Making Digital Humanities teaching responsive to specificity of local context

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An overall goal of humanistic pedagogy has traditionally been to help students connect with "great questions" of human life (Harpham 2006: 256). However, attempts to stage the humanities as an engagement primarily with generalities and abstractions, and to thereby try to make the humanities stand outside time and place, tend to privilege (even if unintentionally) already prevailing normativities. Therefore, it is important for the humanities to try to interpret the particular by exploring its "imaginative possibility" rather than dismiss its particularity as merely, or banally, empirical (Lear 2014: 111). Moreover, he particularity that is the object of attention in humanities pedagogy is often an Other that the student must come to understand on the Other's own terms. However, attention to the specificity of lived experience of the student himself or herself, as an individual shaping his/her own values (Altieri 2001: 251) is, paradoxically, a precondition of the student being able to develop the very capacity to engage with the particularity of an Other. Attention to self-creation, thus, is a vital component of humanities pedagogy, and engagement with the discursive space that the student inhabits is, therefore, essential.

Today's students come from many different backgrounds and life histories, so that the past of the humanities, embedded in a necessary and continued commitment to universal "great questions", is ever more in need of contextualization so that today's diverse student bodies can relate to them. If the future of the humanities is the empowerment of individuals forging a self-created, specific engagement with the world, then the Digital Humanities (DH) are uniquely positioned to act as a bridge between "pasts and futures" (O'Donnell 2009: 100), and, mutatis mutandis, between universal questions and their particular instantiations in different social contexts. The DH, because of their investment in the computational as the dominant paradigm for knowledge as process and in the digital as the normative code for knowledge in exchange, tend to have a bias towards universalist and generalizable forms of representation (Bhattacharyya 2021), because the condition of homogeneity that conforms best to universality and generalizability matches well with both the affordances of, and requirements for, the algorithmic approaches that the DH favor.

My paper focuses on how a pedagogical rapprochement is possible between this universalist impulse of the DH on the one hand, and the necessity of engaging with the specific, particular discursive world of the student, on the other hand. This kind of balancing act, when attempted, is usually conceived of at the level of content: tools and methods are introduced and the broad scope of their applicability is emphasized, and the tools are typically then applied to specific content drawn from texts and cultural objects that matter the most to the particular students in the specific context of their interests and passions, often through a midterm or final project for the class. While this is undoubtedly of great value, the contribution of my presentation, however, consists in focusing on an aspect of this issue that tends to get much less attention: namely, (how) can we, pedagogically, make connections between local specificity at the level of principles, values and dominant narratives on the one hand, and tools and methods of DH themselves, on the other hand — whether in the form of homologies (in the stronger form) or simply as analogies (in their weaker form). Furthermore, how can such analogies and comparisons (between received societal values and principles and the principles underlying digital tools) be useful to students in the humanist task of subjecting to critique the received principles, values and narratives,which they may have normalized and internalized? I argue that, by thinking of them in terms of a common framework, as a balancing of the propagation of top-down constraints in tandem with the generation of many innovative candidate solutions, we can help students relate what they learn in their DH classes to larger questions involving the structure/agency problematic, a central theme in the humanities and the humanistic sciences (Giddens 1979).

The paper draws upon my experience of teaching undergraduate DH courses at a university in Singapore as well as in universities in the USA. I describe how I have used Singapore's own self-image of its recent sociopolitical trajectory, articulated recently by its leaders as a dynamic balancing act between top-down strictures and bottom-up innovation (Baharuddin 2020), as a trope to illustrate the working of a range of algorithms and methods with applications in DH ranging from topic modeling to generative adversarial networks in contemporary AI. I will emphasize how differences in history, culture and setting informed my approach as a DH-teaching educator to the above-described question in the setting of a country with a social and historical context different from that of the West, and I will focus especially on how I draw upon both instances and metaphors from non-Western contexts.

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