Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019
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Collaboration is held in such high esteem in the digital humanities that those who dare to question it are seen as uncooperative and combative. As Ted Underwood has quipped, “Arguing against collaboration is a lot like arguing against kittens.” However, collaboration comes with its own potential pitfalls, especially when the collaborative relationship includes faculty members and graduate students working in the same field. As a current graduate student who has worked on several large-scale digital projects, my interest in this topic is not unmotivated. While my experience has been good, it does not speak for the graduate experience as a whole. Sometimes, for example, graduate students who work with tenured faculty members on digital projects are told that they can present and publish on the technical aspects of a project, but not on the subject matter. Even more commonly, graduate students are simply not encouraged by their project directors to publish and present on their digital work. Both are problematic in that graduate students in the humanities need to publish to succeed in the field.

In my own experience and in talking with other students at various institutions, faculty–student collaborations in the digital humanities tend to follow a typical model: a team of graduate students does the computational work, while the director, usually a tenured scholar, publishes the findings. Graduate students are credited with contributing to the project, usually in the form of a footnote or mention on a project website, but they are rarely encouraged to write or even coauthor critical, interpretive articles about the project. It is tempting to attribute the problem with this model to a lack of standardized citation practices within the humanities and thus to look toward the sciences for a solution. However, running a lab that generates a mass of papers, both single- and multi-authored, is worlds apart from humanities scholarship, even of the digital variety. Humanities projects are interpretive, and so scholars tend to write individual papers, even when working on collaborative projects. And while DH projects are increasingly seen as scholarly in their own right, they often do not count as scholarship. As Cathy Davidson has observed,
the articles and books that the projects enable are the artifacts that tend to count as scholarship (qtd. Kelly, 52). Because the most highly valued form of academic labor in the humanities is the single-authored article or book, collaboration as it is typically practiced risks shutting graduate students out of the very scholarship they labored to produce. Too often, students are not treated as scholars-in-training but as employees. Paying graduate students to work, but not encouraging them to think and write about their work, creates a disconnect between their labor and their intellectual development.

Consequently, I have become a bit skeptical about “collaboration” as an ideal. Conceiving project partnerships as simply collaborative, rather than as more formally structured research relationships, masks some important responsibilities that faculty members owe to their students. Because PhD candidates are training to be scholars, faculty members, even in the capacity of project directors, managers, or PIs, have a responsibility to help their students publish in the field. If a faculty member hires a graduate student to enter metadata, encode documents, program a website, or develop software, that faculty member is taking on more than the student’s technical abilities. Graduate students in the humanities also need to be trained to write and publish critical, interpretive work based on DH projects.

The Collaborators’ Bill of Rights and Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights are among the various efforts that have been undertaken to address the problems associated with collaborative relationships. Although both are efforts in the right direction, neither goes far enough in addressing the particular problems and needs of graduate students. This is in part because addressing those issues requires replacing the collaborative model for working with graduate students with a pedagogical model. By approaching their relationships with graduate students as pedagogical, thereby focusing on instilling skills required to advance in the profession, project directors would be better positioned to take into account student needs. A completed digital project would not be the end goal of a successful working relationship, but rather one by-product in a relationship designed to enhance a student’s professional growth, intellectual development, and readiness for the academic job market.

Although the graduate student–director relationship that I propose might look like something more akin to mentorship, I believe it should be understood pedagogically. Following Roger Simon, to invoke pedagogy is to invoke practices, strategies, and techniques, as well as a “political vision” (qtd. Hirsch, 27). I see that political vision as one in which the roles of researcher, manager, teacher, and mentor are thoroughly integrated into the role of project director, and conversely, the roles of student, mentee, and paid employee are thoroughly integrated into the role of graduate student project member. Individuals alone cannot effect integration of this type; it must be embraced at a disciplinary level.
Collaborative Practices, Collaborative Problems, or Your Student Is Not Your Peer

Despite a general agreement about the necessity of collaboration in digital projects, scholars have increasingly begun to note problems associated with the way collaboration is enacted. Gabriele Griffin is one of several to observe that collaboration is little understood, rarely discussed, and even more rarely put into practice (85–86). Other recent discussions critical of collaboration tend to highlight potential dangers to nontenure-track academics. Usually termed “service-workers” or “alt-acs,” these scholars are not often perceived by administrators or tenure-track scholars as being on equal footing with research faculty. As a result, they are less likely to receive adequate credit for their contributions, less likely to weigh in on important project decisions, and less likely to be taken seriously when they do. Consequently, as Bethany Nowviskie observes, alt-acs have the least incentive to articulate the problems inherent in collaborative work, even as they are the project members who are most able to do so (“Evaluating”). In other words, because status factors heavily into how people relate to and work with one another, what appears to be a collaborative relationship is too often a collaboration in name only.

Status is particularly important to consider when collaborating with graduate students. Elijah Meeks argues that collaboration, by definition, “means partnership and peer interaction” (“Collaboration”). Under this definition, collaboration would seem to sound like a welcome prospect, implying an equal partnership and stake in the project among all participants. However, even in the best of collaborative situations, students are not on an equal footing with faculty and staff, and the stakes they have in the project often differ from those of participating faculty or staff. From learning how to write for publication to obtaining an academic job, students’ needs and goals are not the same as those who are further along in their careers. While faculty members may engage students as peers so as to bring them onto a project, students are too often left behind when it comes time to publish, with their labor cited only on a website or buried in a long list of acknowledgments.

The disjunction between graduate student and tenured faculty partners becomes particularly acute once the collaboration ends and the “real” work—writing the interpretive argument—begins. The numbers bear this out: publication data suggest that graduate students in digital humanities are not publishing in the forms and venues that would help them in their professional development. In “Student Labour and Training in Digital Humanities,” Katrina Anderson et al. report that students’ project work is rarely disseminated through peer-reviewed journals or even in conference presentations. In their 2013 survey, circulated to faculty and student researchers through the Digital Humanities Summer Institute and the Association of College Research Libraries listservs, Anderson et al. found that less than 20 percent of student respondents disseminated project findings via single- or coauthored conference presentations, and only 9 percent of students did so in print publications.
The underrepresentation of student work in DH publications is especially troubling given that the profession continues to value single-authored articles, and consequently, single-authored articles continue to represent the field.

In their study of authorship patterns in the digital humanities, Julianne Nyhan and Oliver Duke-Williams looked at peer-reviewed articles from *Computers and the Humanities* (1966–2004), *Literary and Linguistic Computing* (1986–2011), and, as a control, the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1966–2013). Not surprisingly, they found that single-authored papers dominate the field of DH. Research by Lisa Spiro suggests an even more complex and concerning picture. She reports that while 40 percent of articles published in *Literary and Linguistic Computing* (2004–2008) and *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (2007–2009) were multiauthored, most of those articles focused on practical projects, tools, or methods. It was the single-authored articles that centered on interpretive or theoretical work (“Computing”). These numbers suggest a worrisome possibility: that graduate students are being effectively shut out of the publication process at its most important and prestigious step.

Guidelines meant to address the inequity of collaborative practices, although well intentioned, do not address this particular problem. For example, neither the Collaborators’ Bill of Rights nor UCLA’s ensuing Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights assert that project directors have a responsibility to help graduate students write and publish on the DH projects they share. Instead, much of the language in both is centered on extending credit to project members and articulating the form that credit should take. The Bill of Rights states, “Credit should take the form of a legible trail that articulates the nature, extent and dates of the contribution”; “All kinds of work on a project are equally deserving of credit”; and, “There should be a prominent ‘credits’ link on the main page [of a website].” Largely echoing its parent document, the Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights similarly asserts, “If students have made substantive (i.e., non-mechanical) contributions to the project, their names should appear on the project as collaborators.” While both Bills of Rights offer specific guidelines concerning credit allocation for the projects themselves, they make little mention of how credit should be allocated when it comes to the publications that result from those projects. Until these documents are expanded to take into account that the academy, including the digital humanities, is still focused on publications as a metric, they will fail to fully address the reality of students’ status or needs.

As a student, I see two specific problems with the Bills of Rights guidelines. First, the citation practices described by both assume that an individual’s labor, whether it be as web developer, PI, graphic designer, or data entrant, does not influence the form a project takes or the publication that results from it. But as we can all attest through our experiences as peer reviewers, seminar participants, and conference respondents, ideas do not emerge in intellectual vacuums. If a collaboration results in a successful project, it can be extremely difficult to determine where one partner’s idea ends and another’s begins. Consequently, it becomes extremely difficult
to discern who should be credited with what. Elijah Meeks, reflecting on an experience in which he unwittingly claimed authorship over his project partner’s writing, cautions that “the overwhelming ease and amount of collaboration will make it harder and harder to parse just where and how an idea came into existence and who and what described it” (“Accidental Plagiarism”). Nowviskie confirms Meeks’s assessment, explaining that “digital scholarship is rarely if ever ‘singular’ or ‘done,’ and that complicates immensely our notions of responsibility and authorship and readiness for assessment” (“Evaluating”). Given that an individual’s contributions are more far-reaching than a detailed page of acknowledgments would ever begin to suggest, a “legible trail of credit” is not only impracticable but also risks short-changing members who are not listed as authors.

Second, the assumption undergirding both Bills of Rights is that graduate students will not continue to work on the project they helped build. This is most apparent in the Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights’ declaration: “If students have made substantive (i.e., non-mechanical) contributions to the project, their names should appear on the project as collaborators, and they should be acknowledged in subsequent publications that stem from the project.” As the latter half of this statement suggests, the students are not often the ones doing the writing, and it assumes that their work is sufficiently acknowledged by a mere mention in “subsequent publications.” But a name on a website or an acknowledgment in somebody else’s publication does not help a graduate student move from scholar-in-training to scholar. As Stephen Ramsay writes, somewhat facetiously, “No one has a problem anymore with digital work. It just has to be, you know, about article length. And single authored. And peer reviewed. And disseminated under the banner of a third party” (45). Sarcasm aside, Ramsay raises an important point: the most valued work attached to digital projects still occurs at the point of publication, and it is this point in the publication process that the Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights does not address.

Instead, it reinforces a false binary between students and employees by suggesting, “A professor who assigns a class project, for example, must primarily consider the student’s own intellectual growth, while a senior scholar who employs a student assistant may assign work that primarily benefits the project.” However, the roles of student and student-employee cannot be so neatly separated. The graduate school relationship that structures student employment, especially on digital projects, is unique. Even when graduate students are technically employees—hired through a DH center or by a faculty member—and compensated for their work on a project through stipends, tuition abatements, or an hourly wage, they are simultaneously students. Likewise, the faculty members who employ them also inhabit dual roles and are, at once, mentor/teacher, manager, researcher, and employer. These roles are inextricable, and so the responsibilities a faculty member owes to her students, even when they are her employees, will be different from those found in more traditional employment arrangements. Compensation should not stand in for or be seen as an adequate replacement for student professionalization and publication.
Because the Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights does not take into account the various roles students and faculty members play when working on projects, it fails to adequately protect students as scholars-to-be. For example, it neglects to mention, much less assert, a student’s right to take what he has learned and to use project data to produce his own scholarship. The student’s intellectual development is phrased as a suggestion rather than as a mandate: “We encourage senior scholars to familiarize themselves with the literature on unpaid internships. At a minimum, internships for course credit should be offered as learning experiences, with a high level of mentorship. Those employing interns should be prepared to spend substantial face-to-face time with the student.”

Even adhering to this guideline, the student must choose between being a student and getting paid. But payment is not reason enough for faculty to abdicate responsibility to their students. Faculty members who ask a student to work with them should expect that student to be a student, regardless of compensation. Given that graduate students are expected to publish, and to do so as much as possible while pursuing a PhD, they cannot also be expected to devote countless hours and mental energy to a project that, in the best-case scenario, would result in a coauthored paper or, more likely, recognition on a website and a little extra pocket money. If one of the benefits of DH projects, and the DH centers that support them, is the ability to foster a community in which graduate students can “learn on the job”—and, indeed, most DH centers describe their mission as such—then a student’s intellectual growth and professional development should be taken into as much consideration as her technical skills (Clement and Reside).

Emphasizing the pedagogical rather than collaborative aspects of DH will reinsert scholarship back into the equation for graduate students who would otherwise be treated as only employees. While pedagogy and collaboration both have a place in DH projects, they should not be conflated when it comes to working with students. Untangling these two aspects of DH work will help ensure that a student’s professional and intellectual development is not effaced by the overall goals of developing a digital project.

**The Role of Pedagogy in DH Partnerships or Closing the Gap between Teacher, Researcher, and Mentor**

In its preamble, UCLA’s Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights notes the importance of recognizing “that students and more senior scholars don’t operate from positions of equal power in the academic hierarchy.” Through its various guidelines, the bill represents one attempt to account for and mitigate the difference in status between students and scholars. But rather than trying to force a relationship to be something that it cannot (i.e., a collaboration between peers), I suggest that we recognize it for what it already is: a relationship between teacher and student, rather than between peers or just between employer and employee. Reframing the relationship between...
graduate students and project directors as pedagogical reshapes or, at the very least, makes explicit the different roles played by each. In the words of pedagogical theorist Henry Giroux, “To invoke the importance of pedagogy is to raise questions not simply about how students learn but also about how educators (in the broad sense of the term) construct the ideological and political positions from which they speak” (45). Complicating the issue, of course, is that in the digital humanities faculty members and students speak from multiple positions; the former often act as researchers, managers, teachers, mentors, and employers, while the latter act as students, researchers, employees, and scholars-in-training. Under the collaborative model, these positions are not given equal weight.

The relationship between teaching and research permeates most debates about the field of digital humanities. As Brett Hirsch and Stephen Brier have observed, few scholarly articles address both, and when they do, pedagogy is often discussed as an afterthought or only in relation to classroom contexts. That is, pedagogy is either marginalized and treated as subservient to research, or pedagogy is seen as something that only occurs when professors incorporate digital projects into their more traditional classrooms. Few scholars seem to think of DH centers as learning environments unto themselves. However, the work that occurs in DH centers is founded on knowledge creation via the collective (Hirsch, 16). Fostering a student’s intellectual growth through effective mentorship will advance the project and the discipline as a whole because with guidance and encouragement, students will begin contributing to the field in meaningful ways and will be more likely to produce quality research and keep their project directors abreast of new knowledge. Treating research and teaching as distinct modes not only shuts students out of the academy but also erects a false binary.

Undeniably, DH work takes a long time. It is technologically intensive and often involves a large number of people. Still, as Jerome McGann writes, “The work of the humanist scholar has not changed with the advent of digital devices” (4). Therefore, it is of particular importance for project directors to view their graduate students as students rather than as collaborators, peers, or even partners. To do so will bring to the fore the focus on their intellectual development and related professional responsibilities, both for the student and the project director. In this scenario, ideally, students will begin to see their labor as integral to, rather than disconnected from, their own research agendas. Likewise, project directors will begin to see that their responsibilities to their student workers are not limited to the project, but instead are bound both to the project and to their students’ intellectual and professional development. The aims of DH centers and humanities classrooms should be aligned when it comes to students; intellectual work and development are key components and the raison d’être of each.

As an indicator of how well the pedagogical model is incorporated into DH projects, I propose this as a general rule: projects that employ graduate students should include student publication as among the key metrics of their overall success.
After all, graduate students are expected to complete coursework, teach introductory classes, pass exams, write a dissertation, and publish all along the way. Writing is not only the most important part; it is also the fun part. In Daniel Cohen’s words, “We wake up with ideas swirling around inside our head about the topic we’re currently thinking about, and the act of writing is a way to satisfy our obsession and communicate our ideas to others” (40). Project directors should nurture this instinct. Working and thinking are similarly inextricable. The graduate students who are paid to do the work should therefore also be allowed to do some of the thinking.

NOTES

Many thanks to Michael Gavin, Travis Mullen, and Eric Gonzalez for helping me think through and expand on the issues discussed in this chapter.

1. Practitioners within the field have yet to reach a consensus on what precisely it means to do the work of a digital humanist; however, most recognize the importance of collaboration. As Lisa Spiro writes in “Computing and Communicating Knowledge,” “Collaboration is generally vital to accomplishing . . . [digital] projects because of their scope and complexity” (44). Citing Spiro, Bryan Carter calls collaboration “an inherent part of almost all projects in the field” (59); likewise, N. Katherine Hayles sees collaboration as “the rule rather than the exception” (51). Many others believe that collaboration is a disciplinary asset in a time of shrinking budgets and the so-called decline of the humanities. Matthew Jockers, for one, asserts that the migration to digital humanities is opportunistic (11). Whether that opportunity is defined as scholarly or budgetary, the magnitude of most digital projects not only provides an opportunity for collaborative study but also demands it.

2. Developed as an outcome of a two-day workshop, “Off the Tracks—Laying New Lines for Digital Humanities Scholars” and first published in the NEH report Off the Tracks, the Collaborators’ Bill of Rights is meant to protect collaborators at all levels. It outlines five recommendations: all work should be credited; attribution of credit should be comprehensive and legible; intellectual property rights should extend to all project members; collaborators maintain ownership over the project; and project funders should not support policies that undermine the above principles. In an attempt to remedy the lack of attention paid to students in the Bill of Rights, UCLA’s A Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights adds a list of ten “safeguards for students” to the recommendations laid out in its parent document: students should be paid; course credit is not sufficient payment unless the partnership entails mentorship; students who have made substantial contributions should be named as collaborators; students should be encouraged to present on projects; students should list their contributions on their respective CVs; students should not be forced to participate in public-facing scholarship; students should be treated as full members of the team; and, guidelines should be set regarding reuse of digital materials.

3. Because DH collaborations rely so heavily on what Bethany Nowviskie terms “close and meaningful human partnership,” social boundaries and status will inevitably
influence the shape of those partnerships, usually favoring tenure-track scholars ("Evaluating" and "Monopolies"). Julia Flanders describes collaboration as a relationship characterized by sacrifice and, in the digital humanities, mediated by the tools digital humanists use, rather than the relationship between collaborators. Willard McCarty writes that “collaboration is a problematic, and should be a contested, term,” lest it become a “transcendental virtue”—“a good without qualification” (2).

4. In their NEH white paper, Off the Tracks, Tanya Clement and Doug Reside assert that scholars working within DH centers are viewed as hybrid academics and service workers, both separate from and unequal to tenure-track faculty.

5. Nowviskie attributes this to “the violence inherent in the system” and argues that, though “intellectual egalitarianism” is the ideal, we cannot ignore the way in which social boundaries factor into collaborative enterprises (“Monopolies”).

6. As Christine Borgman writes, “Collaborations, when effective, produce new knowledge that is greater than the sum of what the participating individuals could accomplish alone.” Stephen Johnson, too, notes that “a majority of breakthrough ideas emerge in collaborative environments” (qtd. Spiro “This is Why,” 25).

7. For example, Julia Flanders writes that the staff development strategy at the Center for Digital Scholarship at Brown is “to create a culture in which it is assumed that people will be learning and experimenting as part of the work process.” Paul Marty describes the goal of the Center for Digital Knowledge and Distributed Scholarship at Florida State University as “meet[ing] the needs of faculty, students, and staff engaged in knowledge creation” and “help[ing] students view the university not only as a place where knowledge is imparted, but as a place where knowledge is created.” Writing of the early days at the University of South Carolina’s Center for Digital Humanities, David Miller says, “We have from the start been concerned with the professional development of our staff.” Susan Schreibman of the Digital Humanities Observatory identifies “the enhancement of the teaching and learning experience of research students in humanities” as one of the center’s three major goals (qtd. Clement and Reside).

8. In the introduction to his 2012 article, “Where’s the Pedagogy,” Stephen Brier argues that teaching and pedagogy are seen as subservient to research; in his full-text search of ninety-plus articles published in Digital Humanities Quarterly from 2007 to 2009, Brier notes that “research” returns eighty-one hits, “teaching” and “learning” return forty hits, and “pedagogy” returns nine hits (391). Likewise, Hirsch notes that in the 2004 edition of Blackwell’s A Companion to Digital Humanities, “research” appears 504 times, whereas “teaching” appears only 99 times. Hirsch notes that while discussions centered on digital humanities and pedagogy are on the rise, pedagogy is usually “bracketed,” that is, tacked on or included parenthetically (4–5). Both Brier’s and Hirsch’s articles are meant to redress the lack of attention paid to pedagogy in the DH field, but both approach the topic by addressing digital humanities in classroom contexts rather than by seeing DH projects as pedagogical moments in and of themselves.

9. Katrina Anderson et al.’s “Student Labour and Training in the Digital Humanities” is one notable exception. Within their article, published only recently, Anderson
et al. argue that the rhetoric of collaboration ignores existing hierarchical structures, which creates challenges for students working in the digital humanities. Their list of best practices emphasizes training and encouraging students to disseminate their work and “call[s] for a formal acknowledgment of the mentoring activities—the affective and immaterial labour—that sustains much DH training and many DH projects.”

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


