

## RESEARCH ESSAY

# Learning to Remain Uncertain: Humanities Pedagogy Beyond the Single Answer

Christine Borland<sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Arts, Institute of Contemporary Art, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom

Correspondence: christine.borland@northumbria.ac.uk

A humanities classroom often rewards the student who reaches a clean thesis quickly. Yet difficult works can demand an education in staying with incompatible evidence long enough for a better question to emerge. How can uncertainty become a teachable procedure without making standards of proposition vague? Pedagogy beyond the single answer should assess how students revise, compare, and delimit interpretations, not simply whether they postpone judgment. Description becomes explanatory only when it identifies what connects one event to the next. In this inquiry, revision memos, competing annotations, confidence statements, source comparisons, and the questions students learn to ask make the link between intellectual uncertainty and evidentiary responsibility available for testing.

When two translations produce divergent moral impressions of a character, students first defend a preference. A structured case alignment of syntax and register turns disagreement into a record of how evidence supports distinct but unequal claims. This first case matters because it reveals a mechanism at human scale. The decisive detail is not simply the artifact or action, but the order in which members encounter its features. Read through the alignment between intellectual uncertainty and evidentiary responsibility, the scene shows that significance is assembled by choices that can be recovered, compared, and challenged.

The inquiry proceeds through portfolio assessment focused on the movement from initial reading to bounded conclusion, supported by revision memos, competing annotations, confidence statements, source comparisons, and the questions students learn to ask. Observation is recorded before evaluation, then revisited after collaborators' accounts and technical documentation are compared. The practical threshold is whether a stu-

dent can name alternatives, rank them, and explain the cost of choosing among them. That threshold keeps the reading responsive to complexity without making every interpretation equally persuasive.

The case contains several positions that cannot be merged without loss. Makers, users, custodians, audiences, and later interpreters encounter revision memos, competing annotations, confidence statements, source comparisons, and the questions students learn to ask with unlike authority. Mapping those positions shows how the dynamic between intellectual uncertainty and evidentiary responsibility is negotiated. The conclusion is warranted only where whether a student can name alternatives, rank them, and explain the cost of choosing among them, not where one well-documented perspective is allowed to stand for all others.

Celebrating uncertainty may protect instructors from teaching necessary factual knowledge or confronting demonstrably false explanations. The challenge matters because the language of innovation can conceal older inequalities. A responsible answer begins by asking who carries the cost when the preferred understanding succeeds. It then returns to whether a student can name alternatives, rank them, and explain the cost of choosing among them, treating that criterion as a limit on praise rather than as an item in a procedural checklist.

An archive exercise introduces missing pages and a misleading catalogue note. Instead of guessing the lost event, students write separate accounts of what is legible, what is inferred, and what further evidence would change their confidence. Relational study also exposes a temporal problem. Practical results that seem minor at the moment of production can become decisive after circulation, repetition, or institutional adoption. The scene therefore expands the tie between intellectual uncertainty and evidentiary responsibility beyond immediate experience and

into the artifact's later social life.

The framework treats mediation as substantive evidence. Through portfolio assessment focused on the movement from initial reading to bounded conclusion, choices that might otherwise appear technical become part of the account of the link between intellectual uncertainty and evidentiary responsibility. This does not mean that every minor resolution carries equal weight; it means weight must be demonstrated by showing a plausible pathway from choice to experienced or documented effect.

Courses should pair open questions with firm evidentiary thresholds, grade revision explicitly, and include moments when the record justifies decisive correction. The intervention creates an audit trail without pretending that judgment can become mechanical. It identifies who decided, what alternatives were considered, and how the result was revised. Such records support institutional memory while leaving room for activities that require discretion, privacy, or culturally concrete forms of accountability.

The contention remains limited in three ways. Revision memos, competing annotations, confidence statements, source comparisons, and the questions students learn to ask cannot capture every informal judgment; participant accounts may change after outcomes are known; and portfolio assessment focused on the movement from initial reading to bounded conclusion produces situated rather than universal conclusions. These limits do not invalidate the inquiry, but they require claims about prevalence, intention, and long-term effect to be stated separately and supported at the appropriate scale.

A productive sample includes cases that initially appear unsuccessful. Failed coordination, rejected design, contested account, and incomplete preservation can reveal the conditions of the connection between intellectual uncertainty and evi-

dentiary responsibility more clearly than a finished example. Such material should be studied with consent and context, not repackaged as a cautionary spectacle detached from actors' explanations.

Additional critical work should connect close study with institutional history. Budgets, staffing, property, platform governance, training, and maintenance often determine whether whether a student can name alternatives, rank them, and explain the cost of choosing

among them can be met. Studying those infrastructures would prevent formal innovation from receiving credit for conditions supplied by hidden labor or from being blamed for constraints imposed elsewhere.

The broader value is diagnostic. The framework helps locate where construction becomes authority, where participation becomes labor, and where preservation becomes transformation. Those boundaries are rarely fixed, but they can

be documented well enough to support practical disagreement.

The central concept remains useful only because the interpretation also identifies its failure conditions. Uncertainty becomes rigorous when it increases the precision of a contention rather than decreasing the obligation to make one. The goal is not to leave every question open, but to teach students how to close a interpretation without pretending the field around it has disappeared.