



Digital Humanities

What is it and why care?

The following excerpts are from a discussion in our Digital Humanities seminar involving Dr. Lisa Heaton and graduate students Stacy Scudder and Chuck Ocheltree. It was recorded on December 7, 2016, in room GC136, Marshall University South Charleston campus.

Prelude: *Is it Digital Humanities or just the Humanities?* This has not been an easy question for academics to answer. The University of Alberta in Alberta, Canada, sponsored a yearly “Day of DH” during which it invited digital humanists worldwide to keep a journal of all they do for one day (March 18) to help answer the question, “Just what do computing humanists really do?” In preparation for the Day of DH, participants were asked, “How do you define computing / digital humanities?” See <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/40> for the last published definitions (2011). This end-of-semester question that Dr. Heaton asks Stacy and Chuck probes the intersection of computer technology and the humanities.

Dr. Lisa Heaton (LH): Why should we drop the “digital” from digital humanities?

Stacy Scudder (SS): Because it's such a shenanigan. It's all still *just* humanities. You're doing the same thing. It serves the same purpose. It's just a different media.

LH: Why do so many people disagree with this? Because we've read a lot of literature stating otherwise...

SS: Because people like to get their narrow little fields and it's ruining academia as we see it. This is kinda my pet peeve.

LH: It's also the way we focus so much on specialties that are so finite in different fields without even looking at what other people are doing. I've learned a lot this semester working with humanities students and humanities literature and getting out of my technology-teacher ed box.

Chuck Ocheltree (CO): I come at it from the other side. I realize that I live in a world of humanities and that's not going to change. That's just the way it is. Everybody has their own niche and that's where they want to stay. That's where they are... I'm not saying necessarily that it should or shouldn't...But I think...No, I'll say it...I think we should have the humanities *and* digital humanities because that way we have people who could specialize in his or her own little field, whatever it may be. That way they are more comfortable and more productive.

SS: See, I disagree with “more productive.” There are so many things that dovetail between the subjects. They could build so much faster on the things they're doing if they just worked together rather than separately.

CO: I think you can still work together and still be “digital humanities.”

SS: We could, but do we?

CO: Well, where I live, yeah. We do. We still butt heads quite a bit but that's going to happen regardless, we're all humans.

Interlude: *Analog or Digital?* Chuck offered this brief explanation for what the terms analog and digital mean in the context of his work as a historian and photo archivist. Analog refers to material that can be read without an electronic device. Digital refers to material that requires the use of an electronic device to view it and create it, e.g. computer, e-books, websites, blogs, crowdsourcing, text messages, tweets...

LH: Chuck, you mentioned digital versus analog but is it really possible in today's world for people to just be analog and never tap into the digital?

CO: Both worlds are going to live on the fringes of each other. Your analog people are still going to have access to databases and vice versa. I know people that use their computers at work to send emails and tap into databases and that's it. And then other people spend 8 hours a day in front of their computer. For example, someone has to build our

databases, so data entry comes to mind. Scanning of documents for web use or preservation, which means that they are converting analog into digital. A few use their computer for research.

Interlude: User and/or Creator – An app named Clio *Clio, a program developed here at Marshall University by history associate professor Dr. David Trowbridge, is a website and a mobile application. You can use it to guide you to historical places from your present location and see images, videos, and hear and read about the object of your interest. Anyone who taps into Clio to explore history is a User. Entries are created by museum professionals, local historians, and educators and their students. For them, Clio is a venue for collaborative research, interpretation, and map-building. (www.theclio.com/web/about. Accessed 7 February, 2017) Anyone who contributes to Clio is a Creator. Therefore, you can be a user and a creator.*

LH: In the very first class, we talked a little bit about the difference between the concept of producing—using digital tools and being the database creator—versus just tapping into those tools as an end user.

CO: Right.

LH: And maybe that's part of the difference. A person going for a digital humanities *degree* you would want to definitely come out knowing how to be a creator, not just a user.

CO: Right. And I've worked with people that it's probably best that they are not creators. They're not comfortable doing what they're doing and the end result is just more work for the people that live the digital.

Interlude: Defining Digital Humanities in 30 Seconds *In Melissa Terras' article, "Present, Not Voting: Digital Humanities in the Panopticon," she writes of the symbiotic nature of primary sources and technology and issues of visibility and sustainability. She quotes a colleague who has been involved in a transcribing project for over 25 years: "I'd be lost without access to historical knowledge and source material, but I'd be lost without access to new, online cutting-edge technologies." Near the end of her article, Terras says that "we should be able to articulate the transferable skill set that comes with Digital Humanities research that can educate and influence a wide range of culture, heritage, creative, and even business processes...." (pp. 177 & 183).*

LH: Remember how in the "Present, Not Voting" article Terras challenges us to have "at the tip of our tongue what we do and why we matter and why we should be supported and why DH makes sense." In essence, an elevator speech?

Now you, Stacy, would want to argue that we shouldn't have to explain that because it's all just humanities, but...if you had to explain now, today, what digital humanities are...Because the day we read the Terras article early in the semester, you were like, "Um, I don't know..." all over the place...what would you say now?

Pause.

CO: It's used for a number of different things. To tell stories, to verify authorship of text analysis, text mining for the same purpose....it's a tool...that's the way I see it..."

SS: Ding. [Stacy roll-plays riding an elevator.] Elevator door opens. Third floor...I just ride the elevator all day, ask anybody, telling people what digital humanities is...(Laughter) I do! I do! So, it's a tool, that's it! The digital part is another tool *for* the Humanities.

So, yeah, I guess you could look at it as a separate sort of thing, kind of like masonry is not exactly construction, but it is. It's just all humanities. OK, take my math background. It's telling students a different way to work a problem. You don't need all the extra descriptors.

LH: But if you're going to name a class, building on that line of thinking, and you just have a class, what's it going to be all about?

SS: Well, it depends. If you're going to have a class on literature, you could do critical theory and expository writing...so yeah, you would call a class "digital" humanities, but it's still just a part of the humanities all the same.

LH: What you just said about integrating other strategies is actually a good concept to think about. For example, if it's a writing course focused in the humanities, then you could explore digital tools that are appropriate for facilitating writing, analyzing writing, doing text analysis.

And a literature course could have similar types of tools. So you could easily do all of that integration you're talking about

and not call any of the courses "digital" humanities. You explore the digital tools that are available based on what that course is about.

SS: You could teach textual analysis, you could teach them how to scan pictures to put together in a historical website...

LH: So if you're in a history class you're going to look at a lot of digital history projects, web sites, and digital storytelling to capture histories of events and so forth. You could explore the History Pin website where they have hosted projects and they also provide the potential of building your own project. Or use the Timeline website for keeping track of the events in sequence like Chuck's project on the Kanawha County Book Crisis.

The Timeline website also might be something students could use for projects in a literature class if they are exploring the author and the works that they made and in what order the works were created.

Some tools would cut across [the curriculum], but the class wouldn't necessarily be about *teaching* the tool, it's about teaching the history or the writing or the literature and the tool just happens to be a means for students to represent what they know and are able to do with that content.

To *digitize* a class would mean that the student would [also] learn about the tools. Hopefully people would already know word processing but there are elements in word processing that help you analyze the readability of your text.

You all learned about different website projects and media so not only did you learn about tools, but you used them to create your own projects. You can include these in a portfolio. All of this will be beneficial after graduation.

There are also so many ways that we can share and create these days so it's not just about word processing, it's also about blogging, tweeting, crowdsourcing, and other ways that we can produce and share our work...there are so many different mediums available to create, publish, and present and share our stuff with the world, for better or worse.

Stacy Scudder is finishing her MA in humanities this semester. At Marshall University on the Huntington campus, she teaches mathematics and first year seminar, both of which terrify her students—the former because of the subject and the latter because she uses literary monsters to teach about prejudices. She was born in Pikeville, Kentucky, and after moving around quite a bit, came back to her hometown. She has three daughters and three grandchildren who keep her on her toes.

Chuck Ocheltree is in his second semester in the MA Humanities program. He is the Photo Archivist for the West Virginia State Archives and History, located in the Culture Center on the State Capitol grounds. He returned to college after having spent almost twenty years doing backbreaking manual labor in warehouses. Chuck has lived his entire life in the Kanawha Valley, and focuses his graduate humanities studies on the history and culture of Appalachia. He is looking forward to expanding his knowledge of the great state and region he calls home.

Dr. Lisa A. Heaton has degrees in Instructional Technology (Ph.D.), Social Foundations of Education (M.Ed.), and Secondary Education with emphases in English and Mathematics (B.S.). She worked as a middle school math and language arts teacher before coming to Marshall University, where she has taught for more than 15 years. She currently serves as Professor and Program Director of Elementary and Secondary Education in the College of Education and Professional Development. She occasionally teaches courses for the Graduate Humanities Program, including "Shakespeare: Time, Place, and Space" and "Digital Humanities." Dr. Heaton is a fan of science fiction, with anything Star Trek topping her list because of its embedded humanist themes and interesting technological gadgetry. Atop her office bookshelf, Star Trek: The Original Series action figures stand by.

The font used for the title of this article is "OCR A." OCR stands for Optical Character Recognition or Optical Character Reader. It was developed in 1966 to convert (digitalize) typed, handwritten, or printed texts so they could be read by computers. www.linotype.com/1283/ocr-b-family.html

"OCR is a field of pattern recognition, artificial intelligence and computer vision." en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optical_character_recognition

Reprinted from the Spring 2017 *Graduate Humanities*, a newsletter published twice a year by the Marshall University Graduate Humanities Program, South Charleston Campus. For more information, see <http://www.marshall.edu/graduatehumanities/newsletter/>.