the in-person interaction we shared with Filreis and his cadre of graduate students. The online course, which lasts 10 weeks, covers the whole canon of modern and postmodern poetry, from Allen Ginsberg to Rae Armantrout.

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Contrary to popular belief, the "MOOC need not be impersonal," said Filreis, who describes close reading as "a social act." Filreis isn't a fan of conventional lectures. Instead, he wants to show students a new way of consuming literature, how to "slow down and read intensely, get excitement out of aesthetics and form, not content." Filreis wants to engage a range of people—not just students and educators, but doctors and engineers, immigrants who are still learning English. The diversity of the discussion groups isn't surprising; ModPo discussion groups have exploded in popularity nationally and even internationally. As of last Fall, Filreis or other ModPo staff were

moderating groups in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, D.C., San Francisco, and Prague. That's on top of the dozens of user-led groups hosted around the world.

But ModPo offers just one example of how poetry is increasingly making its mark on the online-education world. Harvard University literature professor Elisa New, for example, has launched a similar virtual course called Poetry in America. Now in its third year, the class is being expanded to include a two-year exploration of the entire American poet tradition. Like Filreis, New's mission is to make poetry resonate with a broader audience: "We have to get outside the gates. What we have [in poetry] is too precious. We have to stop beating ourselves up about how the humanities are dying and instead ask, 'How do we reach all those intelligent people who love language, all those kids who delight in the rhymes of hip hop?'"

New is also interested in how poetry "creates a sense of cultural self-understanding"—how it's used as a tool to reflect on identity, relationships, society, and history. To help guide members of the Harvard basketball team through Edward Hirsch's poem "[Fast Break](#)," for example, New dons an athletic t-shirt. She talks about Hirsch's use of adverbs, the effect of the long "i" sounds, high and gliding; she concludes by comparing basketball to a poem and life itself, each of which has an "overall form that can be seen if we pause to look at it."

And now, in addition to the online class, New is targeting even more "casual" learners: She just developed a television show based on her course. The pilot features well-known public figures ranging from Bill Clinton to Sonya Sanchez reading their favorite poems. Like ModPo, New's course is popular among users around the world, with students representing nearly 150 countries. Certain topics, such as Whitman, are more popular among participants than others. Others, meanwhile, have attracted specific populations. The section on Puritan poetry, for example, gained particular traction with users in the Middle East.

But skeptics of online education still question if academic subjects, let alone poetry, can be taught on the web. They stress that true scholarship takes patience and time—values that aren't inherent to online education. Even though many MOOCs offer certificates of completion, only 5 percent of those who

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enroll actually stick to it. And, despite their popularity, both UPenn and Harvard’s poetry classes have experienced high dropout rates as well.

But Filreis suggests that the courses’ objectives are more important than their measurable outcomes. ModPo, he said, isn’t about the number of people who complete it—and it certainly isn’t designed to replace a traditional college seminar. After all, data indicates that most of the students who sign up already have some formal higher education under their belt. Rather, ModPo—and Poetry in America—are about reaching more minds and opening more people to the possibilities of language. They’re about finding Whitman not only under boot soles but on smartphones, too.

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KRISTINA A. BICHER
Kristina Bicher is a poet based in the New York City area.

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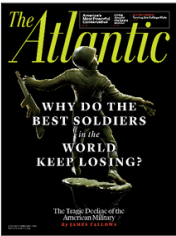
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