

A review of Brett D. Hirsch (Ed.)'s *Digital Humanities: Pedagogy: Practices, Principles, and Politics*

Erik Shell <erik1434_at_gmail_dot_com>, University of Maryland

Abstract

This is a review of Brett D. Hirsch (Ed.)'s *Digital Humanities: Pedagogy: Practices, Principles, and Politics*.

Brett Hirsch begins his introductory essay to his collection *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles, and Politics* with something every digital humanist should be familiar with: a word frequency table. In it, he compares the frequency of some common words (e.g. research) with those pertaining to a particular focus (i.e. pedagogy) within the Blackwell *Companion to the Digital Humanities* [Hirsch 2012, 4]. Hirsch notes the shocking results – “research” with 504 instances, and “pedagogy” with only 8 – along with other data as testament to an overall lack of pedagogical discussion in the digital humanities community.^[1] While each article within *Digital Pedagogy* examines different areas of the digital humanities corpus, the common theme of digital humanities pedagogy, techniques of “bring[ing] the technological and the human together,” [Hirsch 2012, 17], remains the focus for every contributor.

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To this end, Hirsch splits the collection into three overlapping sections: “Practices,” “Principles,” and “Politics.” These, like most areas of digital humanities, are neither static nor exclusive to each other. Hirsch admits the overlap, and the categories end up serving primarily the convenience of the reader, functionally breaking the extensive collection into manageable chunks. Since almost all Hirsch's essays rely on author-specific case studies as their primary source of discussion, the diverse and unique experiences of any one classroom cannot cleanly fit into any one category or other. Rather, Hirsch's categories serve to mark the overall impact of each author's conclusions. The case study model of each essay allows any interested reader to track, from beginning to end, the decision-making processes, issues, and outcomes of each program under analysis. It also shows the emergence of consistently successful traits of a digital humanities teaching exercise, to which I will return later. With the artificial three-category structure, Hirsch can set aside typical divisions of the digital humanities (e.g. GIS, textual analysis, modeling) and rein in these case studies under a more orderly – though intersectional – structure.

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The publication itself, released through Open Book Publishers, merits some evaluation alongside the content of the text. While the work is available for purchase in physical copy and PDF format, it is available for free on the Open Book website [Hirsch 2012]. While this is a welcome attempt at open-access information dissemination, the online infrastructure of Open Book distorts some aspects of the text that are worth mentioning. Since digital humanities publications are likely to cite open-access and internet sources, direct links to many citations within the text are clickable and will take you directly to the source. This is not always the case, however, as some links are either not clickable or simply do not work. There is no option to view a PDF or cached version of these links, so the reader is forced to rely on the site maintenance quality of 100+ websites and resources. This collection is also heavy in pictures and graphs and while some can be read easily, blurry and altogether illegible visuals abound. The poor resolution of these images is such that the zoom function on the site – as well as the PDF version – serves to make them all the more impossible to read.^[2]

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The linked-citation function, despite some occasional dead links, is employed quite early and often in this collection.

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Were a beginner to pick up this text with next-to-no knowledge about the digital humanities, she need only go as far as the “Notes on Contributors” section to gain a firm grip on the community. The CVs of the authors in this collection are long and diverse enough to capture a large percentage of the current big players in DH, with their other articles filling in the many remaining gaps. Lisa Spiro’s bibliography alone is enough to keep the novice researcher busy comprehending wider digital humanities developments. Hirsch’s readers would be well-served spending as much time with this section as with any of the other three if only to observe a telling snapshot of the state of DH in its current incarnation.

As the reader dives into the essays themselves, she will find a multiplicity of case studies from many different countries, institutions, and classrooms working toward very different goals. The scope and summary of these essays are well-covered in Hirsch’s introduction, but I think it quite relevant to note here the range of topics covered as well as the missing subjects. Included are digital humanities doctoral programs, digital archives, digital historiography, textual analysis and editing, mapping, and discussion about the digital humanities community in general. What is missing, as the author himself notes [Hirsch 2012, 39], is a discussion of self-directed learning and copyright issues. While Hirsch saw a reason to single out these omissions specifically, I do not see them as detrimental to this collection. From the standpoint of self-directed learning, the overwhelming majority of students in each case study discussed did seem to have a basic level of technological proficiency. And, even if the technical knowhow of the student body was already high, many authors mentioned the importance of constant peer-to-peer and peer-to-mentor communication and consultation. No author in the collection advocated sending students off to an island to put together a digital text on their own, and so self-directed learning – while possible to a degree – can rightly be omitted here. As for copyright issues, they become, as necessitated by the novice level of the student body, the responsibility of the mentor or professor – making copyright education part of the *process* rather than a specific pedagogical topic needing to be addressed.

Also not included are some more controversial aspects of the digital humanities corpus, such as the viability of some DH practices as research tools. For example, the Sinclair and Rockwell essay “Teaching Computer-Assisted Text Analysis: Approaches to Learning New Methodologies” shows little faith in students’ ability to learn basic programming. Most of the other essayists, however, noted satisfaction in their students’ ability to grasp programming as part of the curriculum. Sinclair and Rockwell also praise the “word cloud” tool for use in philological research, a technique that has been, at the professional level, bypassed for much more comprehensive textual analysis software. While the essay contains a fair number of pedagogical techniques such as project learning, it presents no case studies as evidence, an oddity for this particular collection. Thus the essay and its suggested methods go untested, making it somewhat out of the norm in the text as a whole. Word clouds are sometimes a student’s first interaction with the digital humanities, but an argument for their place in research and the classroom through case-study or some other means is needed as proper evidence in order to make their case.

While articles containing more theory than evidence drawn from case studies are rare in this collection, there are other notable exceptions to this rule that deserve mention. A subject recurring in several articles is the perceived fluency of the digital generation, or those who grew up around computers. The assumption would be that, having grown up in the emergence of the digital age, these students should be more adept at basic computer technology such as light programming. But, as Don Tapscott has shown, the broader educational system’s adaptation to the technology known to the “net generation” (those born between 1977 and 1997) has lagged too far behind, not allowing for the kind of basic computer knowledge we might expect to prosper [Tapscott 2008]. Tapscott’s observation is cited at least twice, but for conflicting reasons in various essays within this collection. Some cite it as a reason to start at the beginning when teaching students in the digital humanities. Others use just the first half of Tapscott’s conclusion – that net-gens are fluent in computer media – to reason that there should be an understood baseline that all students should inherently know, even if socioeconomic backgrounds may not have exposed them to the same technology. An example of using Tapscott in this way, the Saklofske, Clements, and Cunningham essay “They Have Come, Why Won’t We Build It? On the Digital Future of the Humanities,” is a non-case study-focused essay that, while it makes a valid point about the slow rate at which academia has adapted to the net generation, gives untested pedagogical suggestions and even some that are proven ineffective or even false elsewhere in this same collection, such as Facebook’s utility as a teaching tool. The overall conversation on the supposed knowledge of the net generation is weakened by untested theory in a text mainly consisting of case study material, and Hirsch might have noted this discrepancy.

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This is not to say that the balance of *Digital Humanities Pedagogy* tilts away from sound and well-presented papers. Willard McCarty's extensive description of the implementation and evolution of the digital humanities PhD program at King's College is a thorough treatment of the complexities and issues surrounding this doctorate. Particularly helpful is the list given of all current projects undertaken by the doctoral students. Many authors in this text provide invaluable supporting resources, such as their course syllabi, project goals, and screen shots of each step of their various projects. In terms of theory, Lisa Spiro's call for a universalized DH program and her justifications for it open a welcome and much-needed discussion for the community and present big questions that DH must wrestle with eventually.

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The main strength of this text lies in the unmentioned, overarching conclusions that bind virtually all essays together. While the authors differ in their topics and in the implementation of their programs, they all could be said to arrive at the same three conclusions as to what works in the classroom. First, the goal should be project-oriented. It is not enough, many have found, to simply "learn" digital humanities. The class must put a text online, analyze a handful of documents, or map a single aspect of a culture; in short, there must be a tangible end goal. Second, the project must be done in a group as opposed to each individual completing a big project alone. Third, work in the digital humanities should be as interdisciplinary as possible. While some found trouble when mixing undergraduate and graduate students on a project, none mentioned issues in putting an art historian, a classicist, and a computer programmer all in one group. These three points are not mentioned directly by Hirsch as prerequisites for any digital humanities program; they are simply patterns evidenced by each case study of what, out of everything else, seems to work best.

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In conclusion, permit this reviewer to reflect upon another gap in this collection which is also, not coincidentally, a gap in the field of digital humanities. The third and final section of this text, "Politics," is rife with heated discussions about the problems and future hurdles that present themselves in digital humanities today. Lisa Spiro, Tanya Clement, and Melanie Kill interrogate large topics such as, among others: the necessity for universal digital humanities programming, the false notion that the Internet makes us stupider, and the dissolution of prejudices around resources such as Wikipedia. What is generally avoided, or otherwise skirted, is the all-elusive definition of the digital humanities. While most case studies mention bringing this question into the classroom for the first week, it quickly dissolves into the "we can't define it" discussion familiar in most classrooms. It is necessary, however, to wrestle with this idea even more than has already been done, especially when the classroom and pedagogy, the touchstones of a professor's performance, is in question. While no direct answer is raised by any one author, the collection as a whole hints at the beginning of such a conversation. The theme of interdisciplinary work, trumpeted by almost all the essays, makes marking the digital humanities as its own exclusive field a tired and trite gesture. This is especially true when the act of making it a unique discipline might, as has happened with other academic disciplines, further alienate the digital humanities from those who might benefit from its work.^[3]

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In contrast, the essay by Olin Bjork, "Digital Humanities and the First-Year Writing Course," frees and widens the digital humanities from a field to a method-set. Like the works in this collection, the digital humanities consists of many methods (GIS, text analysis, etc.) that can be added or subtracted from a research project as need dictates. Digital humanities, then, becomes co-synchronous with any field that requires it, and avoids the limiting box of a "discipline" that other useful methods might be placed in. While no one should expect a definition of the digital humanities to come out of one book – a point that Hirsch is right to avoid – this collection nonetheless lends its own voice to that ever-changing discussion.

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Overall, this collection is a much-needed resource for the digital humanities community. Not only does it introduce the field to many professors and students who might not know the digital humanities at all, but it also provides real-world, step-by-step accounts of how programs using the digital humanities have been put in place and implemented across various institutions. Like the study of history, this text can exist for others to see past mistakes and not be forced to start from square one in the classroom. Finally, this collection brings to light the massive gap in existing pedagogical study; the radical but essential calls-to-action by all authors, Hirsch included, should spur on other academics to publish their classroom experiences, theories, and failures in order to bring digital humanities further into the digitally-lagging academic system.

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Notes

[1] Further substantiating evidence here would be most welcome, but this reviewer was not able to source this claim through other literature – which perhaps drives Hirsh's point forward that pedagogical publications in the digital humanities are severely lacking. For example, a quick search of “digital humanities pedagogy” in Maryland's library search engine produced one additional text besides Hirsh's: Matthew K. Gold's edited collection, *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2012), which features one relevant essay, called “Where's the Pedagogy.”

[2] One recent development for this problem is the WebCite system: <http://www.webcitation.org>. These particular eccentricities of the publication medium dilute a fair amount of the text's content, and make for an occasionally frustrating reading experience.

[3] Two notable examples, from this reviewer's own discipline, are a Classics philologist examining intertextuality without intertextual tools like Tesseract [University of Buffalo] or an economy-focused ancient historian who is unaware of the ORBIS network project [Stanford].

Works Cited

Hirsch 2012 Hirsch, Brett D., ed. *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles, and Politics*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012. <http://www.openbookpublishers.com/reader/161>.

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