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Teaching Digital Humanities:
Neoliberal Logic, Class, and Social Relevance

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The digital humanities have a class problem. This is not to say that other disciplines are immune from socioeconomic disparities, but that DH is a space in which students, across all stages of education, benefit from access to resources that would not normally be a necessity in the arts and humanities. To succeed in the digital humanities often requires privileged knowledge and resources, access to expensive equipment, software, expertise and training networks that remain beyond the reach of many students and their institutions. Many students do not have access to computers capable of performing substantial analytics, or they attend institutions where licensed platforms commonplace in DH are not provided. Many students do not have access to digital libraries providing readings and datasets, or cannot afford the majority of the field's major publications, still in print and quite expensive. Many students do not have the resources to attend the field's many training networks, and many students, in this age of remote learning and working, do not even have sufficient bandwidth to engage with DH through web-based tools and communities. Education is always subject to the dynamics of class, but the humanities before the digital turn were at least a space through which social relations could be challenged, relatively free of the cultural logic and resource requirements that heighten inequalities.

Educators have a responsibility to think deeply about anything that they choose to teach, because the creation of pedagogical programs of any scope or sort should be motivated by a belief in the value of the thing being taught. The digital humanities are turning into something, but there is a marked difference between disciplinarity as it exists within scholarly communities of praxis and disciplinarity that is packaged into formal programs and delivered to learners. As teachers of DH, we need to consider matters of social relevance and responsibility before drawing learners into the culture of the field.

Such a process of reflection requires general acknowledgement that this is a disciplinary space within which there are many failings, some of which permeate throughout the entire academy, others which have been pronounced by specific DH tendencies. In the early years of the last decade, the field benefitted greatly from critical interventions highlighting and exploring many problematic aspects of the digital humanities, particularly concerning race and gender (Bailey 2011; McPherson and McPherson 2012; Earhart 2012). More recently, Roopika Risam crafted a comprehensive critique of how digital approaches to knowledge production often serve to reinforce colonial structures within cultural records (2018), while the lack of diversity at the annual *Digital Humanities* conference, the major international gathering of scholars in the field, has been exposed through the work of Nickoal Eichmann-Kalwara, Jeana Jorgensen and Scott Weingart (2019).

When we teach DH—when we teach anything—we risk bringing the wider disciplinary failings into our lecture theatres and classrooms. So, in teaching DH, are we exacerbating problems of class and furthering the neoliberal logic[1] that increasingly permeates throughout society and institutes of higher education?

DH as Neoliberal Logic

A high-profile example of DH being charged with contributing to the neoliberalisation of the humanities came in 2016, when Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette and David

Golumbia penned a short political history of DH for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2016). The central argument presented by the piece is that institutions and their administrators have emphatically embraced DH because it fortifies existing structures of power. Doing DH requires money, but relative to other disciplines in the arts and humanities it can also be a lucrative stream of income. The institutional vernacular surrounding DH often effaces the traditional values of the arts and humanities with a techno-discourse that is far easier to sell to policymakers and fee-paying students. At many institutions, DH is being sold as salvation to seemingly "outmoded" degrees in English and history, giving students a chance to learn the skills necessary to secure jobs in private enterprise.[2] The neoliberal logic of DH has not just been seen in misplaced marketing campaigns that betray a complete underappreciation of the humanities other than those considered digital, it has also been seen in the rise of computer-assisted approaches to criticism and cultural analytics. Many DH methods privilege quantification as a means of interpretation through measurement, an ethos which, deservedly or otherwise, has garnered much controversy (Marche 2012). The fetishisation of quantification—and more broadly, all that the digital promises in terms of visibility and so-called impact—can be very easily charged as being inherently neoliberal in sentiment.[3]

The online reaction to the *LARB* article was palpable, but anyone teaching DH needs to confront the issues raised. What is the contribution of dedicated DH programs to the political structure of higher education? Does teaching DH progress neoliberal logic? Does DH privilege pre-existing class structures wherein the best research, the best departments and best programs will be those with access to the capital necessary to do *big*, ambitious things with *big*, powerful computers? Does DH further existing and create new digital divides (Skallerup Bessette 2012)? Recounting a session at the annual MLA convention in 2013 titled "The Dark Side of the Digital Humanities", William Pannapacker blogs some of the key remarks: "DH is complicit with the neoliberal transformation of higher education; it 'capitulates to bureaucratic and technocratic logic'; and its strongest support comes from administrators who see DH'ers as successful fundraisers and allies in the 'creative destruction' of humanities education" (2013).[4] Is any of this, is all of it, true?

As acolytes of DH, perhaps the best we can do is accept our discipline as the imperfect thing that it is: "The digital humanities will never be perfect. It embodies the worst of its criticisms and the best of its ideals, sometimes simultaneously" (Eichmann-Kalwara, Jorgensen, and Weingart 2019, 88). The same could be said of any discipline, but that should not detract from the reality that it can certainly be said of ours. Accepting imperfection does not mean we stop trying to address issues of representation and inequality, but that we do so in the knowledge that something as institutionalised as any academic discipline will always mirror, to some degree, the socio-political contexts to which it is so intrinsically connected. Perhaps we should withdraw DH from our classrooms until we can be more confident that it is not furthering the erosion of the arts and humanities and furthering digital, and thus social, divides? Or perhaps we should use the teaching of DH as an opportunity to respond to the aforementioned charges, reclaiming it from the bureau-techno-cracies that make its presence in spaces of learning so problematic?

Why Teach DH, and How?

One of the most significant consequences of the DH moment[5] is the rise of discipline-specific courses designed to make the digital humanities more than a bit-part of larger curricula. Where the practices of DH were once predominantly isolated to the margins of the academy, introduced as mechanisms intended to somewhat superficially support

generic outputs like dissemination,[6] our field is now being treated as a discipline that institutions view as worthy of teaching, as evidenced by the considerable rise of dedicated programs within higher education (Sula, Hackney, and Cunningham 2017). The emergence of such programmes has calcified DH and we must now decide what to do with the curricular space that we have carved out for ourselves.

What is the purpose of all these new DH programmes? What does it mean for a student to pursue and acquire a qualification in the digital humanities? To what end do we, as scholars and educators, teach digital humanities? Anyone who is teaching should be doing so because they see value in the thing they are teaching. Good educators are enablers, passing along knowledge that will improve the minds and lives of those under their tutelage. The acquisition of knowledge can yield considerable profit for the self, but beyond these somewhat intangible advantages, education should also, wherever possible, be a vehicle for social mobility. We need to consider such intrinsic pedagogical values when considering whether or not we should teach DH,[7] and indeed, *how* it should be taught. This process, working out why and how we teach DH, has everything to do with class and social relevance, because our pedagogy has direct, material consequences for the students who come under our tutelage.

Writing about his rendition of the now common "Intro to DH" course,[8] Ryan Cordell reminds us that "undergraduate students do not care about digital humanities" (2016). And yet, "what is DH?" remains a significant part of what we still teach in DH courses. We have become so consumed with characterising and defending the "concrete instantiations" (Ramsay 2013, 240) of our discipline that we have forgotten that, aside from professional academics, nobody really cares about the exchange of definitions with which we are so frequently engaged. As Cordell aptly puts it: "In DH classes, meta-discussions about the field too often preclude engagement with its projects and theoretical engagements" (2016).

Like any educator, I want to deliver coursework that is intentionally of its discipline and intellectually stimulating, but I also want my students to have a genuine sense of why they are benefitting from a particular module. Straw-man arguments[9] about definitions of DH will not, from their perspective, improve their socioeconomic prospects. It is difficult to answer the question of what to teach when teaching DH.[10] Certainly, the argument that we should not require undergrads to engage with the "navel-gazing"[11] of disciplinary definitions has much merit. As professional, career scholars, we enjoy drawing others into such explorations, but our students, many of whom want to get jobs in a precarious, utility-driven world, will not always share our enthusiasm for what is, to them, a pointless task. But if DH is to be taught, surely its learners should be expected to have a sense of what everyone is saying about it? The current crop of DH students are the next generation of the discipline, perhaps the first generation to be systematically trained in the field as something that exists as its own thing, so they need to be engaged with the discourse surrounding the subject in which they are to be qualified. As the field's future, they need to be aware of its legacy. And frankly, if students are enrolled in DH programs and courses, it is partly their responsibility to care about what that means.

My usual approach to the "Intro to DH" undergraduate course is to divide the syllabus into two sections. The first part is the navel-gazing, where students do the tedious, but I still think worthwhile, work of examining the disciplinary and community contexts from which the thing they are studying has emerged. At the very least they are developing their critical thinking, arguably the most undervalued and effaced of skills in the neoliberal marketplace. The second part is dedicated to what they might see as the more practical side of affairs, what DH methods and platforms can do in applied and project-based contexts.

In doing so I am trying to balance the importance of disciplinary history and critical reflection with the methodological, utilitarian stuff that students can use to sell their labour. But synthesising these two things does not just mean that students get everything, it also means they lose a lot. Part of that loss is total immersion in those disciplines from which DH draws. Why are we teaching, to take one of many possible examples, computer-assisted literary criticism, when one could take a proper, fully-fledged class in statistics and data analytics alongside their literary studies? Why bother with DH-specific programs when students could construct their own DH through joining existing offerings from departments of, say, English and Computer Science? That way they get lots of both English and computing, without any of the conceptually muddled baggage that DH brings.

One response might be that DH-specific programs are inherently interdisciplinary, and that teaching computational techniques in conjunction with how they should be deployed specifically for humanistic enquiry makes students true adepts of distant reading as opposed to good readers who can also do data analytics. But perhaps we are wrong, and what we are really producing are graduates who are neither readers nor technicians? Perhaps that is what we want to do, because look where reading and statistics, taught in isolation, has gotten us, and maybe its time for something else, whatever that may be? Perhaps interdisciplinarity is precisely what has made the world so precarious for so many young people, graduates who fail to find secure opportunities for work in a market where specialist knowledge is a valuable commodity. Or perhaps we are now in the age of the generalist, and there will soon be no work for anyone without an understanding of all codes, especially the digital? As you can tell, I do not pretend to have the answers to these questions, but as someone who believes in education as a force for socioeconomic and cultural opportunity, something which should and can serve all classes of society, I think it imperative that we continue to ask these questions of ourselves, our disciplines, and our pedagogical practices.

And it is not all entirely hopeless; there are ways in which the pedagogical challenges posed by DH can be overcome. At University College Cork (UCC), our undergraduates take credits from a carefully considered troika of disciplinary strands:

i. They study programming and analytics in the School of Computer Science & Information Technology;
ii. They choose a minor subject in the arts and humanities from the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences;
iii. They take several core and elective modules from the Department of Digital Humanities, designed to synthesise their technical and humanistic learning.

This structure benefits greatly from sustained institutional support for the digital humanities at UCC, where the discipline has its own department, denominated degrees, and dedicated, DH-centric faculty.[12] This means that students four years in which to develop their critical thinking and technical skills, while also having a space in which to reflect on how all of this fits together as this thing called "DH".

This model cannot be replicated everywhere, and where DH exists as a smaller part of a broader curriculum, institutions and their faculty must very seriously consider what it is they teach when they teach DH. And there will always be situations where institutions should not be teaching DH at all. Tactical convenience[13] is not sufficient reason for DH to be offered to students, so when administrations and stakeholders are queried on the motivations for the development and sustenance of programmes in the digital humanities, compelling pedagogical reasons should be forthcoming. If scholars

and institutions are to continue to invest in DH as a pedagogical construct, then we, as the instigators of this turn, are professionally and morally obligated to interrogate more comprehensively the extent to which we should be developing such courses and programmes. Central to any such interrogation should be the question: what do our students do with this? How will a particular DH program provide real, material—not just intellectual—opportunity to its graduates?

The Social Relevance of DH[14]

When we teach the digital humanities, are we engaging students with neoliberal logic or presenting them with socioeconomic opportunity? The optimist in me accepts that bringing DH into our classrooms can reinforce dangerous, metric-driven sensibilities, but doing so in conjunction with the critical perspective that comes from interdisciplinary training might serve to subvert problematic ideologies. I am not saying that we should accept DH has a class issue and get on with things in wilful ignorance, but that, in the age of late capitalism, it would be naïve to think that a discipline so connected to the digital would ever exist entirely beyond the influence of neoliberalism. Can *any* discipline that exists in the contemporary university exist beyond the influence of neoliberalism?

Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia argue that one of the propulsive forces behind digital humanities is its potential to generate external revenue, a claim which is, from my experience, often true. But the persistent "viewpoint of the neoliberal university" that "the best kind of research (and the kind to be most handsomely rewarded) is the kind that brings in the most external funding" (Allington, Brouillette, and Golumbia 2016) is one which existed long before the DH moment. The neoliberal university is a consequence of the sustained lack of state support for public education in many western countries. While this does not excuse DH being developed for strategic purposes, it is effectively how most disciplines are now being considered across most universities.

DH will no longer suffer from opportunism when all orders of knowledge are given equal respect and support—it seems unfair to blame a discipline and its core community of practitioners for wider social trends. Departments were being shut down before DH came along. Certainly, there are lots of DH programmes and projects which have, by their very existence, caused deprivation elsewhere, but the same charge could be levelled at any discipline—such as those in the sciences—generally privileged by administrations because of their appeal to external sources of revenue. And to focus only on the deprivation—not that this should be ignored—is to wilfully neglect the value which DH creates.

Much of this value comes from the student perspective: there is a marked difference between the motivations of those faced with the pressures of administration,[15] and the students and scholars who might see some value in DH for their work and livelihoods. This might partly resolve the tension that exists between the digital and the humanities: teaching computer-assisted approaches to knowledge production and criticism is driving the scientification of the humanities and introducing elements neoliberal logic into our classrooms. But the alternative, the idea that students might somehow live beyond the constraints of such conditions is a view which betrays a deeply troubling underappreciation of class dynamics. Higher-level education can often be configured such that it serves commercial forces looking to extend their reach into all aspects of public and private life, but higher-level education, even while guilty of the former, can also prepare new generations to exist in that constrained space.

As educators, we cannot free our students of pervasive public structures. We can make them aware of social, cultural, economic, and political systems, but it is naïve

idealism to think that we can act as liberators in this regard. All we can hope to give DH students is the critical and sentimental training that one would expect of a degree in the arts and humanities, coupled with the techno-cultural fluencies they will *need* if they are to commodify their labour in the age of machines. As Ted Underwood puts it, we are preparing them to deal with monsters, a task which now requires "numbers as well as words" (2018). Only the very privileged are positioned to ignore the machines. For the rest, DH is an opportunity to reclaim the cultural authority of digital technology from other the sciences and engineering (Drucker 2012).

Allington, Brouillette and Golumbia argue that DH was "born from disdain and at times outright contempt, not just for humanities scholarship, but for the standards, procedures, and claims of leading literary scholars", and this argument may have an element of truth to it. But just as students do not care about navel-gazing meta-explorations of the digital humanities as a discipline, they also do not care about the embattled history from which it emerged. Most students do not care about the legitimacy of DH, about comparisons between the university as it is now to how it was then. Most students want to engage with as many ways of knowing as they can feasibly manage, and while we can guide them on the utility and ethics of each, they will ultimately make up their own minds on what is best for them based on their own ambitions and situations.

If DH pedagogy is to create material socioeconomic opportunity for its students, it will need to do so within neoliberal contexts which will make many of its teachers uncomfortable. We must admit that many of our ideologies, such as open access, are not always as progressive as we make out (Lanier 2014), or that the public, social platforms we encourage students towards, are closed, hegemonising spaces. By teaching computer-assisted approaches to criticism, we privilege metric-driven thinking, logic which does not always sit comfortably with humanistic ideals and methodologies that are not always reproducible (O'Sullivan 2019). But in recognising such contradictions and failings, DH programmes can turn, to some degree, the instruments of capitalism on themselves. Many DH graduates will be swallowed by the market, through either choice or necessity, but others may well go on to eat a little part of it in the name of humanity.

I appreciate this argument is defeatist in that I am suggesting we can, as educators, do little to protect the arts and humanities or halt the computer-driven endurance of neoliberalism. But teachers of DH can take comfort in two things. Firstly, many students of DH will find stable employment, and anyone uncomfortable with this justification can be grateful that they have never had to worry about the realities of selling their labour. Secondly, graduates who have studied computers through the lens of the arts and humanities, and vice versa, are precisely those graduates we want in future positions of power within the software industry.

When we commit time to thinking about what DH is, what it might be, what we do not want it to become, and how all this fits within political realities, we improve our capacity to teach it to a generation who cannot ignore technology, many of whom cannot afford to think beyond severe social, cultural and economic constraints. When we teach DH we sacrifice much, but we also gain something, part of which might not allow our students to escape present conditions, but certainly, allow them to survive in the age of machines.

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Notes

[1] This essay is based on my position that the neoliberal agenda is a bad thing and that late capitalism has not been good for the vast majority of the world's population, wherever they are from or live. I hope that readers who disagree with that view might still find some value in this essay.

[2] I have previously addressed this issue in an Irish context (O'Sullivan 2018).

[3] There is much to be gained from these practices—I am a deep believer in the interpretive value of cultural analytics—but anyone teaching such methods needs to engage with this conversation because it is, as uncomfortable as it might be, an important one.

[4] This post by Pannapacker came to my attention when reading Brian Lennon's *Passwords*, itself a compelling critique of digital humanities (2018).

[5] A coin termed by Gold (2012).

[6] I am not dismissing the "DH is sharing" perspective (see Sample 2013), but acknowledging that, for a very long time, the designated DH person at any institution was typically only ever invited into classrooms for the purposes of demonstrating how WordPress or some other content management system functions.

[7] I say this, of course, as someone who is gainfully employed as part of a DH programme, the existence of which I would wholeheartedly defend.

[8] Readers who wish to reflect further on this matter will be well-served by *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom*, particularly the unambiguously-titled "Should you teach an introduction to DH course?" section (Battershill and Ross 2017, 67).

[9] Again, see Cordell's essay.

[10] A question which Max Kemman has eloquently addressed in a blog post (Kemman 2017)

[11] This is how Sarah Stanley humorously, though also quite appropriately, describes the "what is DH?" debate.

[12] I should note that not all my colleagues identify as DHers with the conviction that I tend to show; rather, some of them see themselves as belonging to other fields, with DH being a set of methodologies that they use in the service of those other, core humanities disciplines. This if course raises an interesting question that is beyond the scope of this essay: *who* should teach DH? For more on this topic, see recent work by Diane Jakacki and Brian Croxall (2019).

[13] For more on the idea of DH as "tactical" see Matthew Kirschenbaum's famous essay on the matter (2012).

[14] With thanks to Shawn Day, my colleague at UCC, for suggesting this angle.

[15] I use the term "pressures" because I think it important that someone stands up for the administrators: it is very easy to raise the spectre of the neoliberal university, it is an entirely different matter to ensure that the bills are paid and students have places to learn. Perhaps this is not the case in North American universities—which by international standards are generally seen as wealthy—but here in Ireland, university faculty are struggling with precarious contracts, wages insufficient to meet the spiralling cost of living, and a general lack of resources to support teaching and learning in a truly equitable fashion. This does not excuse the creation of poorly constructed DH courses and curricula in the name of economic opportunism, but we should at least try and empathise with administrators who promote the pursuit of external funding, because they are looking to redress insufficient support from the state.