Over the past two decades, the humanities and social sciences have advanced a more complex and nuanced understanding of space. Today, humanists are acutely aware of the social and political construction of space and its particular expression as place. This understanding no longer seems new because humanists have embraced it eagerly; now, we all recognize the particularity of space, the importance of place. It is, in fact, a postmodern view. But for all the uses we make of this insight the concepts of space and place employed by humanists frequently are metaphorical, not geographical. Far less often have we grappled with how the physical world has shaped us or how in turn we have shaped perceptions of our material environment.

There has also been a shift towards using spatial technologies in a wide range of humanities disciplines that is increasingly referred to as spatial humanities. Above all, GIS demands the use of spatial questions in its applications, whereas most humanists think rarely about geographical space. The fact that humanists typically do not employ geographical concepts in their analyses, however, begs several questions: Do humanists discern a connection between their methods and the methods of geography? Do they understand how spatial competencies can affect their scholarship? Do humanists perceive themselves to be spatially literate?

In 2009, Ian Gregory (geography, Lancaster University) and I received a SPLINT (Spatial Literacy in Teaching) grant from the UK to investigate spatial literacy in the humanities. The project, “GIS and the Humanities: Towards an Educational Strategy in Britain and America,” aimed to map core spatial competencies onto the themes and methods embraced by historians and other humanists in their work, based on consultation with user communities. The community of interest included the disciplines of history, linguistics and literary studies, cultural studies, religious studies, and archaeology, among others.

One part of the project involved an online survey of over 200 humanists from the UK and US. We asked about the use of spatial technologies, the need for spatial skills, and institutional barriers. Our aim was to make recommendations about how to improve the usefulness of spatial methods and tools in higher education at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The results, although not surprising, confirmed what we had learned from user groups. Overwhelmingly, respondents believed spatial skills needed to be improved across the board, with spatial thinking being seen as particularly important and spatial analytic skills as notably lacking among current students. (Significantly, they also acknowledged a need to improve their own literacy and skills as well.) The number of respondents who cited the importance of these skills increased somewhat when asked about the graduate level but the order remained the...
same. Respondents shied from a tools/methods-oriented approach when asked about undergraduate and graduate curricula, overwhelmingly citing the need for instruction in spatial thinking (94 percent), cartographic representation, and spatial analysis. They cited the need for exposure to critical theory, especially at the graduate level. Training in GIS and other spatial software was clearly a secondary concern, and even here the emphasis was not on mastery of the tool as much as on understanding spatial data and its development. All the various means for providing skills—coursework, workshops, online instruction, and labs, among others—received endorsement from three-quarters of the respondents, with nine of ten agreeing strongly that the best method of learning was through project work, including at the undergraduate level.

How can the humanities cultivate spatial literacy, which is the first step toward making the humanities truly spatial? Scholars at undergraduate, postgraduate and professional level must become aware of the importance of geographic space and how it affects them and their discipline. It also is important to help scholars understand the different ways in which space can be conceptualized, as well as recognize how space linked with time helps us achieve a more complete understanding of human activity. In this matter, the history of geographical thought is valuable, especially the development of a critical GIScience literature over the past three decades.

Given the relative newness of these technologies and approaches within the humanities we recommended: (1) that scholars be exposed to the rapidly growing research base that employs spatial approaches to create new knowledge; (2) that access to the limited and disparate resources relevant to spatial literacy become more accessible to humanists; (3) that spatial literacy be taught formally at postgraduate level in suitable humanities courses; and (4) that spatial literacy be introduced at undergraduate level, especially through projects that illustrate its importance without demanding technical mastery first. Undergraduate courses should focus more on core concepts of spatial literacy and their importance rather than on technical skills. In other words, undergraduate education in the humanities first must demonstrate why space is important within their discipline. Numerous resources exist for the development of this understanding, including but not limited to materials offered by the Spatial Literacy in Teaching program, as well the recent book by David Unwin, et al, which includes much of the work accomplished under the SPLINT grant.\footnote{See \url{http://www.spatial-literacy.org/}}\footnote{David J. Unwin, Kenneth E. Foote, Nicholas J. Tate, David DiBase, eds, \textit{Teaching Geographic Information Science and Technology in Higher Education} (Oxford: Wiley-Backwell, 2012).}