Either/Or? Both/And?

Difficult Distinctions within the Digital Humanities

By Michael Roy

Many campuses are witnessing the birth of a new field of inquiry called the digital humanities, which applies computational methods to humanistic inquiry, provides new methods for presenting scholarship online, and encourages novel forms of collaboration. Occurring within this new universe of practice are debates on what exactly defines the digital humanities. How does it differ from the non-digital humanities? How might it fit into the evolving landscape of higher education? The name itself is under constant assessment. Should we call it something else? Digital scholarship? Digital liberal arts? Is the movement a revolution—or simply an evolution out of the world of humanities computing? Does it have sufficient gravitas and engagement in the critical questions of the humanities to actually qualify as a new discipline? Or is it a temporary moment in our disciplinary history, one that will serve as scaffolding for what the humanities will become in the 21st century?
Rather than reenact these important debates here,1 I want to instead consider how the digital humanities, and technology in general, call into question the distinctions that we make as we organize our work on our campuses and within our various professions. We all agree, more or less, that there is a difference between science and humanities, between teaching and research, between data and analysis, between scholarly and popular, between liberal arts and practical, between big and small. And yet we also know that these distinctions—useful for organizing our work, creating our budgets, and even defining our institutional and professional missions—are provisional. If we probe closely, they are actually two sides of the same coin and are not, in fact, in opposition to each other. A reading of the literature surrounding the birth of the digital humanities clearly reveals this complementarity. The digital humanities, and perhaps technology-fueled inquiry in general, dismantle the either/or and replace it with a both/and.

Science or Humanities :: Science and Humanities

C. P. Snow famously described the two-culture problem of higher education in 1959: that within higher education there exist scientists who are interested in a very different set of problems than are the humanists; and that the very language and worldviews are so wildly disparate that scientists and humanists might as well operate on parallel campuses.2

The digital humanities continues the tradition set by humanities computing in using computational methods developed largely within the sciences and applying them to questions and problems within the humanities. From an operational point of view, in looking at the work taking place within a digital humanities lab, we see the familiar set of activities that we see in a physics or biology lab: students and faculty gathering data, using software (often open-source or homegrown) to analyze that data, and visualizing results in graphical forms to test their hypotheses. They grapple with the usual IT problems: how to store their data, what formats to use, how to learn the various software tools, how to stay current on the best methods of analysis, and how to find the financial resources needed to keep this operation afloat. On many campuses, digital humanists have also found fruitful collaborations by working with computer scientists and other science colleagues interested in the vexing computational and information management problems that arise in the digitization and analysis of massive amounts of data.

That said, it would be facile to suggest that the digital humanities rep-
represents some olive branch that will “solve” the two-culture problem. There remain fundamental differences that a convergence of methods will not change. And of course, there remains the unanswered question of whether or not the digital humanities will simply evolve over time into the humanities. To complicate matters further, as Lafayette College President Alison Byerly asks, what if the digital humanities turns out to make the humanities as expensive to support as the sciences?3

**Teaching or Research ::**

**Teaching and Research**

In most cases, there is a very clear and well-acknowledged difference between the activities of teaching and research. When explaining derivatives to students in an introductory calculus course, the professor of mathematics is teaching, and when that same professor is working with a colleague on a proof to be published in a journal, she is doing research. Each institution, depending on its mission and resources, finds a balance in how its faculty members spend their time. And there is a well-understood and highly-valued connection between the two activities. For many faculty, the teacher-scholar model is the ideal, with the classroom being a perfect place to try out the ideas generated in one's research and with research being generative not just for contributions to the discipline but also for classroom engagement.

Within the digital humanities, however, distinctions between teaching and research are blurred. The digital humanities draws on the practice, used within the sciences, of providing students with research experiences that reinforce and extend classroom learning in important ways and that directly contribute to the research taking place in the faculty member's lab. Staff at digital humanities labs are discovering that this model works well with students who are brought in as co-investigators on humanities-focused questions, doing meaningful work on large, complicated research projects.

The work of digital scholarship actively complements teaching. The products of digital scholarship are often digital works that can be integrated into the classroom experience, offering important access to primary-source materials and, in many cases, providing new tools and analytical forms that can be assigned alongside traditional secondary literature. The discrete, granular nature of this scholarship has affordances for remix and reuse that are not typical of the traditional scholarly output in the humanities: the journal article and the monograph, written by experts for experts.

**Data or Analysis ::**

**Data and Analysis**

This leads to a third distinction that digital humanities publications make problematic. Although some of the scholarship that results from digital humanities work takes traditional forms (the monograph, the journal article, and their current digital counterpart, the PDF), the examples of scholarship that is “born digital” and can be read only on-screen are myriad and increasing in number. In addition to putting forth the traditional scholarly argument, these publications provide access to the underlying data that inform those arguments: media databases, GIS data sets, full-text corpora, marked-up editions, animations, other forms of multimedia, and software tools for inquiry, analysis, and presentation. As Tom Seidenfeldt has noted, it is not particularly helpful, at this early stage of the development of the digital humanities, to criticize the field for its focus on building databases and tools at the expense of doing “real” scholarship.4 The creation of these databases and tools can itself constitute actual scholarship and, if not that, can still be critically important for the ability of the field to eventually turn its attention to conducting more traditional forms of scholarship.

**Scholarly or Popular ::**

**Scholarly and Popular**

In thousands of classrooms on any given day, librarians are teaching undergraduates the difference between scholarly and popular literature. Looking at the extreme cases, clearly we want our future engineers to learn to build bridges not by consulting some teenager’s blog but, rather, by carefully studying the scholarly record that has been created through the process of peer review. Digital scholarship, however, has not yet fully developed a process for vetting its born-digital publications. The good news is that important work is taking place in examining what open-source peer-review methods might look like, in developing alternative metrics, and in articulating evaluation standards that are appropriate for these new formats and genres. Libraries and university presses are looking into launching new born-digital presses that can take advantage of the nimble, expressive, and analytical affordances of the new technologies while still providing the assurances of peer review and the continuity of an uninterrupted chain of scholarly communication.

**Liberal Arts or Practical ::**

**Liberal Arts and Practical**

Many in the discipline feel that the digital humanities needs a new name. William Pannapacker, from Hope College, has argued that it should be called the digital liberal arts.5 He asserts that the work of the digital humanities is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary and that
the digital liberal arts will provide a more student-centric “big tent” to cover the entire campus. Embedded in Pannapacker’s argument, and consistent with general findings from practitioners, is the idea that student work in the digital humanities (or the digital liberal arts) (1) challenges the distinction often made between liberal arts education and more practical or vocational education, (2) makes more apparent the practical skills already engaged through the humanities (e.g., critical thinking, writing, information organization), and (3) adds a new digital, analytical component that was previously more dominant in other disciplines. By engaging in the technical but also conceptual activities of organizing and implementing work in the digital humanities, students are learning important, transferable skills and capabilities that will serve them well when they leave campus to become not only members of the workforce but also citizens of an increasingly connected and digital planet.

**Big or Small:**

Pannapacker’s argument is also one that confronts some of the elitism that conflicts with the largely democratic and open ethos of the digital humanities. The digital humanities today is to be found largely, but certainly not exclusively, at well-funded research universities. Pannapacker argues that the digital humanities in fact fits neatly into the worldview of small colleges focused on residential, liberal arts education. At the same time, organizations such as the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) are asking questions about “Coherence At Scale,” wondering whether or not it is possible to orchestrate and coordinate the myriad large- and small-scale efforts into something that might resemble a coherent, aligned strategy for moving forward in an efficient manner that balances innovation against the long-term needs for sustainability and the preservation of the scholarly record. To complicate matters further, organizations such as the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC) are challenging higher education to take more seriously the connections between the digital humanities and online learning, making the point that distinctions between these are not all that meaningful in the endlessly recombinable world of digital media.

**Conclusion**

Developing a campus digital humanities strategy requires thinking through a set of interconnected and complex issues, many of which are playing well beyond the confines of any individual institution. The “crisis of the humanities” is forcing difficult conversations about the role that the humanities in general has in the future of higher education. The “crisis in scholarly communication” is putting immense pressure both on publishers and on libraries. At the same time, the dramatic increase in adjunct and non-tenure-track appointments calls into question the institutional commitment to research and scholarly pursuit. All of this is taking place within the larger financial, if not existential, crisis in higher education as we experiment with new delivery models to try to find our way out from under what William Bowen has described as the “cost disease.”

In spite of these pressures, an infectious enthusiasm surrounds those who have embraced the digital humanities movement. As I have tried to suggest, the digital humanities presents both a fascinating case study in how a new technology-fueled practice can traverse traditional boundaries and an opportunity to explore, rethink, and redefine our assumptions about organizational structures and conceptual distinctions.

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**Notes**


2. C. P. Snow, The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959). See also Alan Liu, “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” Debates in the Digital Humanities (2012 print edition), http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/39, for an argument that the right direction for the digital humanities is not to become more like the sciences but, rather, to become more relevant to public debates about the values of the humanities on its own terms.


4. See Tom Scheinfeldt, “Sunset for Ideology, Sunrise for Methodology?” Debates in the Digital Humanities (2012 print edition), http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/22, for an argument that the right direction for the digital humanities is to suggest, the digital humanities represents both a fascinating case study in how a new technology-fueled practice can traverse traditional boundaries and an opportunity to explore, rethink, and redefine our assumptions about organizational structures and conceptual distinctions.


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