

MOOC presentation, and are now being taught in a blended version.

The Bok Center report, as summarized by HarvardX, focuses on implementation of the blended format, not its educational impact. Students found the online materials interesting and engaging, but reported little change in how they prepared for class. They valued the flexibility the online materials afforded in pacing their learning, but emphasized the continuing importance of in-person discussion sections (which were eliminated in three courses to accommodate online learning time; students wanted sections reinstated). Finally, students used the online material to cut corners, “causing some to integrate the materials in less-than-meaningful ways”—suggesting the need for faculty members to clarify expectations for students in blended courses. The education-school researchers attempted to probe the learning effects of blended teaching; based on exam scores, they found no “significant impact.”

Findings from a far more ambitious attempt to assess learning and possible pedagogical efficiencies in blended classes were also released in July. In “Interactive Online Learning on Campus,” Ithaka S + R researchers detailed the use of hybrid courses (principally made available free of charge by Coursera) at the University of Maryland. Comparing blended with conventional sections of the same course, the study found ways to “enhance productivity in higher education by reducing costs

without compromising student outcomes.” Across disciplines and student subgroups, those in hybrid sections “did as well or slightly better than students in the traditional sections in terms of pass rates and learning assessments.” The productivity gains weren’t free, however; in routine use, Coursera and other MOOC vendors would charge for course content, and Maryland professors reported working 150 to 175 hours to adapt the outside MOOCs to their classes. Moreover, “students in the hybrid sections reported considerably lower satisfaction....Many indicated that they would prefer to have more face-to-face time with instructors.” These results, requiring improved course design and delivery, might well be expected in such experiments; but in the meantime the suggestion of significant cost savings, with no sacrifice of learning, may carry the day in much of U.S. higher education. (Lawrence S. Bacow, a member of the Harvard Corporation and senior adviser to Ithaka, is credited for helping to shape the research.)

Indeed, the *Chronicle’s* 2014 survey of 350 four-year college presidents, published as *The Innovative University*, found that 81 percent expect “hybrid courses that have both face-to-face and online components” to have a positive effect on higher education—by far the largest positive score among seven, mostly technological, innovations. But 52 percent expect MOOCs to have the most negative impact (only 2 percent viewed them positively). Addressing the annual

meeting of the National Association of College and University Business Officers in Seattle in July, Bill Gates ’77, LL.D. ’07, who champions MOOCs and education technology, also propounded a more nuanced vision. He called most current MOOCs “mediocre,” of use only for “the most motivated students,” but predicted that improved versions, used as enriched textbooks, would in the near future provide huge opportunities for remedial math, writing instruction, and entry-level courses in general. (The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which Gates runs, funded the Ithaka study, part of its larger investment in research on MOOCs.)

In the meantime, that future is arriving, outside the conventional boundaries of higher education. During the summer, Starbucks announced that its employee tuition-reimbursement program would shift toward degree-focused programs offered online by Arizona State University. And Udacity (like Coursera a for-profit online venture), which previously partnered with Georgia Tech and AT&T for a low-cost, online computer-science master’s degree, has now joined AT&T to offer a “NanoDegree”: basic programming skills required to qualify for an entry-level data-analyst or app-design job at the company. Each innovation is far from the ivy-covered halls of selective academia—but each is an interesting and possibly large-scale application of the new learning technologies to underserved populations not now enrolled in programs on the country’s campuses.

THE UNDERGRADUATE

“Charlie Parker, Who Played the Saxophone”

by NOAH PISNER ’14

I KEPT my spelling tests from third grade. My mother says this was an eight-year old’s effort to catalogue his vocabulary, and quotes me, apocryphally: *How else will I know which words I know?* There are 22, hole-punched in a binder, on the cover of which red gel pen hardened in tall, uneven letters:

DICTIONARY. (Did my teacher tell me to write this?) In all the tests I misspelled only one word. A red-ink correction tells me that word was *passion*. I wrote *passing*.

“Don’t so be so glum!” my mother said when I rediscovered the error. “Maybe this doesn’t mean you’ve passed up your

passion”—I was staring unhappily into my oatmeal—“but rather that your passion is in letting things pass!”

We had been clearing out my old projects from the basement, something I always said I would not do until school was over, which—as of the end of May—it was. Early in the process, I had come across a set of note cards from an oral report I was assigned to do on Charlie Parker for Black History Month in 1997. In preparing the report, I realized, I never listened to a Parker song. Silly as it sounds, it didn’t occur to my teacher or parents to play one for me. Instead I spent the time reading a Parker biography, weeping over how he spent so much of his life fighting morphine addiction and mental illness. I was seven and had never heard the

phrase *nervous breakdown*. Someone could have played me a 1945 Bird song, and said, “Hear that, son? Hear how it sounds like water through an open doorway? Sometimes music isn’t enough to get the sadness out.” Someone could have explained it with that trite, perfect zeal, and I would have known what jazz meant, or thought I knew. Maybe I would have felt inspired to become a saxophonist because of it. No—all I did was explain to my first-grade class how they, too, could lose their minds. I remember precisely how it began. His music was held as apposite: “Charlie Parker, who played the saxophone, was...”

I get angry with parents for missed opportunities: *If only they had given books instead of toys, or taken me to a Redskins game, or moved us to California—I could have been a reader, a Redskins fan, a Californian.* It upsets me, I realize, not because I would ever have wanted to be these things, but because I want to have something I can say is a lifelong passion. Do you know what I mean? I want to be like Flaubert, who raised his arms at the age of 12 and proudly declared that he would be a great French writer, and, by George, he was. I think of my best friend at Harvard who lived with the saxophone attached to his lips. Here’s a guy who aced Math 21a and knows books better than most English majors. But when it comes down to it, the sax is it. It’s always been it. Once, I asked him how he came to know this and he told me it was like learning to read: “You don’t remember learning, right? It just sort of happened.”

The passion could have even been mundane. My brother’s friend Matt just got his accounting license. When he was six, he knew himself very well and he’d tell people that his goal in life is to find things that are out of place and put them back into place. I love this. As a child on the playground, this meant returning balls to bins before the bell rang. Now as an adult, it means getting the numbers to add up right. “I have no desire to be a calculator,” he once told me. “But I *am* jealous of the file cabinets.”

Authorities on life—*authors*, for short—assure me that passion is the be-all and end-all, the *raison d’être* and *sine qua non* of really living. Seize your passion, they write, yield everything to it. I heard this at Commencement, too: “Do what you love!” “Dream big!”

It’s great advice—*the best*—but I’ve gotten to a certain age and I realize the reason more talented people don’t take it is



because they never even knew what they loved to begin with; they didn’t really have what Flaubert or Matt did. For me, I always assumed I’d figure out my passion in college—pick a passion, pick a major, pick a career. Sometime between freshman and sophomore year my heart would yelp and say, “Noah, the thing you want most in the world is to help the poor and make movies. *Now chop chop!*”

I assumed my passion would arise spontaneously, intuitively, perhaps after some exposure, like the flu. And yet here I am, months after graduating, second-guessing all my choices because I don’t know if I feel strongly enough about them. I panic: What if, this whole time, I was meant to be a zookeeper? Or a biplane pilot?

I HAVE an on-and-off mentor who recently asked me why I might want to be a writer. It wasn’t until I said that *I have to write* that he started taking me seriously. I’m still not sure if I was honest when I said this, though—there are days I’d prefer to dangle my feet in the pool. But supposedly all the best writers feel this passion. As Avi Steinberg put it in *The New Yorker* last year, a dedicated writer gets shunted off by Philip Roth’s advising, “It’s torture, don’t do it,” and replies, “You had me at torture.” Etymologically, this follows. Like *patience*, *passion* comes from the

Latin *pati*, which doesn’t mean *to flow with exuberance*. It means *to suffer*.

What am I willing to suffer for? Honestly, a lot. At Harvard, I learned to love so many things—I read poems with Peter Sachs, wrote history for Luke Menand, rapped jazz with Vijay Iyer, studied neurodegenerative disease with Dave Liu, promoted labor protection in India with my thesis adviser, Sadhana Bery—but now I have to prioritize these things, picking and choosing what among my liberal art studies (or outside them) is worth my time, is worth making a vocation of. It’s a fortunate situation for someone to be in, but lacking some semblance of lifelong passion, I’m hesitant to proceed. It’s easier, for now, to wait at the station, but as time gains momentum I will eventually have to pick a train, and the missed lines will multiply exponentially until I arrive at some point—far out along some branch of life’s sumptuous complexity—from which there’s no turning back. There’s a term chess players will use—*zugzwang*—to refer to a situation in which you’d prefer to skip a turn, as any move will make you worse off. That’s it exactly: I feel Lear-sized, but must be sonnet-precise.

Then again, maybe that’s what’s insufferable about passion. It’s not the sitting down and doing it, it’s the sitting down and doing it when it’s a beautiful day out-

side and the trout are peckish. It's choosing what among the things you care about you're willing to forfeit.

I could have foreseen this. There was a point in my childhood—I'm sure of it—when I was passionate about everything, before things started dropping off. Once, years ago, there was a boy who loved Melanie Price. They had the same piano teacher and walked a similar route to school. When the boy told his parents that he would marry Melanie Price, they told him that he would not, that he would one day forget about her altogether. So the boy

promised never to change the way he felt. He'd buck the system, and commit to the things he loved. *I will, he vowed, love Melanie Price until the day I die.* But today he no longer plays the piano and he cannot remember if the girl was in his grade at school.

Those graduation orators get ahead of themselves. There's a cold truth behind passion no one's talking about and it has left the term rotting. Passion is something teenagers write about on college apps to tell admissions committees that they've got a plan and they'll stick to it. According to the College Board, high-school se-

niors use the word *passion* more than any other noun in their essays. (I did it, too, albeit with a synonym because I was afraid of sounding clichéd.) It's the same after college. Passion has become one of those empty qualifications you put on résumés or eHarmony profiles or when trying to sum yourself up to a new acquaintance. I interviewed at only one hedge fund; they were looking for a writer to make their RFPs and due-diligence reports *sing*. I had a day of one-on-ones in a conference room with weary men in lovely suits whose most frequent question was, *Are you passionate about corporate asset management?* Where does one find the unbidden desire to market stock portfolios? I wish I knew. How nice it must be to feel so passionately about something that pays so well.

Perhaps I was correct to spell *passion* wrong, for the word, subject to overuse, has lost its original oomph—has been left dumb, clichéd. *Passion* used to signify unequivocal want, luring us into bed sheets, inspiring art, bringing peace and the most horrific wars at once. And now it's a word my neighbor uses to describe her fondness for craisins.

It is both a sad and honest deflation.

I hope I'm wrong and epiphany will strike. There's a scene in Stanley Crouch's *Kansas City Lightning* where a stumbling, teenage Charles Parker Jr. hears Lester Young wailing on his sax at the Subway. "As Parker was listening," Crouch relates, "he began to understand what the tenor saxophonist was doing, and he broke out into a cold sweat." I've often pictured myself, right at the moment I make a big life decision. Sweating coldly, I suddenly become aware of my passion. I see the play and make the right call. There are worse mistakes to be made than spelling errors.

Does passion greet you from the hole of a horn? Or does it fill up from beneath like well water? In the 1600s in France, when an apprentice got hurt, or tired, the experienced workers would say, *It is the trade entering his body.* For them, passion was possession, something whispered by God. I listen and listen and listen. But He is not saying anything to me so let me guess: What would He say if he did whisper? ♡

Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow Noah Pisner '14 will soon be moving to New York City, where it is hard to be a fisherman, but harder to be a writer.



Olivia Munk and
Melanie Wang

New Fellows

This magazine's Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellows for the 2014-2015 academic year—selected from among nearly 30 applicants—will be Olivia Munk '16 and Melanie Wang '15. The fellows join the editorial staff and contribute to the magazine during the year, writing the "Undergraduate" column and reporting for both the print publication and harvardmagazine.com, among other responsibilities.

Munk, of Bellerose, New York (in Queens), and Leverett House, is concentrating in English and pursuing a secondary field in mind/brain/behavior. She is an associate editor of *The Harvard Crimson's* magazine *Fifteen Minutes* and a member of the features board of *The Harvard Advocate*, and an active director in the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club. She spent the summer in Berlin, enrolled in Harvard Summer School classes in film theory and documentary filmmaking.

Wang, of Wayland, Massachusetts, and Eliot House, is pursuing a social-studies concentration, focusing on gender and labor in the United States. She has been co-editor of *Manifesta*, the campus feminist magazine, and on the board of *Tuesday*, a literary magazine, and performs as a spoken-word poet. During the summer, she worked in Chicago organizing and conducting oral-history research with Walmart employees through Columbia University's Summer for Respect program.

The fellowships are supported by Jonathan J. Ledecy '79, M.B.A. '83, and named in honor of his mother. For updates on past Ledecy Fellows and links to their work, see <http://harvardmagazine.com/donate/ledecy-fellowships>.