

The Web Poet's Society

Can an online course revive interest in the classics?

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



Steve Johnson/Flick

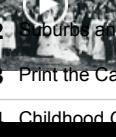
It's 3 a.m. and the emails are coming in fast and furious. My iPhone is pinging like a Vegas slot machine that's come up all cherries. What's the emergency? I had just joined a discussion thread for a popular online poetry class—[ModPo](#)—and Emily Dickinson's "Volcanoes Be in Sicily" is the subject of hot debate. Within 24 hours, there are over a hundred posts about this poem alone: "Why the archaic use of 'be'?" "What of the perplexing 'lava steps'?" One participant lapses into German and has started a discussion group in Switzerland. Another gushes, "ModPo=cyber peyote."

It's the third year of the Modern & Contemporary American Poetry course, the brainchild of University of Pennsylvania English professor [Al Filreis](#). ModPo is taught out of UPenn but it's delivered as a [MOOC](#)—also known as a "massive open online course"—meaning it's a virtual, free class available to Internet users around the world. ModPo enrolled 42,000 students in its first year and some 38,000 this past semester. Enrollees get access to a syllabus, links to texts, and prerecorded discussions of the poems, along with other video clips. They take periodic quizzes and write optional essays. And every Wednesday features a live webcast from UPenn's [Kelly Writers House](#) in Philadelphia. Filreis stresses that the community aspect—study and meetup groups, real or virtual—is integral to the online coursework, and he and his team strive to make themselves available to students. After our recent phone interview, Filreis even invited me to a meetup in Manhattan to see ModPo in action.

I shuffled down a dark stairwell into the basement of the Hudson Park branch of the New York Public Library, one of ModPo's newest partners. Nearly 50 people of all ages were already sitting in a circle under blinking fluorescent lights by the time I arrived, a few minutes late; more students streamed in after. Like an AA meeting, we introduced ourselves one-by-one and then divulged our secret—that we were, in fact, interested in poetry.

Gregarious and welcoming, Filreis listened carefully as we identified ourselves and explained our backgrounds. The group included architects and archivists, lawyers and therapists, business people and more than one "science-y guy." Few

MOST POPULAR

- 

Before Tinder, a True

1 Europe Is Under Siege

2 Suburbs, and the New American Poverty

3 Print the Cartoons; Show the Movie

4 Childhood Guilt, Adult Depression?

5 Phylicia Rashad and the Awful Power of 'Forget These Things' **MORE IN**

6 The Tragedy of the American Military



Web Poets Society: How White Flight Ravaged the Mississippi River
KRISTINA A. BICHER

You Must Be This Old to Die

9 The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur



Group Projects and the Secretary Effect

10 The NYPD Officers Who See Racial Bias in the NYPD ROSE EVELETH



What Students in China Have Taught Me About U.S. College Admissions

TERRY CRAWFORD

PHOTO



19 PHOTOS

Winners of the 2014 National Geographic Photo Contest

JUST IN

The Messy, Beautiful, Unique *Empire*

JOE REID AND KEVIN O'KEEFE

The Same Old 'New' Congress

RUSSELL BERMAN

RUSSELL BERMAN

VH1's *Hindsight* Binges on the Past

LENIKA CRUZ

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.

We must stop beating ourselves up about how the humanities are dying. We must ask how we can reach all those people who love language, all those kids who delight in the rhymes of hip hop.

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

MOST POPULAR

- 1 Europe Is Under Siege
- 2 Suburbs and the New American Poverty
- 3 Print the Cartoons, Show the Movie
- 4 Childhood Guilt, Adult Depression?
- 5 Phylicia Rashad and the Awful Power of 'Forget These Women'
- 6 The Tragedy of the American Military
- 7 How White Flight Ravaged the Mississippi Delta
- 8 You Must Be This Old to Die
- 9 The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur
- 10 The NYPD Officers Who See Racial Bias in the NYPD

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.

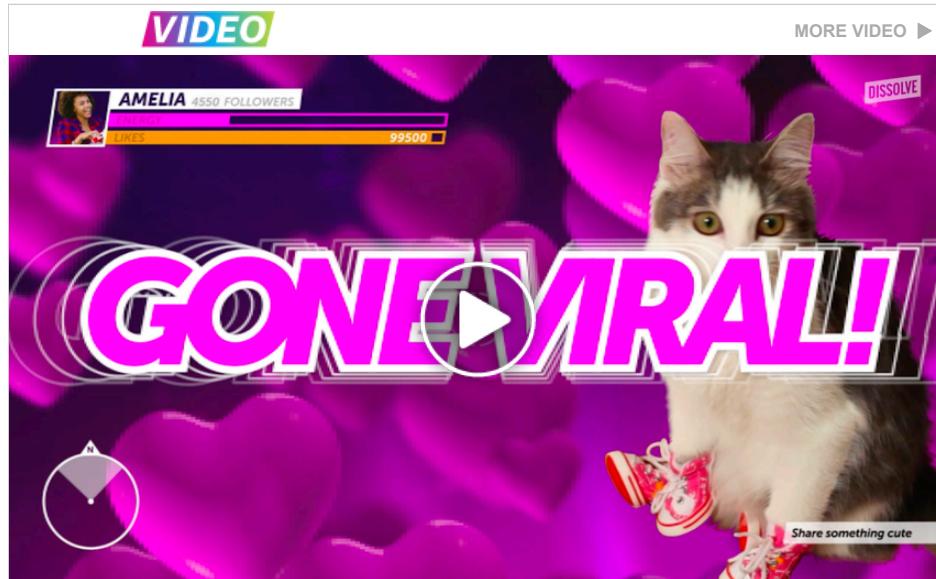
[Jump to Comments](#)



KRISTINA A. BICHER

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

[ALL POSTS](#) | [FOLLOW](#)
@KRISTINAABICHER



Social Media: The Video Game

What if the validation of your peers could "level up" your life? A clever video satirizes selfies, faves, food porn, and cat photos.



MOST POPULAR

- 1 Europe Is Under Siege
- 2 Suburbs and the New American Poverty
- 3 Print the Cartoons, Show the Movie
- 4 Childhood Guilt, Adult Depression?
- 5 Phylicia Rashad and the Awful Power of 'Forget These Women'
- 6 The Tragedy of the American Military
- 7 How White Flight Ravaged the Mississippi Delta
- 8 You Must Be This Old to Die
- 9 The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur
- 10 The NYPD Officers Who See Racial Bias in the NYPD

TOP STORIES

MORE ARTICLES ▶

The Importance of Being *Charlie***MOST POPULAR**

- 1** Europe Is Under Siege
- 2** Suburbs and the New American Poverty
- 3** Print the Cartoons, Show the Movie
- 4** Childhood Guilt, Adult Depression?
- 5** Phylicia Rashad and the Awful Power of 'Forget These Women'
- 6** The Tragedy of the American Military
- 7** How White Flight Ravaged the Mississippi Delta
- 8** You Must Be This Old to Die
- 9** The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

After you comment, click Post. If you're not already logged in you will be asked to log in or register.

blog comments powered by Disqus

ATLANTIC MEDIA

The Messy, Beautiful, Unique <i>Empire</i>	Can Columbus, Ohio, Become a Sports Capital?	Cartoon: Charlie Hebdo	Obama Calls Deadly Shooting at French Newspaper 'Cowardly' and 'Evil'	The Pentagon Wants To Extend the Range of One of Its Missile Interceptors
The Same Old 'New' Congress	Seattle Gets Doused in a Mysterious 'Stinky Fog'	Cartoon: #JeSuisCharlie	The State of Segregation in the Suburbs	Here's Why Security Cameras Were No Help In Capturing Paris Terrorists
VH1's <i>Hindsight</i> Binges on the Past	'Je Suis Charlie' in Photos	Mercedes has designed a self-driving car and it's as luxurious as you'd think	GOP Tensions Escalate After Speaker Vote	How US Special Forces Uses Google Maps
More from The Wire	More from CityLab	More from Quartz	More from National Journal	More from Defense One

FOLLOW THE ATLANTIC

App store

Facebook

Twitter

Linkedin

Tumblr

RSS

E-NEWSLETTERS

Today's Top Stories

This Week

This Month

New at In Focus

CityLab

INFORMATION

FAQ

Subscribe Help

Masthead

Store

Emporium

Jobs

Privacy

Site Map

Terms and Conditions

Advertise

Advertising Guidelines

Press

Contact Us

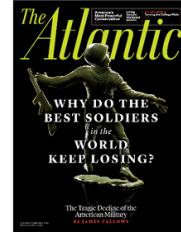
Special Reports

Atlantic Scene

Books

Events

Atlantic Media

SUBSCRIBEGet 10 issues a year
and save 65% off the
cover priceFraud alert regarding *The Atlantic*

FIRST NAME

LAST NAME

ADDRESS 1

ADDRESS 2

CITY

STATE ▼

ZIP

EMAIL

Next ►