Improving Digital Humanities Pedagogy in St. Louis

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Project Summary

In 2021, faculty at Lindenwood University and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville led the formation of a Saint Louis Digital Humanities (STL DH) Network of faculty and scholars at area universities, schools, and cultural institutions. Faculty in this network then worked together to organize a series of workshops and collaborations that seek to improve access to and learning in the digital humanities (DH). We aim to make St. Louis a leader in DH education at the high school and undergraduate levels.

With the support of the Missouri Humanities Council, the "Improving Digital Humanities Pedagogy in St. Louis" workshop became the first workshop in this series. It took place on the Lindenwood University campus on April 9th. Three higher education faculty facilitated discussions with five St. Louis-area high school faculty about how to increase and improve the teaching of DH in high schools and how higher ed and secondary ed faculty can support each other in this effort. The results of these discussions will be used to guide the STL DH Network's future activities. In particular, we will use them to shape the agenda and activities of the next, larger workshop in the series, which will take place in September 2022. The participants at this next workshop will be charged with developing a system whereby any area high school or undergraduate student can remotely participate in a DH project headquartered at any St. Louis-area college, greatly increasing student DH opportunities. The findings of the "Improving Digital Humanities Pedagogy in St. Louis" workshop have encouraged us to believe that creating such a system would be both valuable and feasible.

Project Origins

The digital humanities is an umbrella term for approaches to humanistic inquiry that rely upon digital technologies, and for the humanistic inquiry into digital technologies and how they shape human culture. DH is one of the most active and exciting fields of humanistic inquiry today, and its inherently inter-disciplinary nature (projects frequently involve humanists from multiple disciplines as well as STEM researchers) makes it ideal for engaging students in the kinds of collaborative, team-based work that is the norm in the business world. It builds skills in digital literacy; it helps students in the humanities see the value of their skills in contexts outside of more traditional humanistic study; and it can be an entry point into the humanities for students in STEM fields. And yet, despite its value, instruction in DH at the undergraduate level and below remains minimal or nonexistent at many schools.

In the past few years, undergraduate education in DH has begun to see some scholarly attention. See, for instance, Clement (2012), Arteaga (2015), and Battershill and Ross (2017). A recent special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* was also devoted to DH in the undergraduate curriculum (Murphy & Smith, 2017). While this increased attention is a hopeful sign, it remains the case that DH is peripheral to the education of most humanities students, even those at institutions with well-funded DH research labs and active projects. At teaching-focused institutions, which generally lack such resources, DH often has no place in the curriculum. At the high school level, many students and teachers have never heard of DH. As a result, many

students, especially those from poorer or more marginalized backgrounds, miss out on learning the valuable, 21st-century skills that DH can train them in.

It was in recognition of these inequities that this workshop, and the larger project of which it is a part, were launched. Building on the work of Risam (2019) in networking regional higher education institutions, higher education faculty in the St. Louis area who practice DH formed their own network to find ways to collaborate and share resources. This workshop was an effort to begin the process of bridging the divide between higher ed and secondary ed and investigate if collaborations between the two could improve DH pedagogy at both levels.

The primary audience of the workshop was the workshop attendees—both the high school faculty participants and the college faculty facilitators. The workshop was designed as a mutual learning experience: the university faculty shared their knowledge of recent trends in DH activities and pedagogy, and the high school faculty shared their knowledge of high school instructional standards, digital teaching methods, and institutional needs. By having open conversations with each other on the subject of DH instruction in St. Louis, the workshop identified how that instruction can be improved through greater cooperation between high school and college educators. However, for the larger effort of which this workshop is just one part, the primary audience was not faculty, but St. Louis-area high school students and undergraduates. These students will be served by making DH learning more accessible and equitable, opening up DH projects taking place at area colleges for participation by college and high school students. Finally, the findings of the workshop will be placed online for broad dissemination to the larger education and DH communities, so that others may learn from our conversations and make their own progress toward bridging the high school/university divide and improving DH accessibility.

Project Activities, Team, and Participants

The project director was Geremy Carnes, a professor of English at Lindenwood University. He facilitated the workshop with the help of Meg Smith, a professor History at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and Tara Vansell, a professor of Geography at Lindenwood University.

Carnes made all arrangements with Lindenwood campus facilities for the hosting of the workshop. He also handled the advertising for the event. He contacted the superintendent's office of every public school district in St. Louis City and County, as well as those of many districts in neighboring counties; several private and charter high schools; and area organizations the frequently work with or provide services to high school teachers.

In planning the event, Carnes received advice from his co-facilitators as well as from the advisory board for the "Expanding Access to the Digital Humanities in St. Louis" project, which is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Although the board does not have formal oversight of the "Improving Digital Humanities Pedagogy in St. Louis" workshop, the aims of the workshop served the goals of the larger NEH-funded project, and they were generous enough with their time to offer advice on reaching out to area educators. The advisory board members are Donna Canan (Kirkwood High School), Christine Henske

(Maplewood – Richmond Heights High School), Lara Kelland (University of Missouri – St. Louis), John McEwan (Saint Louis University), Bridget Nelson (East St. Louis Charter High School), and Geoff Ward (Washington University in Saint Louis).

The chief challenge to the planning and execution of the event was the continuing strain the COVID-19 pandemic placed upon area educators and their schools. The workshop was originally scheduled for early March, but consultation with a number of educators indicated that that date was not tenable. The surge in COVID cases related to the omicron strain had high schools scrambling to keep classes staffed, and faculty were exhausted. Carnes made the decision to push the workshop to April 9th. That allowed him to wait until February to begin advertising the workshop, by which time the omicron wave had begun to taper out.

Even then, participant recruitment proved difficult, as exhaustion remained a struggle for many faculty. Many interested faculty ended up having to cancel their participation. While we had a budget to provide honoraria to seventeen faculty, we ultimately had only five participants at the workshop. This was a significant disappointment, as we wished to have a broad range of perspectives and voices at the workshop. It was, however, the only disappointment, as the group that participated was extremely knowledgeable and engaged. The participants were as follows:

- James X. Francis, Social Studies, Saint Louis Public Schools
- Nora Derry, English, Lindbergh Schools
- Margaret Piper-Zamudio, English, Webster Groves School District
- Katie Voss, Librarian, Mary Institute and Saint Louis Country Day School
- Elizabeth Helfant, Curriculum and Instruction, Mary Institute and Saint Louis Country Day School

The day was broken up into a series of sessions, focused on 1) sharing current DH practices in the high school classroom, 2) demonstrating some DH tools and practices that can be easily incorporated into the high school classroom, 3) challenges to and opportunities for performing more DH in high schools, 4) obstacles (institutional or otherwise) to allowing high school students to participate in university-based DH projects, and 5) developing a set of priorities for the STL DH Network to pursue to improve DH pedagogy at the secondary education level. As this list of sessions suggests, the higher education faculty facilitating the meeting aimed to learn as much from the high school faculty as vice versa. Bridging the high school/university divide cannot be effective unless high school and university faculty approach each other as colleagues and equals who benefit from working together toward common ends.

Project Outcomes

The facilitators of the workshop took careful notes throughout the discussions. What follows is a summation of the chief findings of the workshop, organized into a few key categories that roughly correspond with the major sessions on the day of the workshop. Regardless of the session during which an observation was made, however, it is recorded under the topic heading where it is most relevant.

Current DH Practices in High School Classrooms

A pre-workshop survey showed participants' strongest interest was in demonstrations and peer learning, so we dedicated the morning to these activities and discussion about various approaches to teaching DH. Participants' experience with using digital tools in the classroom varied considerably. Most participants' experience was primarily with using sites that gamify learning (such as Blooket, Kahoot!, and Nearpod) or with tools that encourage student interaction and engagement online (discussion boards and Flipgrid) or aid in content creation (WeVideo). One participant made extensive use of very technical tools, such as working in Visual Basic, developing a virtual version of the city of Rome using the *Neverwinter Nights* game design tools, and leading students in a project to digitize old high school yearbooks.

The participants shared some specific lessons and projects they had taught that had leveraged digital tools to increase student engagement and learning. A few key points emerged from these discussions.

- They recognized that digital literacy will likely require some basic knowledge of html and/or code. How exactly to make this part of a humanities curriculum without sacrificing other necessary content remains a challenge, however.
- The "digital native" generation may be very comfortable with using electronic devices, but there are many aspects of digital work that the previous generation takes for granted but which young people have little familiarity with. A lot of foundational teaching is necessary before students can engage with command lines and directory structures.
- When considering a new digital tool, never ask "How does this tool teach students?," because tools do not teach. The correct question to ask is, "How can I use this tool to teach?" It can be very easy to fetishize digital tools, to "focus on tech for tech's sake," but there's nothing inherently superior about digital methods. A tool is only as useful as the questions you ask *with* it, and the questions you ask *of* it.

Participant Responses to Tools/Practices Demonstrated by Facilitators

The workshop facilitators provided brief demonstrations of a number of DH tools or activities that they had used effectively in university classrooms. Demonstrations included ESRI Geographic Information System (GIS) tools, GeoInquiries, and StoryMaps; digital storytelling in the form of Twine games, Timeline.JS, and video editing; and digital exhibit curation using Omeka. Participant discussion about these tools and activities was quite positive, but also brought into focus the concerns that high school teachers are likely to have about these tools.

- At first, some of the more data-focused tools do not seem like they have much to do with the humanities. However, when you frame the work you are doing with the data as a form of storytelling, the humanistic relevance comes into focus. As one participant put it, the humanities is about "asking the big questions." Data can provide some answers to those questions, but data do not speak for themselves. DH helps students see how the use of data is a form of storytelling.
- One concern of the higher ed faculty was that it may be difficult to fit the use of DH into Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MoDESE) standards, but the high school faculty did not think that was a major concern. MoDESE standards are written broadly enough to be inclusive of DH approaches to student learning.

- The DH activities that generated the most interest were those connected with GIS. Not only was working with maps inherently interesting, but the fact that ESRI GIS tools are used by professionals yet free to educators made them especially appealing. Given the presence of the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency in St. Louis and St. Louis's broader ambitions to be a national hub for geospatial technology, a focus on GIS in future DH trainings might help encourage faculty engagement with DH.

Obstacles to Increasing DH Practices in High Schools

In the afternoon, we shifted from a focus on the classroom and assignments to broader reflections on the future that DH could have in St. Louis high schools. The facilitators presented participants with the following prompt and asked them to respond to it:

> What do you see as the obstacles—those you yourself face or those that you know or suspect other instructors face—that prevent DH practices from being used more often? Consider obstacles produced by…
> - institutions/policies
> - curricula
> - instructor training/preparedness
> - finances
> - and anything else.

The following are the obstacles that the participants highlighted and some thoughts that developed out of discussion of them.
- Perhaps the biggest concern noted by participants is how often technology changes. Projects lose funding, tools lose support, communities move on, and a technology that an instructor has invested a lot of time into learning how to teach becomes defunct. The most precious resource is time, and with everything else teachers have to do, it is a big ask for them to invest time in learning a tool that may prove ephemeral. Instructors might therefore be most willing to invest time in either extremely simple technologies that require little upkeep or technologies that are supported by major corporations. Of course, even corporate technologies can be abandoned, as Adobe Flash was, and corporate technologies often are not free.
- Related to the problem of technology change is that of technology proliferation. The sheer number of tools/platforms available to instructors can be daunting to someone trying to get started. To some extent, digital humanist scholars may not be helping matters by creating new tools/platforms when others with similar functionality exist. We have a tendency to reinvent the wheel.
- All of the above problems are intensified for new teachers. While we might think recent college graduates would be best positioned to make use of the latest digital tools, the first few years of teaching are exhausting and creativity is often sacrificed as the teacher focuses on developing their baseline skills as an instructor. New instructors are less likely to have time for additional training in digital tools.
- While it might seem counterintuitive, online teaching (which has often had to take place in the past few years due to the pandemic) is not ideal for teaching digital humanities. Lack of home internet access and technical issues are common. (The higher ed faculty

agreed that this was their experience as well. Given the hesitancy of many humanities students to embrace digital tools, being in the same physical space is often important to working through problems of student confidence in addition to technical problems.) Fortunately, as the pandemic fades, most teaching will move back to in-person classrooms.

- Being in an in-person classroom is no guarantee of access, however. Some schools in the area are not yet "one-to-one," i.e., there is not a computer for every student. In such situations, teachers need to schedule computer use. Bandwidth limitations can also make certain online activities difficult, although most digital humanities activities are not particularly bandwidth intensive.

- One of the advantages of DH is that students can do authentic projects engaging with real-world issues. The downside to this authenticity is that sometimes real projects fail— even if you do everything right. Such failure needs to be managed, especially for students who are very concerned about their grades. For projects that can fail, assessments need to be designed so that the failure of the project does not translate into a bad grade. A focus on process over results can help mitigate this issue. A major component of a project should be a final reflection in which the student assesses the project's process and results, including where things did not go according to plan.

Supports for Practicing DH in High Schools

The facilitators next presented participants with the following prompt about supports (current or potential) for DH and asked them to respond to it:

What do you see as the supports—those you have or those you need—that would allow you to use DH practices more often? Consider supports from…
- institutions and local organizations
- school leaders
- the public
- faculty from your or other institutions
- and anyone or anything else.

The following are the supports that the participants highlighted and some thoughts that developed out of discussion of them:
- While faculty generally have the freedom to implement DH activities on their own, they do need some cooperation from administrators. Sites are often blocked on school computers, and some tools require admin permission.
- Administrative encouragement of DH activities could also generate some faculty buy-in, but there would still be considerable faculty skepticism. School administrations sometimes launch a new project or movement, only to move on to something new after a year or two. It will therefore take persistence for an administrative push in support of DH to result in widespread faculty buy-in.
- Encouraging greater adoption of DH practices in high schools needs to begin in colleges of education at universities. Prospective teachers should gain familiarity with DH as part of their training so that they have a foundation in DH instruction by the time they reach the classroom.

- For seasoned teachers, workshops would be valuable. The STL DH Network could provide a crucial support in the form of a workshop series and/or video lessons that could be shared widely online. The network might begin by reaching out to principals and curriculum/instruction leaders at schools, as they could help identify what trainings would be most valuable and encourage faculty participation. Some schools do not have funding for professional development occurring on a weekday, so trainings would either need to occur on weekends or online.
- Finding schools with faculty enthusiastic about DH and focusing on those schools first might achieve better results than taking a blanket approach. Again, building relationships with a school/community is important for both buy-in and for addressing the particular needs of the school/community.
- If MoDESE gave active encouragement to DH practices, that would certainly increase faculty buy-in and interest.

High School Student Remote Participation in DH Projects

One of the goals of the next planned workshop in the "Expanding Access to the Digital Humanities in St. Louis" project series is to develop a process that will allow students at area high schools to participate (remotely or in-person) in DH projects hosted at colleges or universities. After describing this goal, we asked the participants to respond to the following questions:

- Is this desirable? What does the experience need to provide to students to be worth their time?
- Is this feasible? If not, what are the obstacles?
- What would this participation look like, logistically? Would entire classes participate or would individual sign-ups be better? How would student work be evaluated?

In the subsequent discussion, the participants made the following observations:
- High schools are very interested in students getting real-world experience. That said, logistics are always an obstacle for a student performing work outside the high school campus.
- Some area high schools have internship options that could form the basis of a process by which students could get school credit for participation on a remote project. The STL DH Network should contact internship coordinators at area schools to get a better sense of how this process works. Using an internship model would mean individual student sign-ups rather than entire classes.
- Again, forming a strong relationship between the university and the school will be important to making such a program a success.

Recommended Priorities for the STL DH Network

As we approached the end of the workshop, we asked the participants to respond to one more prompt:

In order to build the St. Louis Digital Humanities Network and improve digital humanities pedagogy in the region, the network's members should prioritize the following actions.

Drawing upon the day's discussions, these are the priorities the participants recommended to the attention of the network:

1. Hold conversations around what DH is and how to use it.
2. Frame DH as something the world is moving toward as opposed to a program teachers are expected to implement.
3. Expose people to DH tools and help them identify which tools would be most effective in the classroom.
4. Establish best practices for implementing DH in the classroom.
5. Provide a model of what a classroom rich in DH looks like.
6. Consider a focus on particular tools, such as GIS.
7. Designate point people for a tool in a professional learning community, or a contact person in a college.
8. Establish relationships between universities and communities/teachers.
9. Bring more voices to the table as we establish network goals.

Most of these items (the first two in particular) relate to communication, suggesting the first obstacle to improving DH pedagogy is explaining what it is and why it is important, and convincing teachers that it is not a passing fad. Items 3 through 7 also deal with communication, but focus more on the nuts and bolts of how to perform DH in the classroom and supporting teachers in their efforts to do it. Items 8 and 9 are crucial to long-term success. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville has already provided a model for building a relationship with a local community with its Digital East St. Louis project, and other institutions should be encouraged to develop similar relationships. (The value of strong relationships between universities and high schools was an observation that recurred throughout the workshop.) As for bringing more voices to the table, that is what the DH STL Network aims to do in its September 2022 workshop, as well as through continued outreach.

Project Evaluations

Following the workshop, a post-workshop survey was distributed to all five participants. The response rate was 100%. Responses to questions about the usefulness of the workshop were quite positive. Participants were presented with a series of statements and asked to rate their agreement with those statements according to a scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree).

- I am likely to use one or more of the digital humanities tools or practices I learned about at the workshop in my own teaching.
    - Strongly agree: 100%
- The workshop was effective at identifying challenges to improving digital humanities pedagogy in the St. Louis area.

- o Strongly agree: 80%
- o Agree: 20%
- The workshop was effective at identifying opportunities for improving digital humanities pedagogy in the St. Louis area.
  - o Strongly agree: 60%
  - o Agree: 40%
- The workshop's results will have a significant impact on improving digital humanities equity and access for St. Louis high school students.
  - o Strongly agree: 40%
  - o Agree: 40%
  - o Neutral: 20%
- I am interested in taking part in further collaborations on improving digital humanities pedagogy in the St. Louis area.
  - o Strongly agree: 80%
  - o Agree: 20%

We were pleased with the high ratings given to the immediate usefulness of the workshop, the value of our discussions about challenges, and participants' interest in continuing to collaborate on this matter. The slightly lower ratings for how effective the workshop was at *solutions*—both identifying supports for DH pedagogy and for the practical effect the workshop will have on DH pedagogy in St. Louis—are understandably somewhat lower. As the faculty noted during the workshop, they are used to new projects coming along and then quickly fading. This tendency toward unreliability is one reason why building relationships between universities and local communities is crucial to the long-term success of the project. Faculty buy-in is likely to remain limited until institutions—and the STL DH Network—demonstrate a lasting commitment to it.

In addition to the questions above, we asked open-ended questions about the most and least valuable aspects of the workshop. Four respondents pointed to the tool demonstrations as most useful to them; one found the focus on the project's long-term goals most valuable. As for the least valuable aspect, four respondents noted the limitations of only having five high school faculty voices in the room. One would have liked a better lunch option.

The high value participants placed on tool demonstrations and activities that can be put to immediate use will inform our agenda for the September 2022 workshop. That workshop was not originally conceived as including significant demonstration time, but this workshop suggests that the enthusiasm an exciting demonstration generates can be useful for propelling discussion about broader and more abstract issues.

Project Continuation and Long-Term Impact

As discussed in the Project Summary, this workshop was only one stage of a larger process of building a robust network of digital humanities practitioners and strengthening teaching in the digital humanities in the St. Louis area. A second, larger workshop, scheduled for September 2022, has been funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The priorities developed by the participants of the "Improving Digital Humanities Pedagogy in St.

Louis" workshop are already being used to shape that upcoming workshop's agenda. The September workshop will, in turn, launch several inter-institutional collaborations, including the creation of a process that will allow students to participate in digital humanities projects at other institutions. Some of these collaborations may require further funding, which the STL DH Network will pursue. The importance of DH to our students' educations is only going to grow, and as more faculty recognize this reality, the network's activities will generate more and more interest.

Acknowledgements

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