

Aversion to risk, lack of research money, dwindling market share, a declining talent pool. That is how mature industries die; perhaps it is the same story with aging fields of thought. But hope for the humanities may be on the horizon, coming from an unlikely source: Silicon Valley.

A few months back I invited a friend to speak in front of my professional writing class. Santosh Jayaram is the quintessential Silicon Valley high-tech entrepreneur: tech-savvy, empirical, ferociously competitive, and a veteran of Google, Twitter and a new start-up, Dabble. Afraid that he would simply run over my writing students, telling them to switch majors before it was too late, I asked him not to crush the kids' hopes any more than they already were.

Santosh said, "Are you kidding? English majors are exactly the people I'm looking for." He explained: Twenty years ago, if you wanted to start a company, you spent a month or so figuring out the product you wanted to build, then devoted the next 10 or 12 months to developing the prototype, tooling up and getting into full production.

These days, he said, everything has been turned upside down. Most products now are virtual, such as iPhone apps. You don't build them so much as construct them from chunks of existing software code—and that work can be contracted out to hungry teams of programmers anywhere in the world, who can do it in a couple of weeks.

But to get to that point, he said, you must spend a year searching for that one undeveloped niche that you can capture. And you must also use that time to find angel or venture investment, establish strategic partners, convince talented people to take the risk and join your firm, explain your product to code writers and designers, and most of all, begin to market to prospective major customers. And you have to do all of that without an actual product.

"And how do you do that?" Santosh said. "You tell stories." Stories, he said, about your product and how it will be used that are so vivid that your potential stakeholders imagine it already exists and is already part of their daily lives. Almost anything you can imagine you can now build, said Santosh, so the battleground in business has shifted from engineering, which everybody can do, to storytelling, for which many fewer people have real talent. "That's why I want to meet your English majors," he said.

Asked once what made his company special, Steve Jobs replied: "It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough—it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing."

Could the humanities rebuild the shattered bridge between C.P. Snow's "two cultures" and find a place at the heart of the modern world's virtual institutions? We assume that this will be a century of technology. But if the competition in tech moves to this new battlefield, the edge will go to those institutions that can effectively employ imagination, metaphor, and most of all, storytelling. And not just creative writing, but every discipline in the humanities, from the classics to rhetoric to philosophy. Twenty-first-century storytelling: multimedia, mass customizable, portable and scalable, drawing upon the myths and archetypes of the ancient world, on ethics, and upon a deep understanding of human nature and even religious faith.