Digital Pedagogy Unplugged

Paul Fyfe <pfyfe_at_fsu_dot_edu>, Florida State University

Abstract

Does digital pedagogy have to be electronic? This paper grows out of a sense that digital pedagogy is too frequently conceived in terms of instructional technologies. Technology, at least in its electrified forms, can be a limiting factor in imagining how humanities instruction can be "digital": something to get your hands on, to deal with in dynamic units, to manipulate creatively. What might an electronically-enabled pedagogy look like if we pulled the plug? This paper surveys several examples to suggest that an unplugged digital humanities pedagogy can be just as productively disorienting as doing humanities digitally, and can potentially help students prepare for and contextualize their learning experiences with instructional technologies or in online environments.

Hacking the Yacking

What does it mean to do digital humanities? To be a digital humanist? Whatever it means, it potentially puts one in a newly advantageous professional position, able to make a claim on the relatively conspicuous resources devoted to digital humanities in a time of scarcity. The buzz factor and professional incentives are drawing new attention to and participation in the DH community. Partly as a result, DH has reached the inevitable if unpleasant stage of authenticity arguments [Kirschenbaum 2010a], [Waltzer 2010]. Debates about what defines and qualifies digital humanism periodically flare, with opinions spread along a spectrum from "Big Tent" inclusivity (come one, come all) to code or computational exceptionalism ("more hacking, less yacking"). The root questions themselves are not new; digital humanities sometimes seems to exist only in a state of self-definition, which ironically may be one of its strengths as a historiography of contemporary humanities knowledge work. But what is new are the concerns about the relative status of insider/outsider or theorist/practitioner, running in parallel to recent concerns about alternative academic employment (#alt-ac) and professorial jobs [Nowviskie 2010a], digital scholarship and peer review [Fitzpatrick 2009], and the relations of librarians and researchers [Ramsay 2010a]. What follows is a small provocation concerning these debates: DH is not the exclusive domain of theorists or practitioners. To be a digital humanist, you don't even need a computer. [1]

Jerome McGann does not especially like computers. Or so he confessed one day to his surprised employees (myself included) at the *Rossetti Archive*. They just happened to be the interpretive machines capable of carrying out his current intellectual projects, or opening those projects to questions he had yet to imagine. That archive has a significant place in the evolution of the digital humanities, but can the same be true more generally for the field? Is it possible to speak of the digital humanities, as it becomes more broadly construed, without computers? Without electronics? Humanities computing, for its part, seems hard-wired to computers by definition. And some of the most interesting questions and opportunities of the digital humanities are inconceivable without the media environments which facilitate or reveal them. In other words, you cannot even imagine the work you can do before you've invented or experienced the tools or the social dynamics they enable. On the other hand, it may be worth trying, precisely because of the felicitous disorientation that characterizes the digital humanities in the first place: its "productive unease" [Flanders 2009] and the "unexpected anomalies generative of new meaning" [Liu 2009, 19]. [2]

The digital humanities has made hacking a discipline. "Hacking" these days means to adapt, manipulate, and make productive use out of a given technology or technological context or platform. The term's popular and professional [3]

usages are widespread, including into academic and pedagogical contexts such as the professional productivity blog ProfHacker, the energetic experiments with the classroom by Cathy Davidson and HASTAC, and the alternative scholarly publication *Hacking the Academy* by Dan Cohen and Tom Schienfeldt (and lots of others). "Hacking" education overlaps with but is not synonymous with digital humanities. Edu-hacking is frequently used in its service, especially to produce unfamiliar and alien perspectives on representation and intellectual protocols. It also suggests an obvious question: Can the digital humanities be hacked? [1] What follows is an approach to that question through the classroom, the generative domain of hacking education with instructional technology. Various commenters have worried that DH overlooks the institutional struggles of "ed tech" within higher education [Waltzer 2010], or has been overly focused on scholarship at the expense of pedagogy [Bier 2010]. This essay proposes an answer to such critique in imagining a low-tech (or even no-tech) approach to DH. More broadly, it suggests that edu-hacking and DH are and must remain closely related. Debates about inclusivity and opportunism in DH have overshadowed the conversation about its life in the classroom. These are the implications of the examples to follow, all of which demonstrate how "digital pedagogy" might be productively hacked.

Teaching Naked

Can there be a digital pedagogy without computers? Amid the influx of electronics into classrooms and the rising debates, popular and professional, about how computers and the internet affect reading, cognition, and learning, now seems like a good time to ask. There are vigorous critiques of a headlong rush to technologize education from those who suspect its deleterious effects upon learning [Bauerlein 2008], [Carr 2010b]. There are also healthy critiques of instructional technology from people very sympathetic to educational and humanities computing, who point out that technology cannot change the classroom without first changing the pedagogy (see, for example, [Krause 2010]). As a result, discussions about digital pedagogy and effective uses of instructional technologies are flourishing across social media as well as conventional academic settings. Former president of the MLA Gerald Graff has an "optimistic sense of the potential of these technologies — if we heed [the] wake-up call to use them in imaginative ways" [Graff 2009, 7]. That imaginative horizon is wide, but it might be limited by keeping digital pedagogy synonymous with tools to utilize, or with the particular technologies of digital media. Mark Bauerlein, who is generally pessimistic about the educational benefits of technology, predicts that "over the next 10 years, educators will recognize that certain aspects of intelligence are best developed with a mixture of digital and nondigital tools" [Bauerlein 2010]. This is not much of a concession, as the digital and nondigital are still consigned to being tools, and still separate things to be mixed.

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Can we redefine these very categories? Their difference may be overrepresented; instructional technology, after all, includes books and backpacks and overhead lighting. To heed the "wake-up call" or to recalibrate education in the digital age, we must not only explore unfamiliar technologies but also defamiliarize those we think we already know [McGann 2001a]. Indeed, the two projects are dialectical.[2] It is because I am a vigorous user of instructional technologies that I am interested to pull their plugs. How might we reimagine analog teaching in terms of the digital? How can we incorporate the opportunities of digital pedagogy without presuming its discontinuity with nondigital tools and methods, or its own self-limiting status as a toolkit? One generative way of imagining digital pedagogy might be outside the context of electronics, imagining instead a digital pedagogy unplugged.

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Perhaps the most common shortcoming of digital pedagogy is how frequently it gets conceived in terms of instructional technology.[3] For many teachers, especially early- or non-adopters, digital pedagogy is often presumed to be just something that uses electronic tools or computers. This is unsatisfying as it often limits the teaching to the extent of its tools. Two familiar problems arise. First, if the tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat problems as nails. If presentation software makes it easy to share lecture notes, the lecture hall can turn into a place for showing bullet points instead of teaching. The second problem is treating technology as merely a tool: something that accomplishes a task you were already doing, but with (electro-) mechanical advantage. For the pedagogy, not much has changed.

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Electronics are machines, and they can become fascinating interpretive machines. But, at the risk of provoking the ire of engineers and programmers, the tools are easy. What is hard is imagining how to use them and, harder still, imagining the social conditions they might enable and, hardest of all, creating the institutional structures in which they will flourish.

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[4] In terms of teaching, how do we work towards the learning environments we may have never had before? How do we break the thrall to tools and technologies which may limit the horizon of our pedagogical creativity? How might we even imagine a "digital pedagogy" without the potentially limiting factor of electronics? What if we just started "teaching naked"?

This is the catchphrase of José Bowen, a dean at Southern Methodist University, whose profile appeared not long ago in *The Chronicle* [Young 2009b]. Bowen is not anti-technology either. His modest proposal to "teach naked" actually just means removing all the computers and projectors from his classroom, which he did at SMU. Bowen was reacting to the ineffectiveness of pedagogy when it gets governed by the tools it uses: in short, by those PowerPoint lectures that rain down boredom in a hail of bullet points. He does advocate offering students podcasts and online discussion groups and even PowerPoint lectures, but outside of class meetings. During class time — and fully clothed — Bowen invites all the Q&A and in-person discussion that these technologies had senselessly displaced. Taking a similar approach at the high-school level, chemistry teachers Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams are successfully experimenting with vodcasting to create what they call "the flipped classroom" [Bergmann and Sams 2011]. In these models, students bring questions about the digital resources they have hypothetically pored over in preparing for class. Instructional technology is not banished but instead moved to the pedagogical periphery. In making such moves, these teachers support Bauerlein's promotion of "the non-digital space as a crucial part of the curriculum" [Bauerlein 2010]. Like Bauerlein, Bowen would segregate digital and analog pedagogy, or electronic and human teaching, for their particular strengths. But can we reconcile them instead? Can we imagine "teaching naked" as more than merely doing without, but as something already integrated to the circuit of its electronic counterpart? What if instead we kept the "digital" in the non-electronic senses of that word: something to get your hands on, to deal with in dynamic units, to manipulate creatively?

The Technology of Cultural Studies

According to Sean Latham, this is what cultural studies already does. In "New Age Scholarship: The Work of Criticism in the Age of Digital Reproduction", Latham riffs on Walter Benjamin to suggest how the "loss of aura" or dematerialization of digitized objects, such as in electronic archives, links up nicely to the demystification of cultural hierarchies he endeavors to teach.[5] Instructing students about disparate, heterogeneous, and highly contingent cultural formations — which is the bailiwick of cultural studies, according to Latham — is to prepare them for an analogous experience in the digital realm. "Cultural studies and digital technology", Latham suggests, "each activate the energies of the other, generating the coordinates by which we can begin to map the infinite density of culture in the age of its digital reproduction" [Latham 2004, 420]. Latham thinks of cultural studies as a technology itself, which might give students a critical selectiveness in navigating electronic realms and archives and their floods of flattened, ambiguously differentiated cultural objects. Further, it potentially empowers students to establish contingent interpretations of their own in these emerging digital spaces.

Latham ambitiously claims that cultural studies only fulfills the promise of its method in the digital realm, where we sort and resort contingent, rare, popular, and heterogeneous materials into dynamic critical narratives [Latham 2004, 413]. But it is not hard to imagine how we might unplug Latham's "technology of cultural studies" and still keep it running. As Latham implies, to teach this way is to already use a kind of proto-digital pedagogy. For instance, imagine inviting students into a classroom where you have literally scattered dozens of heterogeneous documents around the room. For his part, Latham might plant documents related to modernist little magazines: letters, corrected page proofs, sample issues, reviews, newspaper stories, and various images. The subject could be just about anything. Imagine another array of materials relating to cholera outbreak in Victorian London and the imagination of individual and collective identity in urban spaces. One might offer maps, statistical surveys, journalistic exposés, impassioned editorials, urban sketches, snippets of fiction. Students could gather, assemble, and present to the class the critical narratives they collaboratively determine and argue. Discussion could proceed about how to present, exhibit, or visualize those relations. This is old and new fashioned at once, as if curating a special collection and imitating the IVANHOE game developed by McGann, Johanna Drucker, Bethany Nowviskie, and others.

Does this even make sense? Can such an interactive environment like IVANHOE even work when denuded of its socially networked, asynchronous, abstractly visualized, and self-archiving functions? Why not find out? Those

differences as well as shortcomings can become vital aspects of the class discussion: what kind of mediated environments might facilitate this? What interpretive machines might the students imagine, electronic or otherwise? What might they even potentially build, given the conditions of the media they're working in? The game's creators stress how IVANHOE keeps students aware of their interpretation as itself a critical act: it provides "self-conscious insight [...] into the processes of interpretation constituted by any and every act of reading" [Drucker and Rockwell 2003, vii]. By unplugging the game or doing preliminary exercises with analog collections, one might help students to appreciate, by contrast, their active mediation of similar work in the digital field, which too frequently seems transparent, or so flattened that students fail to notice its own critical topologies.

Work in the Text Mines

In this case, the goal is to keep students' attention on the critical labor that digital resources seem to dissolve. This is not to privilege learning on paper but to imagine its digital futures. Daniel Pitti, now Associate Director the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH), teaches classes on XML, TEI, and Encoded Archival Description (EAD) at the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia. He begins the class by handing out a printed recipe, and then gives students a set amount of time to make a list, on their own, of what they think are that object's salient formal properties which they would want (ultimately) to render in code. The subsequent discussion quickly reveals the surprising differences in features the students hoped to describe, and further demonstrates how even the most programmatic of documents has proliferating ways of describing its material, textual, and graphical features. Students come to perceive how analog or physical documents are already and complexly encoded in n-dimensions. How do you mark that up? How do you imagine an archive or finding system that can accommodate deceivingly non-programmatic artefacts of all document types and materials?

> For materially different types of artifacts — printed texts, maps, photographs — divisioning and classifying become yet more complicated when the ultimate purpose is to arrange them in a system that permits coherent analysis and study. The problem is greatly amplified when the manipulable physical properties scale to radically different measures, as is the case with a depository that includes paper-based objects and born-digital objects. [McGann 2009, 839]

The scale of the problem seems like a recipe for a headache. Scaling up from a simple recipe, Pitti elegantly invites students into the provocative complexities of text encoding and information architecture.

Another disarming and elegant example comes from Brad Pasanek. Pasanek's research is heavy into algorithms and text mining; he collaborates and publishes with a computer scientist. He also teaches British literature of the long eighteenth century. These domains came into contact when, one day, a little frustrated with his students' lackluster insights into the basic themes of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, he went home and "text mined" the novel with pink and blue highlighters. Just the title terms: pink for every instance of "pride", blue for "prejudice". The next class he returned with his marked-up book, flipping through the pages to show the bursts of color.[6] The class energetically started correlating them to important moments in the plot, to transitions in how the key terms were conceived. The exercise was an ice breaker (valuable in itself, as any teacher knows), but Pasanek accomplishes much more with it.

Consider one prevalent critique about how we read (or don't read) electronic texts; Latham explains it as follows: "The digital text seemingly makes reading too easy, allowing one to search out specific terms without the labor required to place them in their proper context" [Latham 2004, 416]. Text mining a novel with highlighters restores that missing labor of search. This is not merely to reverse engineer what students can already do with a search engine, or simply to take away the electro-mechanical advantage of such a tool and make busywork. (Noting that many search results functions will highlight the keywords/strings a user has searched for.) Rather, the exercise makes students reflect on how their reading labor is both constitutive and mediated. Pasanek's exercise integrates at least two kinds of reading: first, linear or intensive or deep or close reading, which the defenders of paper books insist provides the all-important context for understanding; and second, extensive or distant reading in which context is measured on a very different scale.[7] Distant reading allows us to survey and map texts from a higher critical elevation, as it were. Pasanek's prototype seems exactly the kind of "hybrid" critical work that does both.[8] It allows for specificities within close contexts as

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students read, and for connections within and across texts. It is like reading from the middle, except that it alternates close and distant perspectives to generate its critical current.[9] The exercise defamiliarizes the act of reading, reveals its continuity with digital text mining, and offers insights that may not solely exist in either realm.

Flipping quickly through the marked-up book, the first thing one notices is the abundance of "pride" relative to "prejudice". Depending on how its counted, pride shows up between six and nine times more than prejudice.[10] There's food for thought here: whereas pride describes a character trait, prejudice is more of a relational term: changeable, situational, and more dangerous to accuse someone of. Browsing through the text more deliberately, the first big splash of color comes (as one might expect) with Mr Darcy's debut, specifically after he declines to dance with Elizabeth Bennet at the first ball [Austen 2005, 20–21]. The second color splash comes later when, at Netherfield, Miss Bingley invites Elizabeth to stroll about the room, trying to get Darcy's attention while scrutinizing his character [Austen 2005, 56]. The third color burst comes (again, as one might anticipate) when Elizabeth meets Wickham and he describes (lies about) his history of mistreatment at Darcy's hands [Austen 2005, 80–81]. At this point, we might consider why the color has been splashing at all: the multiple instances of the term "pride" at these moments. Rereading them, we can see how "pride" is not just an epithet hurled at Darcy, but a concept which certain characters — specifically Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lennox, then Miss Bingley, and then Wickham — discuss with Elizabeth for its appropriateness, even its potential merits. At a distance, we see the "hot spots"; moving closer, we analyze their contexts; and somewhere in the middle we start to learn about the novel's reformation of pride through Elizabeth's perspective. Pride, as the novel eventually suggests, does have a place.

Of course you don't have to text mine the novel to understand this. Such interpretations should be obvious to any attentive reader of the novel. That these readers are sometimes not so attentive is a big part of Pasanek's point. Now for prejudice. The first instance occurs when Elizabeth, just after having heard Wickham's story, gets awkwardly paired with Darcy at the second ball [Austen 2005, 92]. By contrast, a couple of prejudices appear when Elizabeth and Jane later learn the truth about Wickham but hesitate to publicize his bad character [Austen 2005, 218]. What about both "pride" and "prejudice" — the instances where the novel's title terms are co-present? There are three. The first when, after Elizabeth hotly rejects Darcy's unfortunate first proposal of marriage, he gives her a long letter explaining everything [Austen 2005, 198]. The second when Elizabeth visits Pemberley and hears glowing appreciation of Darcy from one of his servants [Austen 2005, 239]. The third when Elizabeth eventually accepts Darcy's marriage proposal and they reflect back on his explanatory letter [Austen 2005, 348–49]. In each case, the subjects are Darcy's maturation and his rationale for recent actions; in each context, this information is private and privileged; in each instance, characters reflect on the very relations and reformation of the novel's title terms.

There is a much more one could think about here. And there are many critical questions to raise about the method. But this should testify to the value of such an exercise. Particularly for students whose interface with digital texts and resources is driven by search engines, or guided by keywords and text strings. Unplugging the search engine can help students perceive the limitations as well as the possibilities of what makes these engines run: pattern matching, which by itself is a far cry from reading at any distance. It sharpens students' attention to forms of analysis that explore the analog and digital domains along a continuum. It helps students to interrogate the various kinds of readings they can do therein. And it reveals all of those kinds of readings as actively constituting critical interpretations.

On Not Reading in the Digital Humanities

There are simpler approaches toward these goals which are no less effective in imagining a hybrid pedagogy. Stephen Ramsay offers another interesting example. Just as Ramsay tries to combine the "technical with the philosophical" in his graduate courses in the digital humanities, so he also combines different configurations of the seminar [Ramsay 2009]. For instance, after working on programming on Mondays and Wednesdays, his class devotes Fridays to a theoretical text on new media or the digital humanities. But no one gets to read it in advance. Instead, on "No-Reading Fridays", the class takes turns reading, paragraph by paragraph, the text projected on the classroom's screen. After two such Fridays grappling with Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology", the class had covered only eight paragraphs, but Ramsay declares that "I truly think that this is one of most enlightening class discussions I've ever been a part of (either as a student or a teacher)." The format allows the seminar to flourish, and "the professor is only a very small part of

what's going on."

Why is this different from a seminar where everyone works from the same edition of a physical book? In some ways it isn't. But for a graduate course in digital humanities, where much of the attention is on the digital realm and on theories of new media, it is a chance for everyone to be on the same page — literally — where the page is projected on the wall. [11] Because no one (save the professor) has read it before, the seminar reimagines real-time information processing in a very old fashioned way. This is "teaching naked" as it is meant to be understood: using technology effectively, subordinating it to the pedagogical goals of the class.[12] Though not quite unplugged, Ramsay's digital pedagogy offers similar critical distance and welcome counterpart to the course's engagement with computers and media theory. This too is digital humanities, and very productive of deep reading and discussion in the flesh. The digital is hands-on, offering the "haptic engagement" that Ramsay argues is crucial to DH's hermeneutic of building [Ramsay 2011b].

Digital Pedagogy Unplugged

No one, I think, would dispute the credentials of these teacher-scholars as digital humanists. In their sensitivity to the necessary interplay of electronic and analog forms, they also blur the fallacious divides of theorist-practitioner, insider-outsider, educator-hacker in ways that seem especially salutary in the context of DH's persistent debates. They enrich the notion of the digital humanist as a "hybrid scholar", according to Julia Flanders, underscoring how digital scholarship proceeds through "hybridizations that challenge our notions of discipline" [Flanders 2009] — and that even challenge our notions of the digital, as well as the inchoate discipline emerging from it. Their examples more specifically suggest how an unplugged pedagogy, so to speak, can still be productively digital. These case studies are meant neither to prescribe nor to exhaust the possibilities; they are simply a handful of the strategies which I've happened to encounter. But they all provide creative answers to a question that every teacher needs to ask: how to imagine pedagogy in a digital age. David Parry is bold to say that "[t]eaching without digital technology is an irresponsible pedagogy", but correct in that the future, and the future of education, is digital [Parry 2009]. This might be gently rephrased to suggest that it is irresponsible to teach with technology without a digital pedagogy. And though there are all sorts of ways to construct a digital pedagogy, one powerful approach begins with pulling the plug.

Notes

[1] That possibility is in some ways fueling the recent authenticity debates: the hackers are themselves being hacked.

[2] Much as the *Rossetti Archive* has suggested for hypermedia and bibliography.

[3] See ProfHacker's report from the Educause conference for a brief and trenchant critique of the institutionalization of this perspective, "simply the apotheosis of higher education's thirty-year change from a public good to a commodity" [Jones 2010].

[4] As several scholars have recently argued, the biggest problems faced by the digital humanities are not technological, but institutional [McGann 2010] or legal and social [Kirschenbaum 2010e].

[5] There are problems with the assumption that digital archives and objects somehow lack materiality (see McGann). Though subject to critique, Latham's argument does provoke thinking about researching and teaching cultural studies through different media.

[6] To "mark up" the book with highlighters is to encode certain semantic elements in color. The exercise also anticipates the critical activity of coding for the Web, where HTML is reconceived as "highlighted text mark-up language".

[7] Carr sketches out a kind of surface or frenetic reading against a deep reading or deep thinking model [Carr 2010b]. Franco Moretti's "distant reading" is not necessarily allied with reading online or with information technology; rather, "distance […] is a condition of knowledge" [Moretti 2000, 57]. But, when moved into an electronic context, distant reading can help articulate a method for online sources and instructional technologies.

[8] Compare to what Latham suggests about using digital archives: "The reading of surfaces […] should not be starkly opposed to a deep reading that is somehow more proper or authentic. Instead, the digital archive requires a hybrid type of critical work, one which matches the ability to pursue connections across texts with a studied awareness of the historical specificity of the printed word" [Latham 2004, 419].

[9] Put a different way, as Lydgate insists in Middlemarch: "there must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry, [...] a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass" [Eliot 1994, 640].

[10] The variation depends on whether or not one includes "proud" and "prided". It is also interesting that neither "pride" nor "prejudice" show up in top 50 or even top 150 most frequent words (excluding common stop words) in the novel. This makes them relatively invisible to such online word cloud tools as Wordle and TagCrowd.

[11] Relatedly, anyone who attended a Technology in the Arts and Sciences Camp (aka THATCamp) knows that its most crucial piece of technology is the whiteboard.

[12] In this context, see David Parry's lucid response to the "teaching naked" concept [Parry 2009].

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