Collaborative Teaching Center

Final Project
Introduction to Digital Humanities
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Table of Contents

Abstract

It is generally accepted in the pedagogical field that collaborative learning is more productive and encourages better learning than individual efforts. This perspective has gained traction in the past several decades. Among some of the benefits include a development of higher-level thinking, understanding of diverse perspectives, and an increase in understanding. Given the benefits, the practice is continuously spreading across all areas of education. Although collaborative learning is now seen as self-evident, the same cannot be said of its counterpart-collaborative teaching. The concept can be traced back to the late 19th century but has not been realized in any substantial way. Whereas *cooperative teaching*, a distant cousin, is somewhat more common, *collaborative teaching* is rarely practiced, and only so in more elite institutions. I propose to introduce a way to promote interdisciplinarity- a fundamental aspect of digital humanities, make it more broadly known, and put into practice. I want to develop a site where instructors or professors can collaborate on assignments in freshman courses in the CUNY system.

List of Participants

- JP Essey, adjunct instructor, in CUNY will be leader and overseer of project.
- Developer knowledgeable in web page development and maintenance. Skills to include coding experience in JavaScript, HTML/CSS, and Python.

- Program and/or App consultant deciding appropriate programs for collaborative work.

Narrative

Enhancing the Humanities

That the university, as an institution, in America is going through a soul-searching era is a point of discussion when one looks at a variety of publications, ranging from historical journals to educational journals to the mainstream media. One only needs to do a google search containing 'university' and 'crisis' together to have a bewildering number of articles listed. The articles range in theme from financial issues, problems of inclusivity of populations, to ones that challenge the fundamental purpose and identity of the institution of higher learning. Having been an educator for a long time, I have seen the gradual shifting of focus of the institution from priorities stressing the development of deeper and stronger critical thinking skills to a focus on more practical endeavors that answer to workplace needs. The Humanities as a field seem to be emphasized less and less in favor of 'practical' skills needed for workplace competence. More and more subject areas are specialized to the point of where one cannot see the forest from the trees. Subject matter is so compartmentalized that an individual may have an incredible understanding of a biological concept, for example, but not know how to explain it to a non-specialist. Fields are specialized and so is learning. Students for the most part do not make connections in what they learn and fail to visualize the bigger picture of what they are learning. They are taught in a fragmented way as well. Along with this shift in focus, I

believe, comes an erosion of the university's purpose in general and in the humanities in particular. The university needs to retain an identity of strengthening higher faculty thinking skills more rather than a specialized focus on trade skills. The humanities do what their name implies- makes us more human, more humane. The purpose of the humanities can be articulated as to make an individual understand, appreciate, experience, and engage their culture and their world more. This in turn gives the individual the opportunity to participate in their community and life more, thus leading to a life better lived. Because the digital humanities are the relatively new iteration of the humanities, the field can – and must- help in this task. Given the digital tools that are in the field's disposal, it becomes incumbent for the field of digital humanities to achieve one of the area's foundational purposes. It is with this in mind that I plan on designing a project in order for participants to collaborate in teaching so as to connect different areas of study. This will allow students, and instructors, to highlight and reaffirm the connectedness of knowledge and learning.

Environmental Scan

The aim of interdisciplinarity is the integration of learning processes and the integration of the resulting knowledge. This is true for learning as has been shown in studies that look at collaborative learning environments. When learners are placed in collaborative learning groups or projects, learning is enhanced. The benefits include deeper critical thinking skills, better oral communication, increased understanding of differing perspectives. More than 1200 studies comparing cooperative, competitive, and individualistic efforts have found that cooperative learning methods improve students' time on tasks and intrinsic motivation to learn, as well as students' interpersonal relationships and expectations for success (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

The benefits ripple outward and enhance and expand the students' learning. For students who know the material, formulating explanations to help their peers helps to strengthen their understanding (Webb et. al., 2002). However, even when none of the group members knows the correct answer, activating one's peers as instructional resources in solving a problem has been shown to increase learning and correct responses (Smith et al., 2009). Many researchers continue to discover the value of this type of learning. Collaborative learning potentially promotes deep learning, in which students engage in high-quality social interaction, such as discussing contradictory information (Visschers-Pleijers et al., 2006). The value of collaborative learning is recognized across the educational spectrum from primary education to graduate settings.

This value of collaboration is yet to be developed in the converse of the learner setting- that of the instructor. Collaborative teaching is an area that is relatively outside the mainstream in educational settings. In recent years, universities have stressed the value of "working with others" as a core skill required for employment. University College Dublin in its *Strategic Plan for 2014* describes academic excellence "with an aptitude for continued, self-directed, and collaborative learning in academic and professional settings" as one of its key graduates' attributes (Hernandez, 2017). The benefits of collaboration do not stop with students but are extended to professors as well. Although there are benefits from *cooperative teaching*, which comes in six forms, it is not to be confused with *collaborative teaching*. In general, cooperative teaching involves two instructors working alongside each other or taking turns to conduct a class with a singular lesson plan focused on a singular topic. Collaborative teaching involves,

generally, two professors from differing areas of study that collaborate on an interdisciplinary assignment. For example, a biology professor will team up with and English professor to generate an assignment that involves both disciplines simultaneously.

In the present time, very few institutions of higher learning practice this approach, and the institutions that do are generally on the higher, more restrictive or elite, end of the educational spectrum. Institutions such as Vanderbilt University, Boston College, University of Austin, Texas include several courses that are collaboratively connected. For example, recently Vanderbilt University launched the *University Courses initiative*, designed to promote cross-college teaching. These courses, collaboratively taught by faculty outside of their home department will provide new opportunities for students to consider big questions and hard problems from multiple perspectives (Traub, 2015).

Given the dearth of offerings, this is the time for digital humanities to step up. As Gold noted, "Clearly, this is a significant moment of growth and opportunity for the field [DH], but it has arrived amid larger questions concerning the nature and purpose of the university system. And the digital humanities, more than most fields, seems positioned to address many of those changes" (1). Others have noted the need for educational institutions to expand their purview and fulfill a broader higher institutional role than one primarily focused on career training. A dominant idea in the history of modern western personhood has been that we're fundamentally isolated from one another (Scott xxi). However, we have been down this road before. Interviewing Scott, John quotes him stating, "I think that's a new lament now actually,

but look back at the Romantics against the material brutality of industrialization for the loss of

the pastoral. In a world of service industries, it's enough for us to sense this is the

categorization and slicing up of everything; we see a marked increase in that in terms of our

loss of the pastoral" (2). The need to see the forest from the trees is evident and necessary.

Digital humanities' tools speak to the present time and need of our educational institutions.

The theoretical foundation for this is present in many areas of the field. Klein and Gold note,

"The notion of a field that operates through relation, one that informs and is informed by

allied disciplines, also clears the conceptual space to acknowledge how multiple disciplines and

their methods have helped to constitute the digital humanities from its inception (5). However,

the practice has not infiltrated the area of collaborative teaching beyond a few places. The

concept has been known for some time as evidence by primary schooling systems such as

Montessori or the Steiner schools. Yet, this has not made much headway in higher education

even though the need is glaringly there. Integrating differing subject areas will not only

enhance learning and teaching but will also have a transformative effect on the university as

an institution, addressing an identity question that is being presently asked. As Presner noted,

" Without critical awareness of the larger social, economic, and cultural issues at stake, Lui

asserts, digital humanities will not be able to engage seriously with the changing nature of

higher education in the postindustrial state. As such, digital humanities is a practice and

performance of making that is conditioned by human, social, and material contingencies, all of

which have the potential to engage in transformative praxis (56). When working

collaboratively, both students and professors can socially annotate to engage. Schacht has written on the subject and mentioned the incredible benefits.

> He notes, "Twentieth century philosopher Moritmer Adler advised readers that although marking up a book might seem like 'an act of mutilation," it is actually an act of love. The attraction of annotation as a pedagogical tool is at least two-fold, presumably: targeting attention at swatches of text should encourage close reading and putting the reader in conversation with the text's creator should help cultivate independent thinking and the habit of argument. By giving student writers the ability to 'talk back' collectively to texts, social annotation has the potential to advance a pedagogy committed to questioning authority and asserting democratic ownership of knowledge and culture.(2)

Some have noted the benefit of collaborative work and its benefits. Speaking of her experience with collaborative teaching, Paravisini-Gebert mentions, " This multi-disciplinarity is key to its success, since the syllabus succeeds in providing a broad selection of materials that can be just as useful to the economist aiming to present a broad spectrum of the various impacts of the crisis on Puerto Rico's population as to the literary or art historian(2). The benefits range from educational skills to those that broadens one's worldview. Quoting Buckingham and de Block who note how, "media that our children experience are '…] a mixture of the national, regional, and global. These media can serve to maintain national allegiances and offer a view of the world that reconnects children with another history or opens a window to a new worlds" [Buckingham and de block 2008,4] (3). Influence can bring together marginalized areas that need to be integrated. Noting a blind spot, Mandell pointed out the ramifications that this could have when she notes, "Quantitative analyses in sociology

proceeded without feminist input at great cost, leaving the field susceptible to " bad science" and "bad description" (1). The influence of a collaborative teaching approach using digital humanities tools may also have an immediate impact on students' lives by including the marginalized groups. Werimont and Losh affirm this view when they note, " I think the digital humanities, or doing digital work period, has helped people create a maroon-free, black, liberatory, radical- spaces in the academy" (5).

The concept of collaborative teaching is still in its embryonic phase. The need for this to be developed not only in more elite schools but in public universities is a challenged that needs to be addressed. Those studying the area note how limited the variations are. Findings reveal that while the scope of disciplines involved in DH research is broad and evolving over time, most interdisciplinary collaborations are concentrated among several disciplines, including computer science, library and information science, linguistics and literature (Zu 2). It is time for collaborative teaching to expand across disciplines and enliven and enrich the fields as a promise of a new insight into pedagogical praxis as that which has been seen with collaborative learning.

Work Plan

The project will proceed in 5 stages: site development, program development, trial phase and live launch.

Stage one will consist in meeting with site developer to optimize site for the goal stated. The developer will decide which web language(s) to use and to make certain that it is user-friendly.

Stage two will entail meeting with the program specialist to discuss which programs will be needed.

Stage three will have several volunteer colleagues perform a trial run where they will collaborate via online interactions at their own time and pacing and fulfill the assignment before deadline. This stage will allow for bugs and hindrances to be addressed.

Stage four will allow the site to go live and a campus wide notice will be sent to all faculty.

Stage five will expand the audience of the city to not only one CUNY campus, but to all CUNY campuses for faculty collaboration.

Final Product

The final product, the site, will live on CUNY Academic Commons where faculty will be able to access it. Included on the site will be example collaborations and suggestions. Faculty will be able to add suggestions as well as assignments they have collaborated on with comments. As I am in the English Department, we will initially start with that as a base. Some examples are:

- English Department (Day of the Locust) + Art Department (View of Toledo)

- English Department (An Echo in the Bone) + Biology Department (any intro assignment)

- English Department (Outlander) + History Department (Intro assignment)

- English Department (Onyx and Crake) + Sociology Department (Intro assignment)

- English Department (Children of Time) + Physics Department Department (Intro assignment)

The administrator will check on the site regularly, trouble shoot any issues and communicate with participants when needed.

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