What We Teach When We Teach DH: Notes from the Field

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Overview

At the 2019 Digital Humanities (DH) Conference in Utrecht, Netherlands, the panel organizers launched an international survey intended to discover "Who Teaches When We Teach DH" (Croxall / Jakacki 2019). The more than 400 responses came from five continents (Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America) and helped us better understand trends in how DH pedagogues are trained and teach. Yet we also discovered that the survey had little to tell us about regional differences that influence the teaching of digital humanities. Since we were beginning an edited volume on digital humanities pedagogy (Croxall / Jakacki 2023), this finding spurred us to solicit essays to address this shortfall.

This panel features an introduction and four full presentations that report on digital humanities pedagogy in different regional contexts. The introduction–Croxall and Jakacki–places the panel in context. The first paper–Tsui, Zhu, and Chen–reflects upon DH within the educational superstructure of Chinese universities. As both an interdisciplinary and relatively new field in China, DH does not yet have a clear home. As such, DH educational opportunities tend to be informal. The second paper–Roy and Menon–considers "postcolonial DH pedagogy" within India. While India has strong programs in traditional humanities fields, these programs are beholden to colonial teaching practices which limit the range of methods students can deploy. Instead, DH courses have flourished at technical institutions, where the faculty and students are freer to experiment with their research. The third paper–O'Sullivan–discusses whether a dedicated digital humanities program, in this case at University College Cork in Ireland, should be understood as a capitulation to neoliberal logic—an abandoning of humanities values in favor of "hard" and "marketable" skills —or instead a social opportunity for students who do, after all, need to find jobs after completing their education. The final paper–Langmead and Vee–reports on the authors' successful effort to get their introductory DH course accepted as part of their university's general education requirements. Since general education is a particular feature of the education landscape in the United States, their work points to an important intervention in broadening access to and awareness of DH in the classroom.

The introduction will take approximately six minutes, and the full presentations will each be held to a maximum of 12 minutes in length. This will make for a robust 30 minutes for discussion between the panelists and the session's attendees.

As contributors to the forthcoming volume, the participants are familiar with one another's experiences. However, in order to encourage rich dialogue amongst the panelists, the authors will circulate their updated talks with one other in advance.

This panel builds on recent conversations about pedagogy at conferences such as ACH 2021, DH 2022, and Open/Social/Digital Humanities Pedagogy Training and Mentorship at DHSI 2022.

Brian Croxall and Diane K. Jakacki

Learning from the Past, Shaping the Future

At the 2019 Digital Humanities Conference in Utrecht and in the weeks following, we invited colleagues from across the digital humanities to participate in a survey designed to learn more about the identities and experiences of those who teach DH. We hoped to discover more nuanced information about what happens in the DH classroom and how those of us in the classroom came to be there. In turn, the results of this survey helped us to shape the volume of essays we were in the process of editing, *What We Teach When We Teach DH: Digital Humanities in the Classroom*. The experience of working with our co-authors led us to realize that it is crucial to examine the differences distinct regional, cultural, and linguistic contexts have on the teaching and learning of DH.

This brief introductory paper will serve as a framing mechanism for the longer presentations by our co-panelists. We will also guide the discussion with the attendees.

Lik Hang Tsui, Benjun Zhu, and C. J. Chen

Finding Institutional Space and Carving out Flexibility": Digital Humanities Pedagogy in China

DH pedagogy, as it is broadly understood, is still very new to China. In this paper, we present the main debates that DH pedagogy provokes within the Chinese higher education system and reflects on critical local conditions in the global digital humanities landscape. Although the Chinese government has stressed the importance of information and communications technology (ICT), the teaching that focuses on the convergence of ICT and the humanities is restricted to professional education in specific disciplines, such as information science and library science.

We present three observations about DH pedagogy in China. First, the role of teaching DH in academic disciplines, general education, and interdisciplinary initiatives respectively in China are geared towards different purposes in the national education system. Second, we argue that all the existing DH pedagogical efforts in the country lie in the relatively flexible area that exists informally between institutional structures, with the exception of a new DH Ph.D. program. Third, we underscore the importance of academic conferences as pedagogical events in China, although overseas scholars have not been able to visit in person since the pandemic. We draw from our experience teaching DH in various formats in China, as well as in building DH communities and capacity in such communities. We also draw from our recent observations of China amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and expect our arguments to inform the promotion of DH pedagogy internationally.

Dibyadyuti Roy and Nirmala Menon

What Is Postcolonial DH Pedagogy and What Is It Doing in Indian Institutions?

In the postcolonial Indian education context, where a palpable binary exists between the technical/vocational and the liberal arts-based models of education, digital humanities does not automatically find a home in Humanities Departments. This paper interrogates the assumption that DH always arrives in pedagogical spaces in the same guise. What's more, it highlights how the academic currency of DH is still predominantly limited to Global-North universities. We demonstrate that pedagogical approaches to DH in India are best categorized as a "rhizomatic" process, which refuse a linear trajectory of experimentation and involve theorizing, tooling, tweaking, and teaching—often all at the same time. Indeed Postcolonial DH epitomizes an array of practices that allow for an articulation of DH pedagogies that are indigenous and enmeshed in non-traditional contexts.

We argue that the key question within the ambit of Postcolonial Digital Humanities is not "what is digital humanities?" (pace Matthew Kirschenbaum 2010), but rather, "how is digital humanities pedagogy implemented in traditionally non-humanities spaces and what are the implications for Global DH?"

James O'Sullivan

DH Pedagogy in Ireland as Neo-liberal Logic or Social Opportunity?

To what end do we teach Digital Humanities? A significant particularity of the so-called "DH moment" (see Gold 2012a) is the rise of discipline-specific courses designed to make DH more than a bit part of larger curricula. But what does it mean to pursue and acquire a DH qualification or degree? One of the major charges against DH is the part that it has played in the increasing neo-liberalisation of the academy (Allington et al. 2016). There is perhaps some merit to this, in that many DH methods privilege quantification as a means of interpretation through measurement, an ethos which, deservedly or otherwise, has garnered much controversy (Marche 2012). If computer-assisted tools and methods privilege such logic, what is the contribution of dedicated DH programs to the political structure of higher education, or, put differently, when we teach DH do we teach neoliberal logic?

This paper will seek to answer this question, examining the extent to which DH programs propagate neo-liberal logic, while also exploring their potential to provide a socio-economic opportunity to a generation of graduates tasked with living in the age of late capitalism. Using the development of the DH program at the University College Cork (UCC) as a case study, this paper will look beyond the *what* of the DH degree, focusing instead on *why* such programs might present true value and utility within a contemporary context, filling one of the major gaps in recent treatments of the field's failings— *class*.

Langmead and Vee

Teaching the Digital Humanities to a Broad Undergraduate Population in the U.S.

Using as its central example a co-taught, cross-listed, undergraduate course that fills a U.S.-based general education requirement, this paper argues for the benefits of teaching a version of the Digital Humanities to a wide population of students both to attract them into relevant majors and to help them more carefully consider the role of digital computation in their daily lives. Through this "gen-ed" requirement and a content focus on the humanistic aspects of digital computing, this course casts a wide net for DH, aiming to appeal to undergraduates who may not already have adopted mindful uses of the digital nor know much about what the humanities are and do. With students, we ask: In a world of ubiquitous computing, what does it mean to be human?

Through discussion of this course's design and implementation, we show how we leveraged institutional resources to launch undergraduate DH courses. We also wrestle with the following questions: how can DH fit productively into a general education model? how such courses can serve as tent poles for larger DH initiatives? and whether co-taught courses are sustainable given the structure of the twenty-first-century university. As the course develops, we need to be conscious of what learning goals should be carried over for the course to meet the programmatic and gen-ed role it now fills in our undergraduate curriculum. In this paper, we report on the progress we've made on design, pedagogical approach, and responding to the administrative challenges of teaching such a course, treating it as a case study relevant to DH faculty interested in undergraduate, sustainable, and inclusive DH pedagogy.

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