Digital Humanities and the Erosion of Inquiry

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There’s something die-hard about academics. When you think about it, there’s nothing more unlikely than leading a life devoted to knowledge, to discovery and inquiry, to curiosity. It’s not practical. Not many parents want their kids to grow up to be scholars. We’d rather our kids have security, stability — an education, yes, and a job and a house and a family, yes. But few of us say “I want you to spend the rest of your life in a library carrel, carrying on conversations arcane to other people.” Academics hoe a row that may or may not yield a crop. It’s risky, doing this work. And yet there’s nothing else we’d like to be doing.

There’s a lot of talk about the liberal arts and the humanities being in peril, or that scholarship itself is in profound crisis. To this, I have said that “If higher education is ailing, it is only because its many doctors have not applied themselves to its resuscitation.” There is no better solution to the problems scholarship faces than its professors, adjuncts, and students. People are the solution to whatever ails the profession. Each of us has agency

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1 Parts of this piece are adapted from a piece originally published on Hybrid Pedagogy. See Sean Michael Morris, “Digital Humanities and the Erosion of Inquiry,” Hybrid Pedagogy, 12 February 2016.
we can apply—not only to create our own success, but to ensure the success of those who come after us.

Agency is tricky, though, especially within the reputational economy of higher education. Too often it seems that in order to enjoy reputational gains—cool publishing opportunities, speaking gigs, keynotes, better and better project opportunities, grants—agency must be set aside. The institution itself, as well as the bodies that fund it, delight in setting up obstacle courses, hoops for jumping through, rhetorics to echo, expectations which must be met that have nothing or little to do with our agency, with our passions and excitement. Projects that we love become dreams we must negotiate or defer until the system which holds purview is satisfied.

Or, as Simon Ensor writes, until we learn to speak dog.²

In kindergarten we dream about the agency afforded the sixth grader. In the sixth grade, we dream of the agency of high schoolers to drive cars and eat lunch off campus. In high school, we dream—well, we dream about sex…but we also dream about the agency promised us in the offing: leaving home and going to college. And it goes on. We work for our PhD only to have to further graduate from being junior faculty, only to have to work for tenure and the title of professor. And even then—if we’re not exhausted—there are bodies that judge and govern and peer-review our work until it can seem like we never left kindergarten.

And it’s not a kind governance we encounter.

The Tumblr site “Shit My Reviewers Say” offers an example. Reality so absurd that we don’t even need parody.³ The site invites “real sentences from reviews you received […] the harsh, the weird, the passive aggressive, the active aggressive and the downright mean.”⁴ For example, “No new insights, no impulses…touches of sense… (...blog), 27 January 2016.

² Simon Ensor, “My Lawyer is a Dog,” touches of sense… (blog), 27 January 2016.

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tant question addressed, no problem solved.”

A single blunt sentence fragment. Others are more overtly cruel.

This is not what scholarship is for. This is not the risk we were meant to take. Scholarship should be expressive, experimental, and liberatory. And it should land within a community of support rather than a pit of critics.

If it’s not clear, what I’m saying is that the systems of rigor that we’ve created, and that we submit to, and which purport to elevate us — in fact oppress. The academy, through some trick of mass hypnosis, makes us dependent upon its reputational economy. For marginalized people — women, people of color, queer, or trans people — this struggle is even more poignant. Women forego pregnancy to achieve tenure. Families are split in order to secure a “good” job. We strive harder and harder to meet the expectations of the academy, but rarely receive praise. The reputational economy is unforgiving. From kindergarten through the writing of a dissertation, we wait upon the satisfaction of others, a nod, and permission to speak. Indeed, the final step in our long life of study is not to present a dissertation, but to defend one. A dissertation should be met with applause, not with a defense.

Years and years and years go by and the most consistent message we get from the academy is to sit down, and shut up.

And that’s why Hybrid Pedagogy was founded. To say instead, no. Stand up, and speak.

Both Jesse Stommel and I have watched teachers and students be silenced, cowed into conformity, broken by the need to please their peer reviewers, their instructors, and their administrations. Hybrid Pedagogy is an effort — however small, however emergent — to provide a space where academic voices can be heard in important, authentic ways.

The journal’s collaborative peer review process provides authors with a supportive editorial team, partners in an effort to amplify their voices — amplify, rather than reduce — and to

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broadcast them to the widest possible audience. And the journal unabashedly promotes each of its articles in order to give authors a broad stage from which to address that audience.

Taking that stage isn’t always easy. The academic stage is most usually crowded with experts, collaborators, citations and references. Scholars aren’t used to an open spotlight, broad and bright, one that is specifically their own. Moreover, they aren’t accustomed to being told they are *good* writers. Some of them have a very hard time breaking free from the style of writing that’s been branded onto their skin — the peculiar rigor that requires more *absence* of the writer’s own voice and perspective and insists on the *presence* of the voices of esteemed others. The removal of the first person pronoun from our work is a violence that leaves us utterly unsure of our own expertise, our own genius.

What happens when we put the “I” back into our work is really nothing short of the return of the human to that work. We forget to oppress ourselves. And the next step after that is to begin to forget to oppress others. Because in truth, we are all always almost about to oppress.

So much of academic work aims at conformity. Even as we push against the oppression of the academy, we recycle and reuse that oppression in our relationships with others. As we work with one another, we frame relationships with expectations. We install and enforce — even unknowingly, even unwillingly — standards for participation in the community.

This is especially prevalent in the project of the digital humanities. Not only does funding require conformity, not only does prestige rely upon it, but we keep the gates of our relationships by those standards. We align ourselves with the “right” people, we collaborate on the “right” projects. We do not spend our sabbaticals breaking molds, but building them up. Risking otherwise leads to criticism at best, excommunication from our communities at worst. We don’t just peer review the work of the field, we peer review its people.
For example, can we look at Adeline’s Koh’s *Sabbatical Beauty* project as DH? Well known for her work as a Digital Humanist, Adeline spent her sabbatical developing a line of beauty products aimed specifically at the academic who has little time for self-care. It’s a decidedly feminist project, not at all divorced from the politics of identity, and a project for which she has had to rely on the skills she’s developed as a humanities and technology scholar. But are we tempted to look down our nose at her inventiveness? Are we tempted to peer review her life as we would a research article from her? She says that

Academic culture asks you to champion some ways of thinking over others (in the humanities: capitalism/neoliberalism = bad! not getting a tenure-track job at a research institution = failure), in ways which are often completely uncritical, but imperative for one to fit into the culture.

The institutionalization of the digital humanities has made it largely inaccessible to those who remain outliers to the institution. As DH has grown in prominence, as it has become what William Pannapacker once called “the first ‘next big thing’”; it’s also become all too discriminating about what and whom the field may include. And as the academy is wont, it has forgotten those upon whose backs the digital humanities was built. Twitter activist @so_treu, responding to “Hybrid Pedagogy, Digital Humanities, and the Future of Academic Publishing,” an article by Jesse and me, wrote:

Academia with this digital humanities push is rushing to catch up with centuries old practices of marginalized wmn / & really, academia made itself via the exclusion/delegitimating of these kinda open grassroots scholarship practices.

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The perfect unfairness of this is that when we limit another’s voice, we create an ecosystem reliant upon limitation. And that’s the ecosystem in which we now swim. We can’t ask for freedom to take risks, to follow our own curiosity — to be scholars — if we don’t offer that freedom to others.

Where DH grew out of positions of deep and necessary inquiry — deep and necessary especially in that its early advocates had to form communities of practice, interest, and support beyond the pale of traditional academic communities — today that inquiry has eroded into gratuitous and massively funded career-building projects. Not only has digital humanities exhaled its sense of urgency, but in doing so it has lost its soul, its spirit, and its ecstatic necessariness.

Interestingly, it’s actually the shackles of rigor and rules of participation — the burdened infrastructure that we build — out of which can come something vital. When people are oppressed, expression rises up. Sometimes violently, sometimes rudely, sometimes in quiet ways that catch us by surprise. When they are unrepresented, when they are oppressed and voiceless, humans find new ways to speak, new forms, new words. Few of us think about scholarship as expression created under duress, but the best of it is. The best of scholarship rises from our need to speak, and to have our observations heard.

Just as a journal run by teachers is — or should necessarily be — a classroom, so must scholarly fields be rich with dialogue. We must open our infrastructure to let in the unexpected and the curious if we want our own curiosity to thrive. The digital humanities will not survive without its collaborators.

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8 @so_treu, Twitter post, 3 January 2015, 9:22 a.m.
Turmoil as Process

Paulo Freire writes of how the oppressed—or in the case of the digital humanities, the outlier—must undo their own oppression. The outlier, she whose work is not seen, not heard, not viewed, who is precarious precisely because of her location outside prescribed bounds—of acceptability, of rigor, of form, of content, of perspective, of political orientation, of gender, of color, of credential, of imagination or invention, of syntax, of mediocrity—she must make her own voice heard. In some ways, this is how the Digital Humanities got its start. As Jesse Stommel and Dorothy Kim say in their introduction to the *Disrupting the Digital Humanities* project,

Many scholars originally were drawn to the Digital Humanities because we felt like outcasts, because we had been marginalized within the academic community. We gathered together because our work collectively disrupted the hegemony and insularity of the “traditional” humanities.

This is where I see the value of digital humanities: in its knack—indeed, its proclivity—for tearing apart, breaking down, for parsing all the way to the marrow, the code behind the text and image. There is something organically extra-institutional, even anti-institutional, about the quizzical approach of digital humanities. It is as much a practice of inspection as it is of invention. The hack is its pedagogy. At its best, it is playful and original, daring but not decadent, irreverent even of its own tenets. It is its own pain in the ass. And when it’s not, it fails to be noteworthy.

I would say that the pedagogy of digital humanities must be comfortable with its own discomfiting processes. This is


my common soapbox, an aspirational rebellion of intellect and heart that reforms education upon a post-digital landscape. And when speaking about the nature of disruption it is all too tempting to glide into superlative anxiety and deliver the stump speech about change and transformation... and disruption. To some extent, more stump speeches are necessary, more manifestos are due; to assume that digital humanities has shaped itself, clean and done, is to presume there is no contention in the field at all. But it is the field’s contentious nature that provides its most fertile manure. Resistance to the awkwardness of argument and dissent is a whitewashing maneuver designed to keep only certain voices dominant.

There must never be dominant voices in digital humanities. We must walk always along the precipice of radical inclusion — not so that we may include others in the conversations we’re having, but so that we may have the chance to be included in their conversations.

Inclusion is disruptive precisely because it does not level the playing field; rather, it points out how uneven that field is, and also that the game we’re playing may not be the right game at all. Part of the effort of digital humanities, if its aim truly is to flourish, must be outreach. To focus on individual projects, to exhaust our muscles on the work of just a few, is to sacrifice the field itself on the sword of individual reputation and career-building. Instead, we must absent ourselves, willingly, intentionally leaving space for others to speak. For the field to develop at all, it must look outwardly; and it must not cower before the havoc which that may wreak.

What I find valuable about digital humanities is not its products, not its notaries, but its processes — the dialogues, the bickering, the fastidious attention to the discourse as it struggles with issues of race and gender, equality and oppression, multilingualism and ethnicity, play and seriousness.

There is very little point in stoic civility. A commitment to disruption is a commitment to breaking our own selves upon the matter of our work — humorously, dangerously, compassionately, bravely, fiercely. We must not cow to the standards
of the academic hegemony, but must rail against them. When
digital humanists eschew performance and bare instead their
knuckles, I am reminded what academia is for, and what it can
do for me.

My hope, however naive, is that digital humanities might at-
tune us more completely to our humanity, finding the muscle
and smile, the delicacy and humor, the beauty and the viscera in
our digital presences — to focus upon how the humanities plays
against the backdrop of the digital, yes, but also upon how the
digital makes us ever increasingly human.
Bibliography


Jones, Juju (@so_treu). Twitter feed. https://twitter.com/so_treu


