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Where's the Pedagogy? The Role of Teaching and Learning in the Digital Humanities

STEPHEN BRIER

The digital humanities (DH) has experienced impressive growth over the past three or four years, sweeping across a number of academic fields and, in the process, helping to reshape and reframe discussion and debate about the nature of scholarly research, peer review and publication, and academic promotion and tenure. "Digital humanities" already generates more than four-hundred thousand unique results in a Google search. The print and online pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, that reliable bellwether of all trends academic, document the impact that the digital humanities has had in and on universities and colleges, both here and abroad. *Chronicle*, which appears forty-five times a year, has published no fewer than ninety-five articles on DH over the past three years alone, many of which are part of the new and popular *ProfHacker* blog that *Chronicle* recently launched to make the publication more relevant to the up-and-coming academic generation. Younger scholars, especially those currently pursuing or having recently received doctoral degrees in fields in the humanities, interpretive social sciences, and the arts, seem particularly taken with the possibilities of using digital innovations and techniques to reimagine their disciplines and the very nature of their future academic work and life.[1] The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), a mainstay of financial support for the humanities since its creation in 1965, was well ahead of this particular academic curve, launching its Digital Humanities Initiative in 2006; two years later it evolved into the Office of Digital Humanities.

But this recent rush toward the technological new has tended to focus too narrowly, in my judgment, on the academic research and publication aspects of the digital humanities, in the process reinforcing disciplinary "silos" and traditional academic issues while also minimizing and often obscuring the larger implications of DH for how we teach in universities and colleges and how we prepare the next generation of graduate students for careers inside and outside of the academy. Pedagogy is not totally ignored by DH's growing cadre of practitioners; rather, teaching and

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learning are something of an afterthought for many DHers. Matthew Kirschenbaum, the associate director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, in a recent essay on the rise of the digital humanities, emphasizes the research aspects of DH, noting its growing impact on academic scholarship, publishing, peer review, and tenure and promotion in English departments. Kirschenbaum hardly mentions DH's role in teaching and learning until the article's final paragraph, when the word "pedagogy" makes a sudden appearance several times (61). DHers seem far more engaged by the intellectual possibilities of using (to take but one example) digital technologies to mine vast and newly available databases of information on a range of subjects and issues. A good illustration of this focus on digital research can be seen in the various academic research projects spawned by Google's controversial library books scanning project and the heavy publicized Google digital humanities grant competition that encouraged humanities faculty members to use the huge database generated by the company.[2]

This emphasis on digital research can also be seen in many recent DH academic publications. For example, one of the key DH academic journals, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (*DHQ*), based at Brown University, has published nine online issues since its debut in spring 2007. Its pages feature scholarly work from across the globe representing a mix of humanities disciplines and focusing on a range of interesting DH-related topics. While *DHQ*'s mission statement indicates a desire to "provide a forum for theorists, researchers and teachers to share their work," its actual definition of DH reveals a narrower emphasis on academic research: "Digital humanities is a diverse and still emerging field that encompasses the practice of humanities research in and through information technology, and the exploration of how the humanities may evolve through their engagement with technology, media, and computational methods."[3] A search of the titles of the ninety plus articles *DHQ* has published over its first three years confirms this emphasis on research over teaching: only two article titles include references to teaching or pedagogy while nineteen titles include the word "research." Full-text searches of the contents of the ninety articles published to date in *DHQ* reveal a less marked disparity between research and teaching and pedagogy: while the word "research" garners eighty-one hits in total (nine of every ten articles that *DHQ* has published), "teaching" and "learning" each total at least forty hits (and twenty-six when paired), while "pedagogy" appears a mere nine times (averaging about one of every ten articles). This quick and somewhat unnuanced survey of *DHQ* suggests that, while research is the dominant focus of much of what scholars choose to publish in the journal, there is some interest in and focus on (albeit a limited one) the broader implications of DH work for teaching and learning.[4]

Brett Bobley, director of the NEH's Office of Digital Humanities, recently offered a broad definition of the digital humanities in a January 2011 radio interview, noting that "digital humanities is really applying digital technology to doing traditional study and also trying to determine how do you use technology best in

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a classroom setting. So it's really about both the research and the education."[5] Yet the cover of the Office of Digital Humanities' September 2010 "Summary Findings of NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants (2007–2010)"—which features a Wordle word cloud drawn from the text of the abstracts of all of the office's funded start-up grants—does not include the words "teaching," "learning," "classroom," or "pedagogy." The word "research," on the other hand, is among the ten most frequently used words in all the abstracts, along with "project," "director," "digital," and "humanities." Again, this does not mean that none of the NEH-supported digital humanities start-up projects funded over the past three years was concerned or engaged with questions of teaching and learning. Several focused, at least in part, on the application of the digital humanities to classroom teaching or graduate education. Rather, the absence of key words like pedagogy and teaching in the abstracts suggests that these approaches are not yet primary in terms of digital humanists' own conceptions of their work, at least among those who apply to the NEH's Office of Digital Humanities for funding support.[6]

Instead of belaboring this point about the primacy of the research focus in the current DH world, this essay will look instead at DH through the lens of the scholarship of teaching and learning,[7] exploring in particular the pedagogical implications of digital technologies for the ways we educate the current generation of college students. Building on my own and my City University of New York (CUNY) colleagues' diverse efforts and experiences in incorporating digital technologies into a variety of CUNY educational programs and initiatives at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, this essay will offer an alternative vision of the digital humanities that is engaged in the project of improving the quality of classroom teaching practices and learning outcomes.

The City University of New York is a good place to focus such a discussion about the scholarship of teaching and learning and the impact of digital technologies in general and the digital humanities in specific. From its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, CUNY's stated purpose was to educate "the children of the whole people,"[8] as expressed by the first president of the Free Academy (later the City College) on the occasion of its opening in 1849. Over the course of the next 160 years, CUNY (which was only consolidated in its current incarnation in 1961) became the nation's largest urban public university system, this year enrolling more than 260,000 matriculating students and an equal number of continuing and professional education students on twenty-three different campuses across the city's five boroughs. CUNY's extraordinary growth over the past half century required that its faculty and administrators be willing to undertake (or at least minimally tolerate) a series of radical experiments in pedagogy and open access that have put CUNY at the forefront of national efforts to effect educational change and transformation, including (but not limited to) pioneering efforts in the digital humanities and the educational uses of digital technologies. CUNY's long-standing focus on innovative pedagogy inflects the institution's orientation and that of its faculty

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and doctoral students toward digital technology. It's not that CUNY faculty and doctoral students are disinterested in the kinds of research questions that digital humanities work has chosen to focus on; rather, our interest in digital humanities is significantly shaped by our institution's deep and abiding commitment to educate successive waves of the city's working-class students. Let me illustrate CUNY's special focus on innovative pedagogy by reviewing a series of major digital projects and initiatives undertaken by CUNY faculty members and doctoral students over the past two decades.

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Initiative

CUNY threw open its doors to thousands of new working-class students when it launched its open admissions experiment in 1969. Open admissions allowed all high school graduates from any New York City public school to gain entry to CUNY's senior and community colleges on the basis of having received a high school diploma. This approach put tremendous pressure on the system to provide remedial instruction in math and especially in writing, given the New York City public schools' acknowledged failures in these years (Traub, 43–80). Mina Shaughnessy, who began teaching basic writing at City College in 1967 on the eve of the open admissions era (which lasted three decades in all), emerged as an internationally recognized expert on teaching writing to underprepared working-class students entering CUNY. Those students received remedial writing (and mathematics) instruction through the City College of New York's (and later CUNY's) Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program. Shaughnessy, through her emphasis on writing as an academic discipline, inspired several generations of CUNY teachers of writing who carried on and significantly broadened her work in the decades following her death in 1978.[9]

Responding to increasing pressure to improve CUNY's flagging academic reputation emanating from the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and from New York City opinion makers including the *New York Post,* CUNY's Board of Trustees voted to end the university's open admissions "experiment" in 1999. With the demise of open admissions, the CUNY administration launched the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiative in the same year. WAC represented a continuation of CUNY's commitment to teach writing skills as a critical component of educating CUNY's working-class student body. The WAC program was built on the deployment of dozens of doctoral-level writing fellows at various CUNY senior and community college campuses. Many WAC fellows were composition/rhetoric doctoral students studying in the CUNY Graduate Center's English PhD Program; they articulated a special academic interest in and commitment to theorizing and improving the teaching of writing skills and practices. The WAC program grew dramatically over the next decade, with as many as 150 writing fellows employed each year, embracing the use of a variety of teaching methodologies to

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improve writing across all courses and academic programs at CUNY community and senior colleges, as well as at the CUNY Law School and the CUNY School of Professional Studies.[10]

Almost from the outset of the WAC program, writing fellows helped push the integration of digital technologies into WAC pedagogy. At Baruch College, for example, home to CUNY's business school, the WAC program launched Blogs@ Baruch in 2008, an online publishing and academic networking platform, built in WordPress and BuddyPress, which is used for course weblogs, student journals and publications, curriculum development, administrative communication, and faculty development. Twenty-seven writing fellows and three full-time staff collaborate with hundreds of Baruch faculty members, supporting nearly four-hundred course sections with an enrollment of more than fourteen thousand Baruch students annually. The use of writing fellows and social media and other digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning has grown in the past several years on many CUNY campuses (though nowhere quite as dramatically as at Baruch).[11]

The American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning/ New Media Lab

The American Social History Project (ASHP), which I cofounded at CUNY in 1981 with the late social historian Herbert Gutman, was a pioneer in the development of digital history, an early exemplar of digital humanities work. Among the project's most important accomplishments was its Who Built America? (WBA) multimedia U.S. history curriculum, which included textbooks, videotapes, and teacher and student guides that were widely used to transform the teaching of American history in college and high school history classrooms in New York City and across the country. The WBA multimedia curriculum also included perhaps the nation's first digital publication in U.S. history, the CD-ROM *Who Built America? From the Centennial Celebration of 1876 to the Great War of 1914*, conceived and written by the late Roy Rosenzweig, Steve Brier, and Joshua Brown and published by the Voyager Company in 1993.[12]

A hallmark of the WBA multimedia curriculum and of ASHP's digital humanities work in general has been the project's quarter-century-long commitment to using digital media to enhance the quality of teaching and learning of history at the high school and undergraduate levels. Working closely and collaboratively with humanities teachers across the country in a series of grant-supported projects over the past two decades, the ASHP staff helped pioneer a set of active learning strategies to improve history teaching, emphasizing, for example, the uses of primary source documents and visual source materials available online as a way to encourage students' deeper immersion in historical thinking and history making.

In 1999, ASHP expanded its digital reach beyond history by creating the New Media Lab (NML) at the CUNY Graduate Center, which provides an interdisciplinary

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laboratory environment for doctoral faculty and students to work collaboratively to integrate digital media into their academic scholarship, regardless of academic discipline. The NML has hosted the development and production of a number of digital humanities projects by CUNY faculty and doctoral students, including (to name but two) the Phylo Project (which mapped the intellectual, institutional, and personal interconnections in the academic field of philosophy) and the Virtual Poetry Project, a web-based multimedia exploration of Latin American poets and poetry.[13]

The Interactive Technology and Pedagogy Doctoral Certificate Program

The Interactive Technology and Pedagogy Certificate Program (ITP) at the CUNY Graduate Center, which I conceived and have coordinated since its founding in 2002, is an interdisciplinary program that provides doctoral students from a range of academic disciplines with opportunities to reflect on the broader theory behind and pedagogical implications of digital technology usage in the academy. The program features theoretical and conceptual discussions about the cultural, economic, legal, political, and personal impact of technological transformation across time; hands-on engagement with a range of digital technology tools, including blogs and wikis; as well as ongoing conversations about how these digital tools can best be used to enhance academic research and the quality of teaching and learning. Since so many Graduate Center doctoral students are employed at various CUNY campuses as instructors, with sole responsibility for teaching large introductory survey courses to undergraduates in their academic disciplines, the uses of digital technology to improve pedagogy is of particular interest to our doctoral students. A number of ITP certificate holders have been able to use their skills in digital technology and pedagogy to find both traditional academic positions in universities and colleges around the country and internationally as well as nontraditional digital humanities and digital pedagogy positions and postdocs. These ITP graduates, along with New Media Lab participants and American Social History Project staff, are committed to using cutting-edge digital research techniques, innovative presentational forms, and open and active pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning to improve the quality of their current and future academic work.[14]

The Instructional Technology Fellows Program at the Macaulay Honors College

The founding of CUNY's Macaulay Honors College (MHC) in 2001 included a commitment to hire and deploy a corps of Instructional Technology Fellows (ITFs), advanced doctoral students at CUNY's Graduate Center drawn from diverse academic disciplines. The twenty-five ITFs currently employed by MHC are assigned to eight different CUNY campus honors programs and at the central MHC facility. Like the CUNY writing fellows, ITFs work closely with MHC faculty and undergraduates to help them use digital tools—including blogs, wikis, discussion

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forums, and podcasts—"to support collaboration, integrative learning, community building, and student-centered pedagogies."[15] The ITFs are among CUNY's most advanced digital scholars and teachers, with broad knowledge about the uses of digital technology and digital pedagogy. And like the ITP certificate holders, the MHC ITFs have a solid record in securing full-time academic positions at colleges and universities once they finish their two or three years at Macaulay and complete their PhDs. MHC Associate Dean Joseph Ugoretz has suggested that the success of Macaulay's ITFs in the academic job market is the result of at least as much of their experiences as digital pedagogues as their skill as digital scholars.[16]

"Looking for Whitman"

A good example of a recent CUNY digital humanities project that combines digital research and digital pedagogy is "Looking for Whitman: The Poetry of Place in the Life and Work of Walt Whitman," conceived and headed by Matthew K. Gold at New York City College of Technology, CUNY (NYCCT). The semester-long project was designed to bring together undergraduates enrolled in four different courses at four geographically dispersed college campuses (NYCCT and New York University [NYU] in New York City, University of Mary Washington in Virginia, and Rutgers–Camden in New Jersey) to collaborate on an exploration of Whitman's poetry in relationship to specific places in which Whitman lived and labored. The participating students and faculty members regularly shared ideas, research, and feedback about Whitman's life and writing on the project's WordPress site. The four-month effort ended in April 2010 with a face-to-face "generative" conference held at Rutgers–Camden, which not only included reports on what had been accomplished by the students on each of the four campuses during the previous fall semester but also featured continued creation of scholarly content and student presentations about Whitman's life and poetry, all captured on digital video and displayed on the project's website. "Looking for Whitman" is a model for how digital scholarship and digital pedagogy can be combined to enhance undergraduate teaching as well as how social networking tools can help bridge very real geographical, economic, and cultural gaps among and between universities and colleges.[17]

The CUNY Academic Commons

The development in 2009 of the CUNY Academic Commons (AC) was a critical step taken by CUNY faculty members and administrators, led by George Otte and Matthew K. Gold, to create a unified platform for scholarly communication across CUNY that could pull together individual academics working with or interested in digital technologies and pedagogies under a single, broad, digital umbrella. The Academic Commons was conceived as an accessible, collaborative public arena on the Internet (http://www.commons.gc.cuny.edu), built in WordPress and BuddyPress,

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which is, in the words of one of the ACs operating documents, "dedicated to the free expression of our users in a collaborative [shared] environment. We are a community that seeks to use the Academic Commons as a means of fulfilling our highest aspirations for integrating technology into our teaching, learning, and collaborating."[18]

The AC's emphasis is on building academic community in all its diverse permutations and forms. In the eighteen months since its launch, the AC has garnered nearly two thousand CUNY members (only CUNY faculty members, staff, and doctoral students are eligible to join) who use the AC's group sites, blogs, and wikis to find and inform one another, to teach doctoral courses, and to collaborate on digital and other types of academic projects and groups (including, it should be noted, CUNYPie, a group of CUNY academics/fanatics in search of the best pizza served in New York City's five boroughs). The AC has already generated extensive notice in the academic press (including feature articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Educause Review*, and other online academic publications) as well as inquiries from numerous universities and colleges looking to emulate CUNY's efforts by creating their own academic commons.

The existence of AC proved especially helpful last year when a group of faculty and doctoral students from across the CUNY system, under the aegis of the CUNY Digital Studies Group, which I founded and cochair, decided to organize a major conference, "The Digital University: Power Relations, Publishing, Authority and Community in the 21st Century Academy." The conference, supported by the Graduate Center's Center for the Humanities, was an effort to broaden notions of the digital humanities beyond academic scholarship and publication to include digital approaches to teaching, learning, and pedagogy. The all-day event, held at the CUNY Graduate Center in April 2010, drew more than 140 scholars and teachers from around the world, was the subject of a vigorous and sustained Twitter stream (#du10), and featured a series of smaller workshops and a keynote address by Siva Vaidhyanathan, which engaged critical issues related to academic scholarship, academic publication, peer review, and digital pedagogy.[19]

Digital Humanities Initiative

The success of "The Digital University" conference and its focus on the transformational possibilities of the digital humanities in the university led a group of CUNY faculty and doctoral students to launch the Digital Humanities Initiative (DHI) at CUNY. The DHI, cochaired by Matthew K. Gold and Charlie Edwards (a doctoral student in English and in the ITP certificate program), has in less than a year attracted more than one hundred DHers to its ranks from across the CUNY system. The group, in the words of its mission statement, is "aimed at building connections and community among those at CUNY who are applying digital technologies to scholarship and pedagogy in the humanities."[20] It is important to note the equal weight given in the mission statement to scholarship and pedagogy. Working

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under the aegis of the Digital Studies Group, the DHI has sponsored a series of talks and lectures on a range of DH-related research topics, including presentations by Tom Scheinfeldt of GMU's Center for History and New Media; Kathleen Fitzpatrick of Pomona College's Media Studies Program; David Hoover of NYU's English Department; and Patrik Svensson, director of HUMlab at Umeå University, Sweden. Consonant with its commitment to focus its work particularly on questions of pedagogy, the DHI has also offered several roundtable presentations on the relationship of DH to teaching and learning, including sharing of ideas and approaches to using off-the-shelf open source tools, including WordPress plug-ins to create paperless and networked classrooms. And at one of its first sessions in fall 2010, the DHI heard CUNY educational technologists Mikhail Gershovich, Joe Ugoretz, and Luke Waltzer discuss technology and pedagogy in the context of their teaching work at Baruch College and at the Macaulay Honors College.

Looking Ahead

I have provided this somewhat breathless survey of diverse projects and educational reform efforts at CUNY because they share a common focus on bridging the gap between digital scholarship and digital pedagogy. Each was designed to encourage CUNY faculty and doctoral students to engage in an extended conversation about the best strategies for improving classroom teaching and, increasingly over the past two decades, centering those conversations and strategies on the uses of digital technologies to enhance the prospects for improving teaching and learning. CUNY's growing focus over the past two decades on the scholarship of teaching and learning has by no means been limited to the digital humanities, narrowly defined. If we are willing to broaden our definition of digital humanities beyond academic research and related issues of academic publication, peer review, and tenure and promotion to encompass critical questions about ways to improve teaching and learning, then CUNY's various digital pedagogy projects and strategies offer an alternative pathway to broaden the impact of the digital humanities movement and make it more relevant to the ongoing and increasingly beleaguered educational mission of contemporary colleges and universities.

NOTES

1. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* is online at http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5; the *Chronicle*'s *ProfHacker* blog is at http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/. The National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education recently (Summer 2010) defined the digital humanities as encompassing the humanities, interpretive social sciences, and the arts, an approach that echoes some funders' definition (cf. Mellon Foundation) and other national digital humanities projects (cf. Project Bamboo). See http://blogs.nitle.org/2010/08/31/nitle-launches-digital-humanities-initiative/.

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2. Other scholars have pointed to DH's general exclusion of issues of pedagogy, including Katherine Harris at California State University, Long Beach, who has been particularly vocal about this issue. See her blog for comments on DH and pedagogy: http://triproftri.wordpress.com/. Professor Harris and I helped carry the pedagogy banner at several of the workshops at Project Bamboo, an ongoing international organizing effort, funded by the Mellon Foundation and headed up by the University of California Berkeley and the University of Chicago, to build a set of collaborative digital humanities tools to enhance academic scholarship. See http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/07/our-commitment-to-digital-humanities.html, accessed March 19, 2011, for Google's statement announcing the first recipients of its digital humanities research grants.

3. Quotations from the "About *DHQ*" section of *DHQ*'s website: http://digitalhumanities.org/DHQ/about/about.html.

4. Searches were conducted from the *DHQ*'s home page: http://digitalhumanities.org/DHQ/.

5. The *Kojo Nnamdi Show*, January 11, 2011, WAMU 88.5 FM, American University Radio podcast and transcript: http://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2011-01-11/history-meets-high-tech-digital-humanities/transcript.

6. The Office of Digital Humanities (ODH) report can be found at http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/cio/odhfiles/Summary.Report.ODH.SUG.pdf.

7. The simplest definition of the scholarship of teaching and learning has been offered by the eponymous Carnegie Academy at Illinois State University: "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public." See http://www.sotl.ilstu.edu/.

8. Association of the Bar of the City of New York, Report of the Commission on the Future of CUNY: Part I Remediation and Access: To Educate the "Children of the Whole People," 1999. http://www2.nycbar.org/Publications/reports/show_html_new.php?rid=47.

9. Background information on Shaughnessy can be found on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mina_P._Shaughnessy) and in Jane Maher's biography, *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*.

10. CUNY's dean of undergraduate education produced a history of CUNY's Writing Across the Curriculum Program, "Writing Across the Curriculum at CUNY: A Ten-Year Review," which can be found at http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/ue/wac/WAC10YearReportJune2010.pdf.

11. Information about Blogs@Baruch provided by Mikhail Gershovich, telephone interview with the author, March 26, 2011. Gershovich is the director of the Bernard Schwartz Communications Institute (BSCI), Baruch College (CUNY). BSCI oversees the WAC program at the college. The integration of digital media at Baruch and its impact on the college's freshman seminars can be seen by reading the multiple blog posts and viewing the student-produced videos at http://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu/fro/. The Schwartz Institute and its pioneering work in CUNY's WAC program were featured in Fara Warner's online article, "Improving Communication Is Everyone's Responsibility," http://www.changemag

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.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/November-December%202008/full-improving-communication.html.

12. Information about the WBA multimedia curriculum can be found at http://ashp.cuny.edu/who-america/. Developing the first WBA CD-ROM in 1991 and 1992 might well qualify Rosenzweig, Brown, and Brier for special status as "premature digital humanists." For those unfamiliar with the historical reference, this phrase echoes the U.S. Communist Party's labeling of those who fought (and in many cases died) to defend the Spanish Republic in 1936 as "premature antifascists."

13. ASHP received research center status in CUNY in 1992 with the founding of the Center for Media and Learning (CML). ASHP and CML have been led by Josh Brown since 1998. Information about ASHP, CML, and the New Media Lab can be found at http://ashp.cuny.edu/and http://nml.cuny.edu/. The Phylo Project can be viewed at http://phylo.info. The Visual Poetry Project can be viewed at http://nml.cuny.edu/poetryproject/vpp/index.php/vpp/index.

14. Information about the Interactive Technology and Pedagogy Certificate Program can be found at http://web.gc.cuny.edu/itp/.

15. Quote is from the description of the Macaulay Honors College's uses of instructional technology on the school's website: http://macaulay.cuny.edu/academics/technology.php.

16. Joseph Ugoretz, e-mail message to the author, March 27, 2011.

17. The *Looking for Whitman* WordPress site can be found at http://lookingforwhitman.org.

18. CUNY Academic Commons Terms of Service, http://commons.gc.cuny.edu/about/tos/.

19. The conference's website (http://digitaluniversity.gc.cuny.edu/) offers the most complete sense of what we hoped to accomplish and what actually transpired.

20. DHI's mission statement can be found at http://commons.gc.cuny.edu/groups/digital-humanities-initiative/.

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Visualizing Millions of Words

MILLS KELLY

One of the very first posts I wrote for this blog was about visualizing information and some of the new online tools that had cropped up to make it a little easier to think about the relationships between data—words, people, and so on (Kelly). Interesting as they were, those tools were all very limited in their scope and application, especially when compared to Google's newly rolled out Ngram viewer.[1] This new tool, brought to you by the good people at GoogleLabs, lets users compare the relationships between words or short phrases, across 5.2 million books (and apparently journals) in Google's database of scanned works.

The data produced with this tool are not without criticism (Parry).[2] I will leave it to the literary scholars and the linguists to hash out the thornier issues here. My own concern is how using a tool such as this one can help students of the past make sense of the past in new or different ways. Among the many things I've learned from my students over the years is that they can be pretty persistent in their belief that words have been used in much the same way over time, that they have meant the same things (generally) over time, and that words or phrases that are common today were probably common in the past—assuming those words existed. They (my students) know that such assumptions are problematic for all the obvious reasons, but that doesn't stop them from holding to these assumptions anyway.

I just spent an hour or so playing with the Ngram tool, putting in various words or phrases, and I can already imagine a simple assignment for students in a historical methods course. I would begin such an assignment by asking them to play with word pairs such as war/peace. By using Ngram, they would see that peace (red) overtook war (blue) in 1743 as a word that appeared in books in English (at least in books Google has scanned to date).

Intriguing as this "finding" is, the lesson that I would then focus on with my students is that what they are looking at in such a graph is nothing more or less than the frequency with which a word is used in a book (and only books) published over the centuries. While such frequencies do reflect something, it is not clear from one graph just what that something is. So instead of an answer, a graph like this one is a

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doorway that leads to a room filled with questions, each of which must be answered by the historian before he or she knows something worth knowing.

After introducing my students to that room full of questions, I would then show them a slightly more sophisticated (emphasis on slightly) use of this tool. My current research is on the history of human trafficking. The term "human trafficking" (green) is a very recent formulation in books written in English. More common in prior decades were the terms "white slave trade" (blue) and "traffic in women and children" (red). This offers students a way to see the waxing and waning of these formulations over the past century.

But this also demonstrates a nice lesson in paying attention to what one is looking at. Google's database of available books runs through 2008. The graph I describe ends in 2000. If I expand the lower axis to 2008, the lines look quite different. My hope would be to use tricks like this to demonstrate to my students how essential it is that they think critically about the data being represented to them in any graphical form.

While I doubt that I'll ever assign Edward Tufte's work to my undergraduates, I do think that an exercise such as this one with the Ngram viewer will make it possible to introduce the work of Tufte and others in a way that will be more accessible to undergraduates. If they've already played with tools like the Ngram viewer, then the more theoretical and technical discussions will make a lot more sense and will seem a lot more relevant. I think they will also be more likely to see the value in what Stephen Ramsay calls the "hermeneutics of screwing around."[3]

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "Visualizing Millions of Words" (http://edwired.org/2010/12/17/visualizing-millions-of-words/).

1. http://ngrams.googlelabs.com/.
2. http://chronicle.com/article/Scholars-Elicit-a-Cultural/125731/.
3. http://library.brown.edu/cds/pages/705.

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What's Wrong with Writing Essays

MARK L. SAMPLE

As a professor invested in critical thinking—that is, in *difficult thinking*—I have become increasingly disillusioned with the traditional student paper. Just as the only thing a standardized test measures is how well a student can take a standardized test, the only thing an essay measures is how well a student can conform to the rigid thesis/defense model that, in the hands of novice scholars, eliminates complexity, ambiguity, and most traces of critical thinking.

I don't believe that my mission as a professor is to turn my students into miniature versions of myself or of any other professor. Yet that is the chief function that the traditional student essay serves. And even if I *did* want to churn out copycat professors, the essay fails exceedingly well at this. Somehow the student essay has come to stand in for all the research, dialogue, revision, and work that professional scholars engage in.

It doesn't.

The student essay is a twitch in a void, a compressed outpouring of energy (if we're lucky) that means nothing to no one. Randy Bass, a longtime collaborator of mine at Georgetown University, has said that nowhere but school would we ask somebody to write something that nobody will ever read.

This is the primary reason I've integrated more and more *public* writing into my classes. I strive to instill in my students the sense that what they think and what they say and what they write matters—to me; to them; to their classmates; and, through open access blogs and wikis, to the world.

In addition to making student writing public, I've also begun taking the words out of writing. Why must writing, especially writing that captures critical thinking, be composed of words? Why not images? Why not sound? Why not objects? The word *text*, after all, derives from the Latin *textus*, meaning "that which is woven," strands of different material intertwined together. Let the warp be words and the weft be something else entirely.

With this in mind, I am moving away from asking students to write, toward asking them instead to *weave*—to build, to fabricate, to design. I don't want my

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students to become miniature scholars. I want them to be aspiring Rauschenbergs, assembling mixed media combines, all the while through their engagement with seemingly incongruous materials developing a critical thinking practice about the process and the product. I call this type of critical thinking *creative analysis*.

In my video game studies class, I asked students to design an abstract visualization of a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) video game, a kind of model that would capture some of the game's complexity and reveal underlying patterns to the way actions, space, and time unfold in the game. One student "mapped" *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (1991) onto a piece of driftwood. This "captain's log," covered with screenshots and overlayed with axes measuring time and action, evokes the static nature of the game more than words ever can. Like Meier's *Civilization*, much of *Pirates!* is given over to configurations, selecting from menus and other nondiegetic actions. Pitched battles on the high seas, what would seem to be the highlight of any game about pirates, are rare; and, though a flat photograph (see Notes) of the log doesn't do justice to the actual object in all its physicality, you can see some of that absence of action here, where the top of the log is full of blank wood.

The wood says what words cannot.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "What's Wrong with Writing Essays" (http://www.samplereality.com/2009/03/12/whats-wrong-with-writing-essays/). A photograph of the "captain's log" may be found there.

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Looking for Whitman: A Grand, Aggregated Experiment

MATTHEW K. GOLD AND JIM GROOM

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!
—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

In the spring of 2009, students from four universities converged on a single website in a collaborative effort to research and explore the poetry of Walt Whitman. Conceived of as a multicampus experiment in digital pedagogy seeking to break through the institutional barriers that, even in the age of the Internet, so often divide one university classroom from another, "Looking for Whitman: The Poetry of Place in the Life and Work of Walt Whitman" was sponsored by two Start-Up Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Digital Humanities.[1] The project brought together five courses on Walt Whitman, each running concurrently at a college located in a place where Whitman himself had lived and worked, in an attempt to see how a group of distributed faculty and students could share, collaborate, research, and converse out in the open through a rich infrastructure of social media.

While each course ran on a face-to-face basis at its respective university, a large majority of the work took place online. The project served as an opportunity to illustrate how loosely networked learning spaces could be used to reimagine the possibilities for connection among students and faculty working on related projects at a disparate range of institutions. As a case study for linked courses across universities, it framed the importance of an open and porous learning ecosystem that used network effects to aggregate and amplify student work, building a larger, focused conversation around the relationship of particular literary texts to particular geographical spaces.

The colleges chosen for participation in the project—New York City College of Technology (CUNY), New York University (NYU), University of Mary Washington, and Rutgers University-Camden—represented a wide range of institutional profiles:

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an open-admissions public college of technology, a private research-intensive university, a public liberal arts college, and a public research university, each with very different types of students. Beyond that, the courses explicitly and intentionally engaged various levels of the curriculum and learners with very different types of backgrounds and knowledge bases. The class at University of Mary Washington consisted of senior English majors who were taking the course as a capstone experience. There were two classes at Rutgers; one contained a mix of undergraduate English majors and master's-level students, while the other was open to students in master's and doctoral degree programs who were taking a methods course that served as an introduction to graduate English studies. At City Tech, meanwhile, undergraduate students with little training in literature were taking a course on Whitman as part of their general education requirements. The project gained an international angle when NYU faculty member Karen Karbiener received a Fulbright Fellowship to Serbia and decided to make her American Studies class at the University of Novi Sad part of the project.

Mixing all of these students together in a single online space—especially one that placed a great deal of emphasis on social interaction—might seem at best a bad idea and at worst a dangerous one. What could graduate students studying literature and preparing for comprehensive exams learn from undergraduate students taking gen-ed courses at an urban school of technology? Would students flame one another on a course site that emphasized social media? Would undergrads be intimidated by graduate students who were doing research in their fields of specialization? How would these students connect to one another across individual institutional cultures and socioeconomic differences? And above all, how would they collectively engage Whitman's work and connect his texts to the places in which they had been written?

A look around the *Looking for Whitman* website and its diverse array of assignments and projects will demonstrate the meaningful connections created through this pedagogical experiment. From videos that remixed Whitman's work to detailed annotations and explications of his poems to a collaboratively built museum devoted to Whitman-related material artifacts, student projects demonstrated the power of networked academic study. Of course, that work did not take place without complications; we're just beginning to sort through the evaluation data associated with the project, and we're especially looking forward to tabulating student responses to the extensive survey we circulated at the close of the semester.

Still, it's not too early to say that the radical potential of projects like *Looking for Whitman*—and perhaps of digital humanities pedagogy more generally—lies in their ability to connect learners in ways that hack around the artificial boundaries of selectivity and elitism that educational institutions have long erected around themselves. And if one result of that hacking is the creation of more open, more diverse, more egalitarian learning environments that engage a broader spectrum of students and institutions in the hope that they, like Whitman himself, might stitch

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together common fabrics from diverse threads, the digital humanities might find that it has a social mission that complements its technological one.

NOTES

Parts of this chapter originally appeared as "Looking for Whitman: A Grand, Aggregated Experiment" (http://bavatuesdays.com/looking-for-whitman-a-grand-aggregated-experiment/) and "Hacking Together Egalitarian Educational Communities; Some Notes on the Looking for Whitman Project" (http://mkgold.net/blog/2010/05/28/hacking-together-egalitarian-educational-communities-some-notes-on-the-looking-for-whitman-project/).

1. *Looking for Whitman*. http://lookingforwhitman.org.

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The Public Course Blog: The Required Reading We Write Ourselves for the Course That Never Ends

TREVOR OWENS

Ninety-two blog posts,
one hundred and ninety-five comments,
twenty projects.

This is the digital footprint of my digital history seminar, the first course I ever taught. In designing it, I did what came naturally to me: I bought the domain name Dighist.org and set up a public course blog. This blog served as a common place for us to think aloud and work together publicly; it also played a valuable role in the face-to-face class, and it will continue to serve a valuable role in the future. The blog was not simply a supplement to the course; rather, it played a cognitive role in the distributed structure of the class, moving it from knowledge consumption to knowledge production. It allowed us to disseminate the thinking that happened in our class beyond those who registered to take the course at American University. In what follows, I will suggest the potential value that can come from new students in new iterations of the course "inhabiting" the same course blog in the future.

The Course Blog as a Spider's Web

In *Supersizing the Mind Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, philosopher Andy Clark adapts the idea of niche construction from evolutionary biology to an idea of cognitive niche construction, which he applies to the way people use tools. In evolutionary biology, niche construction refers to the "varying degrees, organisms chose their own habitats, mates, and resources and construct important components of their local environments such as nest, holes, burrows, paths, webs, dams, and chemical environments" (131). In each of these cases, animals' behavior has altered their environment, and those alterations then become the basis for further adaptation. One of the primary examples of this kind of interaction is the spider's web. Specifically, "the existence of the web modifies the sources of natural

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selection within the spider's selective niche, allowing subsequent selection for web-based forms of camouflage and communication" (61).

During our course, the blog served a similar role to a spider's web. The structure of the blog changed what it meant to do "class" in the classroom. As we interacted with the blog, as it provided a structure for us to share our thoughts and ideas and displayed those thoughts and ideas to anyone on the web, it pushed us to think differently about our course time. Our writing counted, our writing mattered, in a way that is different from many courses, especially at the undergraduate level. Students were not just writing papers for me to evaluate; they were composing public writing for an audience that included both their classmates and anyone from the broader digital history community. They were writing about exciting new projects that their academic community might not have even been aware of. On several occasions I would tell one of the students who had reviewed a particular software application that the creator of that software had read and posted a tweet with a link to the student's review. After making clear that students could blog under their real names and take credit and responsibility for their thoughts and ideas or blog under pseudonyms, nearly everyone opted to use their names and receive credit for their ideas on the web. We were writing for an audience, and that changed how we all approached writing about history and the production of history.

Like a Beaver Dam, the Blog We Built Together Will House the Next Generation

The spider's web is interesting as an example of how an organism's use of tools changes the cycles of feedback in their evolution. The example of a beaver's dam adds another layer of complexity. As Clark points out, dams are created and inhabited by a collective group of individual beavers. Further, beaver dams extended through time, outliving the lives of the individual beavers who occupy them. Future beavers adapt to the niche that the beavers before them had created and the altered physical landscape that that dam has produced. What matters for Clark in this case is that "niche-construction activity leads to new feedback cycles" (62). I intend the course blog site, Dighist.org, to persist into the future like a beaver's dam. The thinking and work of my students, as manifest in the structure of the content they have produced, will play an active role in the thinking and work of future students who occupy the space.

The Technological Husk of the Course Will Be Reinhabited

According to American University, my course is over. End of semester. Students received their grades. But the grades are the least interesting part of what makes a course a course. Not only am I keeping the content up, I intend to use this same WordPress instance for future iterations of the course. Whoever joins future digital history courses I teach is going to register for this blog and start posting. I will move

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the current syllabus to an archived syllabus page and post the future student projects right above the existing set. The next set of students will understand that they are not starting a class from scratch; they will build on the work of course alumni just as future students will later build off of their work.

When I started this course, I told students that the course blog would be the required reading that we write ourselves. Next time, I will add that the course blog is the required reading we are writing for ourselves and for future inhabitants of the course. Some of the particularly interesting reviews of software applications are going to become course content in future iterations of the syllabus. Some of the particularly interesting student web projects are going to become examples I will use in class. Some of the particularly interesting student papers will become course readings. Students from this first session of the course are welcome to continue posting and commenting on the blog.

All too often, we think about instructional technology as something that supplements the features of face-to-face instruction. If we want to think this way, then that is in fact what these technologies are going to do. BlackBoard is happy to put a closed course blog inside of its learning management system. Their blogs adapt the features of the technology of a blog for a closed system. That isn't really blogging. Blogging involves certain technical requirements, posting bits of text on the web and generally allowing others to comment on those posts. Beyond this, however, blogging is a cultural phenomena. As a genre of public writing, it has an emergent set of norms and rules that we should learn by doing. In short, blogging is actually a set of skills that is worth cultivating. When we start to think of the technology of blogging in this light, it becomes something that, instead of supplementing instruction, disrupts and transforms education.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "Digital History: The Course That Never Ends" (http://www.trevorowens.org/ . . . /digital-history-the-course-that-never-ends/).

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