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# Chapter One

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## Why Now

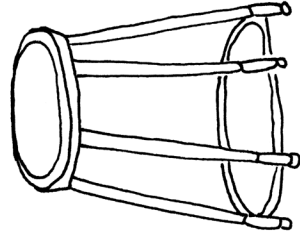
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In this chapter, we notice that all is not well in our spaces of learning. We will introduce you to the assumptions that guide this book, including our assumption that as you make projects, you are both facilitating material transformation and a transformation of yourself.

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\* We suggest that the following section be shared with the group as best suits your context, either read aloud—in whole or in part—or assigned to be discussed in your space of learning. Before you begin to read, we invite you to ground yourself in the space: notice the air on your skin and your feet on the ground. What are your feelings and sensations at this moment? What are you bringing to this text? Take a moment to become aware of this. We invite you to notice what comes up for you, as you are reading this chapter. We will ask you to reflect upon this at the end of this chapter.



This book aims to help you practice ways of being in the world by identifying the capacities that you wish to develop as an artist and then connecting these to your production process. *See Chapter 5: Capacities for more.*<sup>7</sup> We focus on the production of projects because artists, like you, often have ambitions for the impact of their projects that extend well beyond what is possible in the current system of production and circulation.

*We notice that:*

1. Artists create projects by focusing on a topic of attention. For example, this topic could be the qualities of ink on paper, or the consequences of mass incarceration.
2. Artists hope that each project will create dialogue about their topic of attention. At best, people who experience their project will gain a new perspective on the topic.
3. The average encounter with a finished project tends to last a few seconds. This is not enough time for a viewer to consider the topic of attention deeply enough to change their minds.
4. Artists are transformed in their process of making, experimenting, and researching. This transformation unfolds over time, often over months and years. As you make projects, you are facilitating a material transformation, but you are also facilitating a transformation of yourself.
5. The function of all cultural forms of expression is to reproduce or call into question the order of things, meaning the systems of values and beliefs that organize our daily lives. Cultural forms are inherently political.

*This led us to ask:*

1. What if artists could develop capacities of embodiment and collaboration throughout the process of making a project?
2. What if artists could be intentional about the expressions of power that are being reproduced in their process?
3. How might the process of making a project be aligned with the intentions of the finished project?

The result of these questions require that we teach differently. We will ask you to focus on your production process rather than your finished projects. The content and form of your projects may change as a result of this reflection on your production process. With these observations, questions, and claims in mind, we offer a framework for thinking carefully

**As you make projects, you are facilitating a material transformation, but you are also facilitating a transformation of yourself.**

about your production process. *See Chapter 7: Lifecycle Phases and Framework for more.*<sup>7</sup>

## All is Not Well

We can attest to the fact that all is not well in our spaces of learning. So much of what is taught in art classes today feels out of touch with lived experiences. There is dis/ease, anxiety, attention deficit, and general distraction. Spaces of learning are filled with people like you who wonder why all their teachers are white. You might question the emphasis on Eurocentric theories, practices, and cultural voices. You might sit in silence and fear because of differences between the group. You might be in a state of withdrawal in spaces of learning from constant social-media use.

If you are in art school you have been taught only by adjuncts or graduate students. You may panic when you have to get recommendations from adjuncts for jobs, grants, and graduate schools and the adjuncts cannot be reached. Some of you are graduating and cannot stay in the country because your visas run out after one year, and you can't find a job that gives you a work visa. Some of you are moving back to the homes you left because you are burdened by student loans. You can't imagine how you will sustain your creative practices because you have lost your communities of peers, the necessary spaces and tools to produce your art, and the time required for it because you need to work multiple jobs to survive. At the end of each semester, the dumpsters at your schools are filled with abandoned projects and discarded, toxic art materials.

*Questions which might be urgent for you include:*

- Why don't my teachers collaborate?
- Why do we put our projects in white cubes?
- Why do I have to rush? Why can't I make "only" one project per year?
- Why can't I get a job?
- Why can't I get a visa to stay in the United States?
- Why can't I get a show?
- Why do my friends say I'm a downer when I talk about politics and identity?
- Why are sports seen as more important than the arts on campus?
- Why don't my teachers talk about how they survive?
- Why am I checking my phone constantly?
- Why are most of my teachers white?
- Why do I have so much anxiety?

- If I am not taught how to make something, who will make it in the future?
- Why are my materials making me sick?
- Why do I have to make things that I will eventually have to throw out?
- Why don't we talk about race and class in spaces of learning?
- Why isn't my voice heard by the administration?
- Why do I feel so attacked in art school?
- What is the appropriate scale for my project?
- Why is art school free in so many other countries?
- Why do I feel uncomfortable speaking in critiques?
- Why don't most people feel welcome in art galleries?

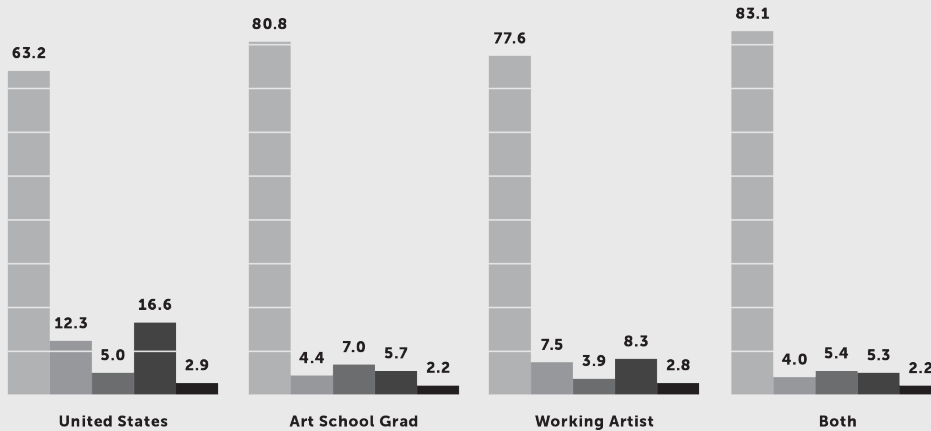
For many of you, an art program may be one of the only places where you can find a community of people who do not question the value of the arts. And yet art programs are failing people who want to talk about collaboration, healing, politics, or the political economy and who are often isolated or discouraged from having these conversations in studio programs.

In 2014, our collective BFAMFAPhD showed that although the population of the United State is 51 percent female, and art-school graduates are 60 percent female, only 46 percent of people who make their primary living in the arts are female. Although the United State is 63 percent white, non-hispanic, art-school graduates are 81 percent white, non-hispanic, and 77 percent of artists who make their primary earnings in the arts are white, non-hispanic.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, Eloise Sherrid and the Black Artists and the Designers of Rhode Island School of Design produced *The Room of Silence*, a documentary video about the lived experience of students of color in a predominantly white institution.<sup>2</sup> As one student says in the documentary, “I don't think responsible analysis and criticism around issues of identity should be something that you can opt out of.”<sup>3</sup> For us, and likely for many of you, this was a powerful call for change in art classrooms, and in higher education in general. This book is a response to that call.

If you are currently a student, we imagine that you decide to take art classes in order to:

1. Honor your imagination and curiosity;
2. Strengthen skills of craft, rigor, and patience that are necessary to make anything;
3. Trust your ability to turn ideas into reality; and then
4. Implement your ideas in dialogue with others; and finally
5. Acquire skills to sustain a livelihood in the arts after school.

## Predominance of White, Non-Hispanic Arts Graduates and Male Working Artists



### Mutually Exclusive Race and Ethnicity for Total Population and Artists 2012, U.S.

**Source:**  
U.S. Census Bureau  
2012 American Community Survey – Public Use Microdata Sample

White, non-Hispanic  
Black, non-Hispanic  
Asian, non-Hispanic  
Hispanic\*  
Other, non-Hispanic

\*Hispanics can be of any race

The population of arts graduates and working artists is not representative of our country. The population of the United States is 63 percent White, non-Hispanic, but 81 percent of arts graduates are White, non-Hispanic. The population of the United States is 12 percent Black, non-Hispanic, but only 4 percent of arts graduates are Black, non-Hispanic and only 8 percent of working artists are Black, non-Hispanic. The population of the United States is 17 percent Hispanic, but only 6 percent of arts graduates are Hispanic and only 8 percent of working artists are Hispanic.

The population of the U.S. is **17% Hispanic**, but only **6%** of arts graduates are Hispanic.

In our experience, most art classes focus on ways of making, emphasizing speed and quantity. You are asked to deliver as many projects as possible, as fast as possible. School administrators are pressured to enroll as many of you as they can, to keep the tuition and fees coming in. But when you leave school, what happens to you? Where do all of your projects go? This book addresses the life of projects after they are made, and the life of people after school.

What does an art education in speed and quantity provide? What are you being trained for? Where will you go with the disciplinary knowledge of painting or sculpture, and the ability to paint or sculpt, but no understanding of the mechanisms that enable your projects and ideas to circulate in the world? We believe it is time for you to learn how to make your projects circulate at appropriate scales.

“Professional practices” courses are often not included in many curricula and, if they are, rarely prepare you to make a living and find meaningful work after school. They are taught as though the majority of you:

1. Want to show your projects in a for-profit gallery space,
2. Will be able to get your work shown in a for-profit gallery space, and
3. Will make a living by selling projects through your gallery.

*Or that you:*

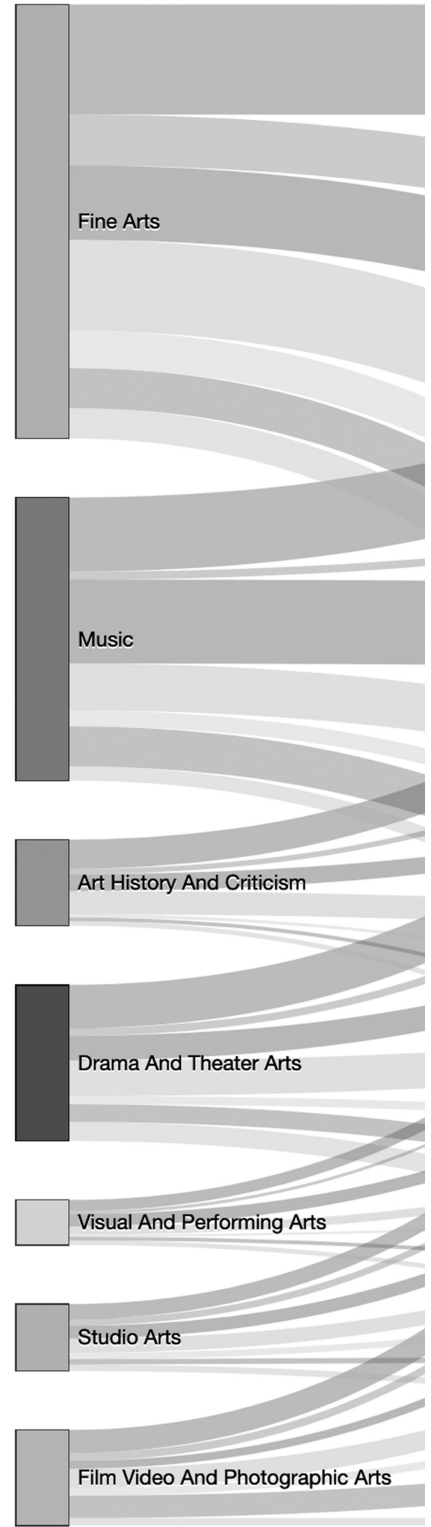
1. Want to get commissions and grants from non-profit organizations,
2. Will be able to get commissions and grants from non-profit organizations, and
3. Will make a living with commissions and grants from non-profit organizations.

*Or that you:*

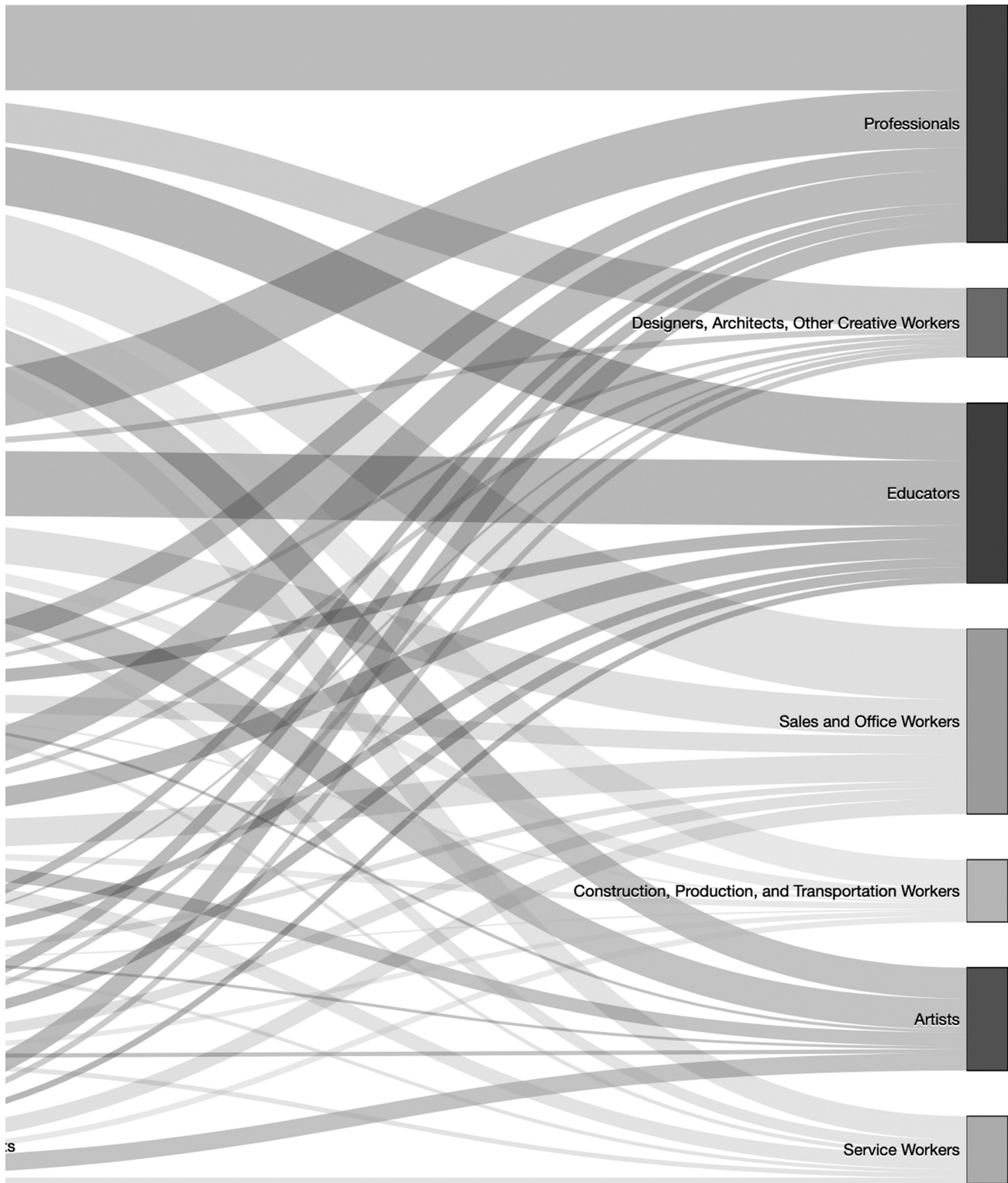
1. Want to get a teaching job,
2. Will be able to get a teaching job, and
3. Will be able to making a living with that teaching job.

The assumptions above do not represent the ambitions that many of you hold, and even when they do, it is widely acknowledged that artists with gallery representation do not make a living from the sale of their projects. Likewise, the new faculty majority is composed of precarious adjunct workers who do not make a living wage.<sup>4</sup> This is what we say to our

BFAMFAPhD contributors Julian Boilen (Producer), Vicky Virgin (Data Analyst), and Caroline Woolard (Editor). "School to Work." Visualization using ACS data from 2014 to show that the majority of fine arts graduates will work as professionals, creative workers, educators, or sales and office workers. Data from US Census Bureau 2014 American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample. Processed by BFAMFAPhD and IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota.







students, who inevitably email us or find us one-on-one to ask us what a BFA will get them:

While we cannot say that a degree in Fine Arts will guarantee a job in the arts upon graduation, we can say that Fine Arts education teaches you how to identify what matters to you (a rare ability) and to turn your idea into reality, with technical skills to do so. Almost no other discipline in the university will ask you what matters to you, or give you the skills to create something from nothing. These capacities will allow you to work in a number of fields. *See Chapter 5: Capacities □ for more.*<sup>7</sup> In order to have conversations with our students about the different careers that people with BFAs have, on Mondays we bring in people who fuse their skills in the arts with other fields. For example, we have brought in a sculptor with a BFA who is a Union Welder and makes \$130k a year, a painter with a BFA who works as a prosthetics technician and makes \$90k a year, a interdisciplinary artist with a BFA who runs her own upholstery business, and a more conventional artist with a BFA who is selling her artwork in the art market.

*So, what is the role of an art education, and how can you as an art student receive art training that enables you to find active and fulfilling livelihoods where your projects matter?*

Lucky for artists and for art departments, government agencies, corporations, and social-justice initiatives alike are turning to artists for their capacities as divergent thinkers who can embrace ambiguity and articulate contradictions in order to imagine plausible futures. The cultural theorist Chris Newfield writes that all students, whether they take art classes or not, need “to be more inventive, more craft based, more like artisans and less like assembly line workers.”<sup>5</sup> This is because, in the “knowledge economy” of networked information technology, you are more likely to invent a job you love than be hired for one. The job that you invent will rely upon arts-based skills and habits of mind, even if the job is not in an arts-related field.<sup>6</sup> *See Chapter 5: Capacities □ for more.*<sup>7</sup>

If you cannot invent a job after school, there is a good chance that you will work in the service industry.<sup>7</sup> No matter what, you will be subjected to the reality that average salaries have failed to keep pace with inflation since the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> However, it is worth noting that the World Economic Forum’s report on the future of jobs states that “social skills—such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others—will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills, such as programming or equipment operation and control.”<sup>9</sup> How will you prepare to critically assess how you can be employed by the institutions around you, finding uses for art that are aligned with your ambitions for the worlds you want to see?

## Reflection

*Please write or reflect upon the following:*

1. Why are you here, in this space of learning?
2. What are your intellectual interests?
3. What is urgent to address in this moment?
4. What skills, relationships, and knowledges will you need to acquire in order to implement your projects in school *and* after school?
5. \* What feelings and sensations came up for you while you were reading this chapter? For example, did you feel surprise, frustration, or excitement? How did you hold these in your body? For example, did you sense these emotions in your shoulders, neck, and back while reading this chapter? *See the Social-Emotional Intelligence Project Reflection activity in Chapter 4: Teacher/Facilitator Guides.*<sup>7</sup>

When you address these questions and the questions we return to throughout this book, we hope you can begin to connect life in school with life after school, to connect life as an artist with ways of being a person in the world. We hope you can identify and intervene in the economies you reproduce each day and in your relationships with the people around you. Instead of an art education in speed and quantity, we envision an education in contemplation, collaboration, and appropriate circulation of projects.

1. Susan Jahoda, Blair Murphy, Agnes Szanyi, Vicky Virgin, and Caroline Woolard (BFAMFAPhD), *Artists Report Back: A National Study on the Lives of Arts Graduates and Working Artists*, report, 2014, [http://bfamfaphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/BFAMFAPhD\\_ArtistsReportBack2014-10.pdf](http://bfamfaphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/BFAMFAPhD_ArtistsReportBack2014-10.pdf).

2. *The Room of Silence*, directed by Eloise Sherrid in collaboration with Black Artists and Designers of Rhode Island School of Design (2016), available, <http://www.eloisesherrid.com/the-room-of-silence>.

3. Ibid.

4. See Christopher Newfield, "Humanities Creativity in the Age of Online," *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 6 (October 1, 2013), <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/humanities-creativity-age-online>.

5. Ibid., 2–3. Newfield notes the following on p. 3, "Knowledge industries' was already a term in circulation by the time Clark Kerr helped popularize it in *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). Nonstandardized labor was a central concept in Ivin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970; New York: Bantam, 1984). A watershed exploration of the rise of customized production and flexible problem solving in manufacturing is Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984)."

6. See Julian Boilen (Producer), Vicky Virgin (Data Analyst), and Caroline Woolard (Editor) (BFAMFAPhD), "Poverty Rates," *Census Report*, US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Microdata 2009–2011, processed by BFAMFAPhD and IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, 2014, <http://censusreport.bfamfaphd.com>.

7. Of arts graduates in The United States who reported studio arts as their degree field, 19 percent work in sales and other office occupations, 17 percent are educators, 12 percent work in various professional fields, 10 percent work in service jobs, 10 percent have not worked in the last five years, 8 percent work in various blue collar occupations, 7 percent are managers, 6 percent make a living as artists, 5 percent now work in science, technology or engineering, 4 percent are working in business and finance, and 2 percent now work in medicine. See Julian Boilen (Producer), Vicky Virgin (Data Analyst), and Caroline Woolard (Editor) (BFAMFAPhD), "School to Work," *Census Report*, US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Microdata 2009–2011, processed by BFAMFAPhD and IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, 2014, <http://censusreport.bfamfaphd.com>.

8. "From 1945 to 1975, a student could go to college, use knowledge to increase his or her productivity, and assume that this increased productivity would be rewarded by increased pay. After 1975, worker productivity continued to increase, but pay did not," from Newfield, "Humanities Creativity in the Age of Online," 3.

9. World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Global Challenge Insight Report, January 2016, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Future\\_of\\_Jobs.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs.pdf), 22.

