

The Futures of Digital Humanities Pedagogy in a Time of Crisis

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Higher education has long been in crisis, both by design and by circumstance. The systematic dismantling of public higher education,¹ the ever-increasing burden of student debt,² and the growth of adjunctification and precarious labor conditions for faculty and staff have all created an unstable system.³ In the time since I first started working on this piece, more specific emergencies have taken hold. An international public health crisis has deepened, exacerbating already extant systemic inequality. In higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic has and will lead to widespread budget cuts, hiring freezes, and concerns over how we can teach without killing our students and each other. Against the backdrop of this emergency, the murder of George Floyd by police has brought renewed attention to the ongoing struggles of Black people against widespread police brutality and systemic racism, on campus and beyond.⁴ To be clear, these two, most recent moments of crisis intersect,⁵ and they are not new: they represent merely the most immediate and emergent manifestations of longstanding systems of discrimination.

It can feel impossible to answer the questions that moments like these ask of us. How do we teach right now? Why do we teach now? And, for this audience, what might Digital Humanities pedagogy, in particular, have to do with and for this moment? Difficult to answer though these questions may be, it is, usefully, impossible to ignore them. The development of certificates and degree programs in digital humanities in recent years might appear to be part of a

¹ For just one example, see “UW Struggle” for Chuck Rybak’s personal reporting on the actions of former governor Scott Walker as they pertain to the University of Wisconsin system.

² See Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price*.

³ See, for example, Bousquet, *How the University Works*.

⁴ See “#BlackInTheIvory” on Twitter for an ongoing chronicling of the systemic discrimination faced by BIPOC in academia.

⁵ Risam, “Reopening Schools Safely Can’t Happen without Racial Equity.”

growing and healthy field,⁶ but, like the institutions of which they are a part, the field is streaked with inequitable labor practices⁷ and white supremacy.⁸ The future of graduate education in digital humanities lies in the field's ability—or not—to direct its pedagogy to respond to and take account of its complicity in these crises. As Kevin Gannon has noted, “pedagogy is political,” and our “our students and our academic communities need more from us” than a pedagogy of neutrality.⁹ It is not a given that there will be a future for graduate training in the humanities, much less a digital one. In order for there to be any kind of DH teaching worth having in the years to come, the field needs to be founded on a critical and engaged pedagogy that acts beyond the classroom. This moment can be an opportunity to re-evaluate the nature of the work we do and stand in solidarity with those who have long struggled for a more just and equitable DH practice.

The idea of re-working one's approach to teaching might seem daunting, since time is at a premium for many in the academy right now, particularly for women.¹⁰ One can, however, start small, advancing a more just pedagogy in the classroom itself, following the examples set by those already engaged in this work. As Matthew Cheney and Catherine Denial have argued, we can frame our syllabi and course practices as instruments of trust and community building rather than abuse.¹¹ Roopika Risam has called for a digital pedagogy informed by postcolonial studies and literatures that “empowers students to not only understand but also intervene in the gaps and silences that persist in the digital cultural record,” and instructors might engage students in

⁶ Sula, Hackney, and Cunningham, “A Survey of Digital Humanities Programs.”

⁷ Boyles et al., “Precarious Labor and the Digital Humanities.”

⁸ Bailey, “» All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave Journal of Digital Humanities.”

⁹ Gannon, *Radical Hope*, 22, 21.

¹⁰ “Open Letter to Editors/Editorial Boards – Femedtech.”

¹¹ Cheney, “(Against) The Syllabus As Instrument of Abuse;” Denial, “A Pedagogy of Kindness.”

course projects that address local issues to do so.¹² Jeffrey Moro calls for a movement against “cop shit,” those pedagogical practices and technologies that rely on punishment and surveillance.¹³ These steps, even if they might feel small at times, can begin to redirect DH teaching practices towards the pursuits of freedom, hope, and self-transformation.¹⁴

Beyond course practices and course assignments, though, this is a time for pedagogical action, for critically engaged teaching that sees the work of pedagogy as moving beyond the classroom. Sean Michael Morris speaks of a pedagogical habitus, “embodied practice, often uninspected or subterranean to a person’s own thinking about themselves,” that forms the “genetic makeup” of one’s teaching.¹⁵ Accordingly, the ways we carry out projects reflect our outlooks towards students.¹⁶ Model examples of this work are the African American, History, Culture, and Digital Humanities (AADHum) initiative¹⁷ and the US Latino Digital Humanities (USLDH),¹⁸ both of which center mentoring and community building, even as they advance research agendas. In this line of thought, pedagogy transcends classroom practice. Sara Goldrick-Rab’s work at the Hope Center on food insecurity, homelessness, and poverty among students is emblematic of the ways pedagogy can join with advocacy beyond the classroom.¹⁹ Pedagogy is a generalizable outlook towards all that you do in relation to students, and it should lead to action beyond teaching.

¹² *New Digital Worlds*, 89–90. There are many examples of using course projects to engage in local activism. For a recent example from the Scholars’ Lab, see “Land and Legacy,” which asked students to engage with the “Charlottesville Regional Equity Atlas,” a collaboration between the library and local community members.

¹³ “Against Cop Shit · Jeffrey Moro.”

¹⁴ See hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; hooks, *Teaching Community*; and Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. For more examples of courses assignments that could serve as models, see Rebecca Frost Davis et al., *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities*.

¹⁵ Michael Morris, “The Habitus of Critical Imagination.”

¹⁶ See “A Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights” for evidence of how a generalized pedagogy of equity can be enacted in project development.

¹⁷ “African American History, Culture, and Digital Humanities.”

¹⁸ “US Latino Digital Humanities (USLDH).”

¹⁹ “The Hope Center | For College, Community, and Justice.”

The ways we theorize and practice DH teaching and research can also intervene in the institutions around us, and they can both reflect and enact infrastructural changes. DH teaching and mentoring regularly happen in interstitial university spaces, and this positionality can be leveraged to make administrative interventions that recognize their intersections with equitable pedagogical practices. By viewing budgets as moral pedagogical documents,²⁰ we can advocate for bettering conditions for students and postdoctoral fellows.²¹ When called upon to offer professional development to students, we can make sure that the work we do with them is informed by organizations like the Academic Job Market Support Network,²² which offers materials and resources for a range of different career paths. And the ways in which we engage with scholarly discourse and one another can be informed by the work of #generousthinking,²³ by which these individual activities connect to a larger project of changing higher education. The work of Cathy Davidson and Katina Rogers at The Futures Initiative is emblematic in these regards, for the ways in which it joins pedagogy with activism to push for infrastructural change.²⁴

There are, of course, a number of DH practitioners, largely BIPOC, who have already been engaged in this work for years. The work of activists involved in the creation of #TransformDH, Postcolonial Digital Humanities, and DHWOGEM,²⁵ to name a few, have made the field a better space. Assign this work; cite this work; amplify and support these people. Similarly, look to your local communities to find those people already engaged in this work. Amplify and support the student activists fighting for unions, the adjunct and precarious faculty

²⁰ Walsh, "Your Budget Is a Question of Pedagogy and Equity."

²¹ Alpert-Abrams et al., "Postdoctoral Laborers Bill of Rights."

²² "Academic Job Market Support Network – Humanities Commons."

²³ "#generousthinking."

²⁴ "The Futures Initiative."

²⁵ See "#TransformDH," "Postcolonial Digital Humanities," and "Women and Gender Minorities in Digital Humanities."

working towards better labor conditions, the BIPOC staff and students fighting for justice on campuses dominated by white supremacy. No one person can affect change at all levels. More than or in addition to individual action, this is a moment for collective action, pedagogical and otherwise.

It may appear that I am offering a mercenary argument: DH pedagogy must serve the ends of equity and justice so that it can survive. That is not my aim. Instead, I hope to echo Kathleen Fitzpatrick, speaking of universities' plans to re-open while COVID-19 continues to spread: an institution does not deserve to survive "unless [it is] committed to the survival of the people who make up and serve that institution first, foremost, and above all."²⁶ The same can be said for digital humanities and its associated pedagogies: if they are not concerned with acting towards a more just vision of the world and with safeguarding better conditions for the communities they affect, then they not deserve to survive. The future of DH pedagogy is one that deepens its engagement with these struggles.

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²⁶ Fitzpatrick, "Your Institution Does Not Deserve to Survive."

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