Impractical Applications

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Abstract

The question of how we justify "digital humanities" to unknowing or skeptical audiences cannot be disentangled from how we justify studying the humanities in an era of anxiety and doubt regarding the pursuit of anything without supposedly practical aims. Answering these concerns requires not only rejecting the faulty assumptions on which they are based, but also bringing more information to bear regarding the connections between our work and the values, both "practical" (judged in terms of effects) and not (judged on its own terms) of the larger economy and culture in which we participate.

[1] DHQ's general editor, Melissa Terras, gave a rousing keynote at the Digital Humanities 2010 conference at King's College, London, and by now people reading this may have their own impressions of the significance of what she said — even if you weren't there last July to hear it. The fluidity of these media makes it possible for me to pick up without paraphrasing, since the presentation is still there (at least as I write) for you to see on Melissa's site, at http://melissaterras.blogspot.com/2010/07/dh2010-plenary-present-not-voting.html. So it doesn't need to be a concern for me whether as a reader, you already have some developed idea of what you think of it, or don't. No one has missed anything.

[2] After all, one of the themes of Melissa's speech — and of the keynote address given earlier in the week by one of the pioneers of our field (and a DHQ editor), Joe Raben, in receiving the Busa Award for outstanding lifetime contributions — is that the way in which communities (disciplines, universities) are constituted is now changing irrevocably under the pressure of networked social media. One of these changes is in openness and accessibility, to such an extent that we are now faced with an awareness of how every conversation is already ongoing. Whether insiders or outsiders, already committed members of the increasingly far-flung digital humanities community, or more distant colleagues or members of the public, we all have all the arguments always already before us, and the only thing we can assume with regard to prior knowledge is that our picture is still incomplete. "In" and "out" aren't about time and space anymore, only in how familiar we are with the questions Melissa and Joe were asking: what is/are digital humanities? Are we talking about one thing or many? How is it (are we) related to parent or sister disciplines in the humanities or otherwise? How do we propose to justify ourselves in a world of scarcity and challenge? Maybe you have heard the arguments and anxieties; you know these discussions are underway, and have been as long as any of us doing this can remember.[1] Or maybe not. Either way, there is no great need to recapitulate what can easily be found at the end of a link. Nor would it necessarily help, as there is no starting point without its antecedents.

[3] What might be odd to the newcomer, however, is the uncertainty and disquiet apparent in so many of these accounts, just at a time when one might think we'd be hopeful and confident. It cannot help that one of the things we have in common with traditional humanities disciplines is the way these debates about definitions get caught up in larger conversations, both more philosophical and more vexed, sometimes going so far as to challenge the assumptions behind questions being asked, but never quite settling the case.[2] Whether digital humanities have or should have any practical application at all is a question asked as often about English or Comparative Literature or Art History or Philosophy (I use proper nouns to indicate I speak also of departments and institutions, not only some committed pursuit of a subject, however one defines it). Our dilemma is that, on the one hand, we have sometimes felt unwelcome

even in institutions where the humanities are studied, facing persistent questions, often from those we respect most, about what we are for and whether we belong. Yet on the other hand — this is some kind of irony — in society at large, and even from academic administrations on occasion, we have heard the same questions regarding the humanities in general. So the humanities are "in crisis," "under siege," etc., etc. Our supposedly begrudging or resisting colleagues, who challenge us to justify ourselves and explain how we belong at all, must themselves answer to people whose support they need in their turn.

These old, tangled roots suggest to me that no argument would be sufficient to prevail here, and that such critiques will be heard as long as anyone doing any of this stuff is around. Our habit of doubting ourselves, echoing our earnest but never conclusive efforts to address the misgivings of others, shows more than anything else how at home are digital humanists in the humanities. Indeed, we are perfectly capable of sustaining all sides of this debate without encouragement. Of course I speak as someone to whom this particular problem is merely "academic" (understand this word in a weirdly reversed sense), as I am not personally dependent, at least for the present, on academic funding, either "soft" or "hard". As soon as the discussion became consequential, I suppose I might be reluctant to take issue with any administrator or committee charged with managing a budget or prioritizing line items. Their jobs are difficult enough, I imagine. Yet it is with considerable astonishment that I read accounts of Lord Browne's Report (again, this is easy enough for readers to learn about online if they don't already know too much) and its promise to make British universities more "competitive" (sic) by decimating funding for education in arts, language and literacy. Is this the way a great nation treats its children, I wonder? What would Dr Arnold think?[3] And of course, albeit without the same public discussion, the same thing is happening in the United States. Even at a remove, it is difficult to maintain a philosophical detachment in the face of all this.

So I do agree with Melissa that as practitioners of Digital Humanities (using another proper noun), we have to advocate for ourselves: we do have to make our point of view and our priorities known. This is in part because I also agree with Joe, that changes are inevitable, even that the university itself, at least as we know it, will soon be disappearing or at least undergoing a metamorphosis, humanities and all. If institutions of higher learning are likely to be unrecognizable within a generation, that makes exactly this moment critical for imagining and re-imagining what they, and we, are good for. But in my experience, there are conversations meant to elicit information and develop understanding, and then there are those whose goal is to seek justification for a position already staked out or a decision already made. Apart from surface resemblances (since the latter sort wants to be taken to be the former), these two species of dialogue really have nothing in common with one another; indeed the second kind may not be dialogue at all, but just a sort of ritual posturing. For seekers of truth, common understanding and comity, the trick is to recognize and cultivate the one kind of conversation, and not expend energy fruitlessly on the other, turning instead, if we can't abide by decisions we are presented with, to mobilizing a constituency. Which sort of discussion is this?

One fears it is too often the second kind. Which leads me to ask what is our constituency. Paradoxically, to answer this question, I think, requires that we go sideways, and imagine the first kind of dialogue, in more of a relaxed spirit — something like the conversations, say, that Socrates, the famous skeptic and iconoclast, might have had with his friendlier companions:

Socrates	So, Electra, I see your head is buried in that device in your hand even more than usual. Is there anything special there?
Electra	[Looking up.] Yes Socrates, lately my iPhone has been even more than usually attractive. I'm reading tweets about the conference in London I just came back from. I'm famous! People have been very complimentary about the paper I gave there.
Socrates	"Tweeting", isn't that Twitter? I've heard of it. I have to admit a limitation to only 140 characters is an interesting idea for a communications medium, although I could certainly never manage it.

Electra	It forces you to be concise, Socrates, for sure, or at least it should. That can be very helpful at certain times especially.
Socrates	For example, if you were in a hurry, as you always seem to be. So you gave a paper? What about?
Electra	It was about this project I'm working on, analyzing philosophical dialogue. It was at Digital Humanities 2010.
Socrates	I have to say, that sounds right up my alley, but what do you mean, "digital humanities"? Is that like digital music or digital thermometers? (I think I can guess what you mean by humanities. As I recall, there were a number of Renaissance scholars called "humanists", and many universities have programs or departments in the Humanities.)
Electra	Well let's see, my friend Melissa says I'm not allowed to say "it's the intersection of blah, blah, blah...."
Socrates	Melissa sounds smart. I agree that wouldn't mean much to me.
Electra	So take, for example, my project, Dialectical Imaginations: I'm using TEI to mark up a corpus of ancient texts of philosophical dialogue. Then I'm breaking the texts out, categorizing them on various axes, including speaker (Socrates, you appear a lot), authors, correspondences and echoes in theme and language, and so forth. I'm planning to build a browsable, searchable web interface –
Socrates	That's all very nice, and I'm flattered, but what you just said is complete nonsense to me. Besides, I wasn't asking what you did, but what digital humanities is –
Electra	Um, that's hard, sorry. Hrm [looking exasperated for a moment, then brightening] – I guess you'd have to start with the fact that in the digital humanities, most of our work is done with computers ... so "digital music" isn't really very far off ... except that working with digital *text* is a different thing altogether ... I'm marking up my sources using a customized schema I built –
Socrates	Ouch, you're hurting my head! Back up!
Electra	Um, well in working with text in digital form, we worry a lot about text encoding, and other esoteric topics –
Socrates	Tell me about it. I mean, you don't say.
Electra	Except I guess there are also differences from fields like computer science or electrical engineering. Unlike many other disciplines involved with computers, the questions we are asking are not only about how to innovate new ways of working with the machine or electronic data, but also how to keep asking the same questions we've been asking. Digital humanities projects are frequently closely tied to specific topics of interest in the humanities, like Italian Baroque painting or Bulgarian dialectology, or close readings of video games.

Socrates	I see, that sounds interesting. So, in your case, you're asking questions, about the texts you've collected, that any reader of the last five hundred years, or two thousand, might have asked, namely about how different philosophers or writers (Plato, Plutarch, Lucian or whoever – I assume these fine writers are all in your collection), how different authors of philosophical texts make words into ideas, ideas into voices, voices into characters – have you thought of studying dramatists too? I'm sure my friend Euripides would love to be included.
Electra	Socrates, that's great idea, thanks! I have to get that down. [Thumbing into device.]
Socrates	Although I have to say, it makes me wonder, what's the practical use of studying philosophers. In my experience, they tend to be somewhat ... shall we say ... *partial*, in their views? Although I guess it might shake one's faith in received ideas, and that's good.
Electra	Socrates, that debate has been going on for centuries, and you should know, you started it.
Socrates	Maybe, but everyone has regrets. I mean, it's not that I'd do anything differently given the chance again, but what good has it done?
Electra	Socrates! You, of all people, to be asking that question!
Socrates	I know, it's depressing, isn't it? But at least you're learning about computers. They're everywhere nowadays.
Electra	Yes, Socrates, it all goes together. And I admit my skills are very marketable right now, even in this economy. Apart from my digital humanities friends, who are all super-busy, about the only person I know my age who isn't either still in school, or looking for work, is a friend of mine who designs web sites. We're even talking about whether I can do some work for him.
Socrates	That's excellent. So, you have a lot of friends who are doing this too?
Electra	Well, not just friends [blushing], but, yes, it's pretty cool. I've met all kinds of interesting people. It's not just about computers. It's about the network, as a communications medium, an entire community of scholars learning how to do these things. Some people are really amazing – and everyone is really generous with their time and expertise. Which you learn you kind of have to be, since there's so much to know, you become very dependent on others. That way it seems a bit unlike the traditional humanities, where work can be very solitary.
Socrates	I have to say that also sounds like good practice for the modern world. Learning to communicate! But doesn't it bother your traditional humanist colleagues? I mean, you claim to be doing what they are doing, but I bet you spend a lot more time with a computer than a book. Mind you, I'll be the first to acknowledge that one mechanical contraption may be no worse than another, but you have to admit, your methods are apparently quite different from theirs, and very complicated and mysterious to the uninitiated. I was going to ask you what "TEI" is, but I'm not sure I want to know.

Electra	Isn't that paradoxical: it's about as old-fashioned as you can get, and yet it is thought to have this threatening and destabilizing aspect. I won't deny it. But even in that way it's nothing new – just as you say, the humanities have always been doing this. Even more, digital humanities is all about a kind of literacy, over and above the immediate subject matter, and many of the things you learn have a very general application. Which is just like the humanities too.
Socrates	Yes, isn't that what the humanities is all about? Or at least, hasn't that been the claim? So "digital humanities", like my friend Gertrude Stein used to say, isn't different, only more like it already was already.
Electra	You knew Gertrude Stein?
Socrates	Well not exactly, but I think it's safe to say she knew me....

Admittedly this is a fanciful scenario; and if discussions like this could ensure that programs in the digital humanities all had budgets into the future, things would be good. But there is that persistent anxiety, especially regarding the questions our two interlocutors circle around: not only whether DH is traditional or newfangled, but whether it is esoteric and insular, or practical and sociable. Notwithstanding the details, the "stuffness" of it, the paradox of the humanities has always been that, even or possibly especially at its best, a humanistic discipline has no evident practical use beyond "practice" itself. Certainly, there is literacy, and analytical ability, "critical thinking", but why these should be the special dispensation of our disciplines to cultivate these things, and not equally essential to any true education, isn't entirely clear. We do not help matters when we respond only with a counter-critique, seeking to deconstruct the terms in which questions are asked, only to discover again the old lesson that at least when unbalanced by any compensating affirmation, critique tends to be demoralizing. Yet we also cannot justify ourselves entirely in the terms presented to us. An esteemed senior member of our community argued as much to me late in the conference in London. "Trying to 'measure impacts' is ridiculous", he said, alluding both to Melissa's speech and to the demands of its occasion. "The minute we try to do that, we are playing their game, and have lost it." While this reaction, expressed in a moment of frustration or pique, may represent no one's actual policy, even the speaker's own, it is nonetheless clear, as soon as one starts to try to do so, how impossible it is to argue for our meaning and significance using only language in which meaning and significance have been reduced to terms in economic formulas, and how to acquiesce in the attempt gives up any chance of acknowledging the contributions we actually make.

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However old this problem is, yet its face is changing as the humanities go digital, as methods and forms of work change under the pressures of technology and a newly interconnected society. While we must, and will, do so all the time, it remains problematic to submit the humanities – or the purported "outcomes" of studying them – to evaluation according to the set criteria of any system. A discipline like the study of literature or history is not a consumer product to be reviewed or rated on a scale of satisfaction, but a personal, intimate interrogation and testing of oneself, and an occasion for conversation, inasmuch as the humanities are an inquiry precisely into the values fostered by human culture, both historically and in the face of present challenges. In its richness and strangeness, here the digital humanities has a peculiar strength, at least for anyone who understands why one might want to be more than a consumer of a pre-packaged culture and history – why one might want to understand and participate in their creation, exploration, and transmission, in the definition and discovery of what matters.

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Properly pursued, our activities are like their parent disciplines in one crucial respect: we create economic benefits only as side effects, much the way the output of a computer program is a side effect. But this does not mean that the economic benefits are not real and tangible. In particular, as Electra remarks, the technical skills we cultivate now claim a great deal of currency. But we don't do the work for the sake of the technology alone so much as for the sake of the technology in a humanistic context; and the economic benefits of our work will be indirect, unpredictable, without guarantees, often untraceable and unknowable, if only because they are sometimes too large and far-reaching to measure. A dramatic instance is in the way our efforts to develop text encoding standards over the last twenty years

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(including but not limited to the Text Encoding Initiative) have contributed to the foundation, development and growth of Internet technologies in general and the World Wide Web in particular. Practitioners of Humanities Computing, as it was then called, valued collaboration and sharing, and lamented the waste of their labor and ingenuity as their work decayed with obsolescent data formats; so they did something about it, which resulted, when joined with convergent efforts from elsewhere, in a communications platform open to the world. The bureaucrat who seeks only to rationalize slashing a budget may have no wish to learn anything about any of this. But any university administrator or department chair whose mission is actually to promote the program of higher education will surely take an interest.

[35] The fact that these connections are invisible does not mean they are not there. The way forward is open to us, in other words, if only we traverse the links and assert the relations between our activities and programs, and the worthwhile efforts and positive trends in the world around us, both in practical terms (even when "practical" is code for "reducible to a monetary abstraction") and more directly, in terms of pursuits worthwhile for their own sake. Making common cause, indeed, between the "digital humanities", the humanities writ large, and the economy and culture that sustain them, is of the essence. In my own field, standards-based electronic publishing technologies, many of the most successful, engaged and influential innovators and practitioners have advanced degrees in fields like Comparative Literature, Linguistics, modern and ancient languages, Philosophy, and of course Library and Information Science. Our work, like so much else in the "information economy", is both humanistic and technical, both "hard" (disciplined, focused, methodical) and "soft" (sensitive, alert, questioning and sympathetic). It is collaborative and community oriented, there being (as Electra notes) so much to know. And this is just as the humanities at their best have always been. The work makes its own claims and has value on its own terms, and it is part of something bigger, there really being no contradiction in this.

[36] The digital humanities, to put it another way, has friends, more friends than are usually recognized. I submit that we should keep this in mind as we answer Melissa's call at DH2010 to participate and be heard. It is always possible to bring attention back to the focus we share with endeavors outside the academy, which our projects and initiatives nourish and are nourished by: work interpreting, developing and using new and old media and old and new arts of rhetoric – so intertwined as to be inseparable – to say nothing of cultural and historical understanding. To whom, in an information economy, is this not practically relevant? Allies and constituencies, who can advocate in ways impossible to do for ourselves, are all around us, both within and outside the walls, in disciplines and fields of endeavor such as media production, design, information science, engineering, psychology and cognitive science, linguistics, sociology and social studies, social action, journalism, justice, and government. And why exclude the sciences and mathematics? To engage these parties is only to expose and formalize connections that are already there. This requires rejecting the politics of zero-sum.

[37] As Electra recalls, Melissa told us to avoid describing our field as "the intersection of (blah blah blah)", and as far as presenting a compelling narrative goes, she makes a point. An intersection is not a "thing", and we are surely a thing. Yet it is also the case that we come out of an energetic crossing and commingling of motives and interests. We are informed by the way human culture has always been networked, and becomes ever more so; and now we inform it in return. It is our attitude or motive that distinguishes us – to be engaged thoughtfully, with intelligence and empathy, just as medicine and engineering are *humanistic* to the extent they are empathetic and thoughtful. A nexus of transmission and reception like this, a site of feedback, is a point of power. The digital humanities is a place we can set a lever that can move the world.

Notes

[1] Indeed as I write, further iterations have appeared online at http://www.hastac.org/blogs/cforster/im-chris-where-am-i-wrong and http://www.bogost.com/blog/the_turtlenecked_hairshirt.shtml, to mention only two.

[2] So it is hard not to notice Stanley Fish in the New York Times: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/the-crisis-of-the-humanities-officially-arrives/ and earlier writings.

[3] Readers who wish to learn something of the opinions and influence of Dr Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), headmaster of Rugby, may consult any history of Britain in the nineteenth century, or for that matter a resource of their choice on the Internet.