



PROJECT MUSE®

Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

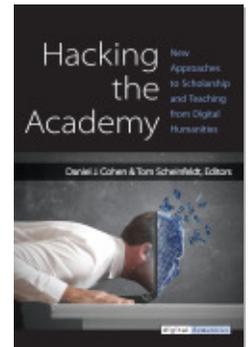
Published by University of Michigan Press

Cohen, Dan & Scheinfeldt, Joseph T..

Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities.

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/22907>



Interdisciplinary Centers and Spaces

Stephen Ramsay and Adam Turner

Centers of Attention

—*Stephen Ramsay*

I've been around digital humanities centers for a long time—fifteen years at least. I've worked at them—in positions ranging from part-time staff member to Fellow—consulted for them, given speeches at various openings and anniversaries, and been present at a few center funerals. So, I'm always interested in how these things get started and how they end.

One of my favorite founding stories involves the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH) at the University of Virginia, where a lot of my ideas about centers were formed. According to the story, IBM offered to donate a server to the University of Virginia—this was back when such things were much rarer, and a lot more expensive. The university naturally approached the computer science department, asking if they'd like the equipment. The department, amazingly, said “no.” They had heard, however, that there were some people over in the English and history departments who were doing things with computers. Maybe ask them.

I've always imagined the server washing up on the shores of the College of Arts and Sciences and starting a strange cargo cult among a group of people who normally didn't talk to each other much. There's a guy in history who's into computers, and there's someone in English. Neither of them really knows what they're doing, and the computer science people are too busy with serious computational matters to help out the poets. The librarians, fortunately, know more than the computer scientists about how to actually run a rack server, and so they get involved. Questions arise: Where do we put this thing? Who pays for its upkeep? Doesn't it need, like, maintenance or witchcraft, or something? Are we really qualified to design websites, given that none of us have the faintest idea how to draw?

That this turned into one of the most vibrant centers of intellectual

activity in North America—a hugely influential research group that would be widely imitated by such contemporary powerhouses as the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Center for Digital Research in the Humanities—should surprise no one.

We like to marvel at the technological wonders that proceed from things like servers, but in this case—I would say, in all cases—the miracle of “computers in the humanities” is the way it forced even a highly balkanized academy into new kinds of social formations. Anyone involved with any of these big centers will tell you that they are rare sites of genuine collaboration and intellectual synergy—that they explode disciplinary boundaries and even the cherished hierarchies of academic rank. They do this, because . . . well, really because no one really knows what they’re doing. Because *both* the English professor and the history professor need to learn MySQL; because the undergraduate student from art history happens to be the only one who knows PHP; because actually, you do need to learn how to draw—or at least know something about design—and the designers are pleased to reveal their art to you. Because you know Java.

These may not sound like disruptive modalities, but in an area of scholarship where coauthorship is viewed with suspicion and collaboration is rare, the idea that you couldn’t master everything necessary to create a digital archive or write a piece of software was a complete revelation. It forced scholars to imagine their activities in terms of highly interdependent groups. To succeed, you had to become like the Clerk in *The Canterbury Tales*; “gladly would he learn and gladly would he teach.” Working as a full-time programmer at IATH in the late 1990s—while finishing a PhD in English—not only changed the way I think about computers in the humanities, but changed the way I think about the humanities, and about higher education itself.

Universities are designed around subject areas. But what if they were designed, like centers, around methodologies or even questions? Right now, we have English departments, and political science departments, and biology departments. These various units—made up of people who only occasionally talk to each other—band off to form things like the Graduate Certificate Program in Eighteenth-Century French Drama, or the Center for Peace Studies, or the Bioinformatics Initiative. What would it be like if that was all there was—structures meant to bring people and students together for as long as a methodology remains useful or a question remains interesting? Such entities would be born like centers—born with all the

excitement and possibility of not knowing what you're doing—of having to learn from each other what the methodologies and questions are really about. They might also die like centers. I mentioned that I've been at a few center funerals, and I can tell you that they don't die the way you think—lack of funding, for example, is probably the least common reason. Mostly, they die because people move on to other questions and concerns—and what's wrong with that? You could imagine a university in which scholars move through a number of different centers over the course of a career, and students pass through a number of them on the way to a degree—we'd have to change the names of the degrees to something vague, like “Bachelor of Arts” or “Doctor of Philosophy.”

Years ago, while working at IATH, my dissertation director—Jerome McGann, one of the cargo cult founders—stopped me in the hallway and said, “Steve, be sure to treasure this experience. I've worked in this field a long time, and I can tell you: you may never see this again.” I think Jerry was right and wrong about that. He was wrong; I've managed to see it several times since leaving IATH, most especially at the center I'm now involved with—the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities. But he was also right. It's easy to treasure the wrong thing about digital centers: to see the excitement brewing in a community of teachers, students, and researchers as a new opportunity for what we might do, rather than a way to affirm an amazing thing that has already happened.

Hacker Spaces as Scholarly Spaces

—*Adam Turner*

A hallmark of the hacker/maker culture is community collaboration. That community is often physically manifest in a particular space—a rented warehouse, a shed, somebody's garage. Hacker spaces often grow out of a common need for a place to work, exchange ideas, share knowledge, and pool resources. In these cases, the community essentially exists without the space, but it is the space that breathes life into the community. Interdisciplinary practice works in much the same way. Many in academia are already interested in—and often work across—multiple disciplines, but lack a common space to facilitate both independent disciplinary work and collaborative interdisciplinary work. A hacker space.

Such a scholarly space—of which HUMLab, the digital humanities and new-media lab at Umea University in Sweden, serves as an excellent

established example—exists not to institute interaction, but to provide a creative environment for scholars, researchers, artists, students, teachers, anyone with interest (hence paradisciplinary), to work, exchange ideas, share knowledge, and pool resources. A flexible scholar/hacker space encourages exchange of ideas, collaboration, and discovery beyond the discipline through an organic process of interaction, sharing, and learning from each other. Possibly the most valuable aspect of such a space would be the creation of a hacker/scholar/maker community in which members are free to pursue their own research and academic projects, and also to collaborate and interact with the community as a whole.

Like a discipline, such a community would provide a living repository of common knowledge and quality practice, but instead of establishing a single shared heuristic, it would serve as a dynamic collection of varied modes of thinking and questioning. This model is certainly not for everyone, and would likely not replace the current disciplinary model, but should it? One of the strengths of the hacker/maker model is that it is not an attempt to eliminate previous models so much as it represents a drive to modify and improve upon elements of those models.

In conjunction with a more flexible disciplinary framework, paradisciplinary scholar spaces could provide an organic—and fun—means of thinking and doing across the academic disciplinary divide. Hacking is about doing: creating, thinking, questioning, observing, learning, and teaching. The core of academic work is, at its heart, hacking. The scholar-hacker takes this and runs with it; breaking open previous modes of thought to see how they tick, rearranging them, adding to them, and then taping, soldering, and gluing them back together again.