Disrupting the Digital Humanities

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Published by Punctum Books


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I am going back and re-reading a handful of articles from the 1970s published in the journal “Computers and the Humanities.” I am struck by how innovative and imaginative so many of these articles are. I am also struck and saddened by how little the field has progressed. R.L. Widmann, one of my dearest mentors, wrote (five years before I was born), “the increasing numbers of works which do use computers with intelligence and perceptive-ness demonstrate the versatility to which the scholar’s imagination can be put. It was a very good year.” The year was 1971. The pieces I’m reading outline the 6 or 7 or 8 new (and revolutionary) approaches being used for thinking about the intersections between computers and the humanities. These pieces also map something very close to the current philosophical terrain of digital humanities pedagogy. They do so with an intense curiosity about what else might be possible. In R.L.’s work, there is no entrenchment. There is no unwillingness to account for edge cases. The limits of what counts and doesn’t count are described repeatedly as “arbitrary.” I’m certain the field wasn’t entirely rosy in 1971, but I have an incredible amount of hope reading these

2 Ibid., 12.
now and thinking about what we might be able to discover in
the next 45 years.

In 2011, I co-founded Hybrid Pedagogy: an open-access jour-
nal of learning, teaching, and technology.3 The project was from
its origin focused on faculty development but also on asking
hard questions of technology and education. These two do not
always sit well together. And when teachers and scholars con-
verse at this edge, the discussion is often strained. I have worked
at several institutions where their merely brushing against one
another has led to scholars expressing a kind of derision that
should have no place in education. Ultimately, the problem is
less about specific individuals looking askance and more the
result of a system that pits academics against one another in
conflict over scarce resources. This invariably privileges those
who are already privileged, those who (because of their race,
class, gender, sexuality, ability) already have protected positions
within institutions.

Hybrid Pedagogy has been since its formation staunchly ex-
tra-institutional, because we felt better poised to comment on
higher education from that vantage. Our goals have been to:
(1) interrogate academic publishing practices by making them
transparent; (2) share models that could be duplicated, recon-
figured, and reworked by other digital publishing projects; (3)
offer scholars strategies for making their pedagogical, editorial,
and outreach work legible as scholarship; (4) make publish-
ing more overtly pedagogical; (5) and to make pedagogy more
public, an open dialogue not a monologue. Christopher Long
writes in “To Be Published or To Be Read,” “Although publica-
tions with reputable university presses or journals continue to
be the cornerstone of the tenure and promotion process, many
remain inaccessible to a broad audience, bound up, as they often
are, in paper volumes or locked behind paywalls required by the
outmoded business practices of scholarly publishers.”4

4 Christopher Long, “To Be Published or To Be Read,” blog post, 23 March
2014.
Hybrid Pedagogy uses a collaborative peer-review process, in which editors engage directly with authors to revise and develop articles. Editorial work is done both asynchronously and synchronously in a Google Doc that evolves through an open dialogue between author and editors (a process very similar to the one used to edit this volume). We also encourage co-authored and multiple-author submissions; we invite the community into conversation around articles; and we link articles directly to their sources, creating a web of influence and dialogue. Hybrid Pedagogy is less focused on publishing articles as content repositories and more on reimagining scholarship as pedagogical, publishing as a way to create conversations and bridge academic and non-academic communities. We are a group of mostly humanists using digital tools to build a network of teachers and students helping to rethink the what, why, and who of public scholarship. Our primary aim has always been to make space for voices that might not otherwise be heard within academia.

The public digital humanities starts with humans, not technologies or tools, and its terrain must be continuously co-constructed. There is no place within the public digital humanities for exclusion or anti-intellectualism. No place for hierarchies: inside the academy–outside the academy; teacher–student; senior scholar–junior scholar; tenure-track–adjunct; all too distant past–inaccessible future. And we mustn’t stare or snarl in derision at people mid-thought, expecting that only the final draft of an idea should be public. Or mistake mean-spirited criticism and closing down of conversations for critical engagement.

The public digital humanities is a Venn diagram at the point where public work, digital work, and humanities work intersect. And these points of intersection are always shifting, so I won’t attempt to neatly map them here. Making scholarly work legible to the public and helping it find audiences is a form of outreach, community building, and advocacy. This is the work I’ve endeavored to do with Hybrid Pedagogy and all my other projects.

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I long identified as a “digital humanist,” but the digital humanities, as a discipline, has not endeared itself to me. I find considerably more solace in the feminist community, in the queer community, and in motley subsets of digital humanities outliers. I have never found DH particularly welcoming, for all its proclamations of being “nice.” Adeline Koh argues that “niceness/civility […] play important gatekeeping roles within the digital humanities public sphere.” What I’ve discovered is that “nice” translates too often into quiet, unassuming, staid, and scholarly (in the worst senses of the word). All the while daggers are brandished behind people’s backs, as is far too common in the scarcity economy of academia. Nevertheless, there are countless people in the digital humanities community that have won my love. My allegiances are to people and communities, not to disciplines. And it is, I think, the desire to legitimize the digital humanities itself as a discipline that brings out the daggers — and, perhaps even more detrimental, the urge to keep one eye always over our shoulders.

This question of “discipline” has been something my career has incessantly circled around. I’ve been in many rooms where humanities scholars have recited in the round a litany of fields, subfields, periods, major authors, and disciplinary affiliations. For 15 years, I made up something almost completely new at every one of these scholarly show-and-tells. I have been a 19th-century Americanist, a queer feminist, a film scholar, a new media specialist, a Shakespearean, a digital humanist. I still am most of these things, but none of them describes me or circumscribes me. And I’ve had the boundaries of these disciplines drawn on the other side of my work, to my exclusion, more often than not. With regard to my work on Hybrid Pedagogy, I was told very publicly by a senior digital humanist, “You claim the mantle of scholarship while avoiding the actual work of scholarship.” And, at conferences, in blind peer-reviews, on

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social media, this kind of gatekeeping is not at all unusual, both within the field and from outside of it. The Graduate Education Research Committee at University of Wisconsin-Madison wrote these words to me in a letter, “The Committee wants to send a clear message that what matters is tenure, what matters for tenure is peer review, and work posted on the web is not considered peer-reviewed.” Sentences like these take a toll. But they also make me even more resolute.

Ultimately, what counts as digital humanities is work that doesn’t try to police the boundaries of what counts as digital humanities.⁶

While I have played in and around many disciplines, my primary scholarly interest has always been pedagogy. I have devoted nearly my entire professional life to teaching, to the collaborative work I do with students — and with other teachers as students. Pedagogy is not synonymous with teaching or talking about teaching, nor is it entirely abstracted from the acts of teaching and learning. It is both my discipline and threaded through all of my disciplines. Pedagogy is praxis, the place where philosophy and practice meet. Most of my pedagogies, including my digital ones, are rooted in critical pedagogy — in thinkers like Emerson, Elbow, hooks, Dewey, and Freire. And like Freire, I am a hopeful critical pedagogue. In Pedagogy of Hope, he writes, “I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative.”⁷ But, also like Freire, I recognize that hope must be balanced with action and struggle.

My digital humanities has focused less on reading humanities texts with digital tools, and more on using humanities tools — humane tools — to read and make digital texts. Since I started teaching in 2001, I’ve become more and more concerned with thinking about ways to make public what I do in the classroom and what I do in the safe confines of a word-processing window. The impetus for my scholarly work and publishing is to

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⁶ See Jesse Stommel (@Jessifer), Twitter post, 4 January 2015, 10:46 a.m.
do my pedagogy in much larger and more open spaces—teaching, and teaching teachers, as a form of activism. What I call “public digital humanities” is built around networked learning communities, not repositories for content, and its scholarly product is a conversation, one that blurs distinctions between research, teaching, and service.

As Brett D. Hirsch writes in the introduction to Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles, and Politics, “To bracket pedagogy in critical discussions of the digital humanities or to completely exclude it from these discussions reinforces an antagonistic distinction between teaching and research, in which the time, effort, and funding spent on the one cannibalizes the opportunities of the other.”

Our work must be collaborative. Even when our work is not produced by multiple authors/artists, it becomes collaborative when it is given generously to its readers. And, it’s not just that we need to find and celebrate new modes of digital scholarship, but that we must allow our new digital environments to influence all forms of scholarship.

The public digital humanities must be rooted in a genuine desire to make the work legible to a broader audience inclusive of students, teaching-focused colleagues, community college colleagues, and the public. I believe pedagogical work should be honored as the best kind of research, and our scholarship should be pedagogical. This is the voice I speak in, the voice I write in, and it is a voice that chooses at strategic moments to generalize. It is a rigorous voice because it is a hybrid voice, attempting to balance the nuanced analysis of a scholarly approach with a desire to make the work accessible. Scholarly writing for broad publics must invite readers and students (once its mere satellites) into a more intimate, more provocative dance. This scholarship cannot be static, traditional, or staid. It must resist the deadening impulse of much so-called “academic rigor.”

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And the gathering together of work into collections like this one demands a move away from the metaphor of the static bibliographic record toward hyperlinked ones—our work is not just influenced by but connected metonymically to its sources, to the other works that gather around it, a cacophony of sometimes disparate voices.10

And my sources for the work here are myriad:

I hear echoes of my friend and colleague R.L. Widmann in the words I’ve written in this chapter. Well beyond her early articles in “Computers and the Humanities,” it has been through conversation with her over two decades that I’ve found my way to these sentences.

I also hear echoes of Bonnie Stewart who writes, in “What counts as academic influence online?”: “The work of research that is not legible to others always feels, rhetorically, like lifting stones uphill: constantly establishing premises rather than moving on to the deep exploration of that one particular thing.”11 Doing public work is different from making academic work public. Available is not always accessible.

Sean Michael Morris and I write, in “Hybrid Pedagogy, Digital Humanities, and the Future of Academic Publishing”: “Post-print publishing keeps its focus on moving objects: digital artifacts and networked conversations that can be plumbed at the level of the code behind them, tracked in their progress through the web, or catalogued next to works beside which they would not normally sit.”12 For over 15 years, Sean’s words have come to inhabit my sentences.

Describing how words on a page can also be action, Maha Bali writes, “if our writing works on the world by striving to challenge it, to change it, to influence it, our writing can be praxis.”

One of my other early mentors, Martin Bickman, writes in “Returning to Community and Praxis: A Circuitous Journey through Pedagogy and Literary Studies”: “We often ignore the best resource for informed change, one that is right in front of our noses every day — our students, for whom the most is at stake.” This has been (and will continue to be) the focus of my work, bringing students to tables where talk of education is underway. In this, I have had my greatest successes and my greatest failures. The work is hard. We have built an almost ironclad academic system — and I acknowledge myself as one of its privileged builders — a system which excludes the voices of students, which calls students “customers” while monetizing their intellectual property, which denigrates the work of learning through assessment mechanisms and credentialing pyramid schemes.

Finally, Steven Lubar writes, in “Seven Rules for Public Humanists”: “The work of public engagement comes not after the scholarship, but as part of the scholarship.” A public digital humanities is constantly interrogating itself, but never at the expense of bringing non-academic, non-specialist voices into the conversation. Lubar’s work on the public humanities has moved from a model that brings humanities work to the public to “a re-

April 2014.


alization that our work was not about us, or for us.” It’s not that we need to do this work in bigger and bigger tents but that we need to move outside tents altogether. This is what I have called *humongous tent digital humanities.*

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When I wrote a draft of what became the first paragraph for the introduction to *Disrupting the Digital Humanities,* I wondered where it would fit inside this collection. I wondered how the rest of the prose would bear the weight of these assertions: “Academic turf wars have no place in a world of mass-shootings, fear-mongering, xenophobia, and white supremacy. Demanding fellow scholars do a literature review before speaking their mind has no place in a world of AR-15 assault rifles and weaponized algorithms. When something as basic as going to the bathroom lacks dignity for so many, we have no use for double-blind peer review.” As I put the final touches on this chapter, I realize how much — and for how long — my own prose has been weighed down by the trappings and bureaucracies of academic work. I realize how much bigger this conversation must be. Words are indeed action, but paragraphs alone, no matter how strident, can’t possibly make the necessary space for the work we must do.

At the center of the digital humanities should be an emphasis on individual and collective agency, which means advocating for marginalized teachers, scholars, and students. I’m arguing for the exact opposite of objectivity — for an intense subjectivity. If the digital humanities is going to innovate, it can not be through competition, clearcutting, and hype cycles, but by listening intently to more (and more diverse) voices. The digital humanities needs to be about generosity — about breaking brains not hearts.

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