

ADDRESSED TO: The Directorial Board (Ray Siemens, Constance Crompton, Daniel Powell, James O’Sullivan, Laura Estill, Diane Jakacki, Jason Boyd) of the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI)

PROPOSAL

Help expand DHSI’s scope and improve efforts to counter existing white, male, straight, cis, and/or able-bodied privileges and biases in the digital humanities with a two-pronged approach: **representation** (efforts to include and re-center people who may feel boxed out of the field in some way) and **project-building** (efforts to support digital humanities projects that preserve and build upon the knowledges that marginalized and oppressed peoples offer).

INTRODUCTION

Practitioners in the digital humanities, with the combination of technological innovation and critical thought, have the momentum in their hands to help foster radically different, diverse learning spaces for students and scholars alike. Digital humanists are enthusiastic about concepts of openness and inclusivity, making potential for intersectional practice high. Yet three persisting problems plague DH’s efforts:

1. **The field is relatively homogeneous in makeup – still quite white, male, straight, cis, and/or able-bodied;**
2. **Digital humanists are encouraged to make names for themselves in the field by using specialized technologies less accessible to those scholars or students in the humanities without the time, money, or prior experience to immerse themselves within them;**
3. **Scholars tend to study either what interests them or reflects their own experience, so a sense of “sameness” also creeps into the spread of DH projects.**

As the field begins to enter the mainstream, **“we risk adding the digital humanities to our proliferating disciplinary menus without any meaningful and substantial engagement with fields such as gender studies or critical race theory”** [emphasis mine] (McPherson 2012). If we do not seriously consider how the field can better represent different modes of thought, the digital humanities become just another buzzword.

Some of these improvements we can make are relatively straightforward. Others, in Miriam Posner’s words, **“require dismantling and rebuilding much of the organizing logic that underlies our work”** (2016).

REPRESENTATION

Women in DH

According to Eichmann, Jorgensen, and Weingart, **“women comprise 36.1% of the 3,239 authors to DH conference presentations”** from 2000-2015, if we count every individuated author only once (2016). If we count an author once *for each time they appear in a paper byline*, the percentage of women represented drops even more, to 32.7% (Eichmann, Jorgensen, and Weingart, 2016).

Eichmann, Jorgensen, and Weingart also show DH papers dealing with **“topics that are heavily gendered towards women”** (e.g. gender studies,

DH paper topics	% passed, 2000-2015
Textual analysis	83%
Programming	80%
Gender studies	60%
Cultural studies	57%
Pedagogy	51%

cultural studies, and pedagogy) pass peer review less often than papers that deal with topics commonly gendered towards men (e.g. text analysis and programming) (2016).

In Digital Humanities Summer Institute course listings for the upcoming 2018 session, the ratio of women instructors to men is remarkably balanced overall.

However, the “women-gendered” topics mentioned above are fixtures in the titles of **ten of 72** total courses and workshops to be offered at DHSI’s 2018 sessions. The *two* topics traditionally gendered toward men, meanwhile, feature prominently in **at least 18** course and workshop titles.

Additionally, **few DHSI course titles make a point of blending the two sets of gendered topics together.**

People of Color in DH

Eichmann, Jorgensen, and Weingart had no data to track representations of race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ status in DH conferences. This is understandable. Gathering data that illustrates differences within the gender binary, for all its faults, is generally less invasive than trying to ask people point blank what their “ethnic makeup” is, or whether they are LGBTQ+.

Where no hard data exists, we must be constantly self-aware, taking critical looks at our surroundings and asking ourselves if we are doing enough to help diversify our perspectives.

With this in mind, **I have noticed no people of color currently sit on the DHSI’s directorial board.** The institute would immediately benefit from bringing decision-makers to the table who can personally relate to the challenges and needs of people of color in the digital humanities.

At the same time, Moya Bailey points out that we must also **“challenge the ‘add and stir’ model of diversity, a practice of sprinkling in more women, people of color, and disabled folks and assuming that is enough to change current paradigms”** (2011). We must make sure we do not simply tokenize scholars of color, but actively collaborate with them and take their ideas seriously, even if those ideas rattle the cages of “conventional wisdom.”

Finally, the digital humanities are, and should continue to be, a globally-focused field. People who would be classified as part of “minority populations” in Europe or North America may not be classified as such elsewhere. A big part of including people of color means **centering non-Western digital humanists just as effectively as we do Western ones.** By continuing to invite scholars from around the world to speak and providing incentives for interested international students and scholars to make the (rather expensive) trip to Victoria, DHSI has already made some good strides in this realm.

LGBTQ+ in DH

Over the past 40 years or so, queer theorists have been very effective at reimagining the way we think about history, literature, and the social sciences. **Our LGBTQ+ humanists** not only supply us with specific, alternative approaches to gender and sexuality – they can also **offer ways to reorient how we might think and feel about the creation and curation of our digital environments.**

“We need to be literate in emerging scientific and technological methodologies but also in theories of race, globalization, and gender. We’ll gain that literacy at least partially through an intellectual generosity or curiosity toward colleagues whose practices are not our own.” – Tara McPherson (2012)

For example, Kara Keeling’s sketch of a hypothetical Queer OS “**insists upon forging and facilitating uncommon, irrational, imaginative, and/or unpredictable relationships between and among what currently are perceptible as living beings and the environment in the interest of creating value(s) that facilitate just relations**” (2014). In other words, an operating system that resists the heteronormative logic of typical operating system design, where creative control has fallen largely to a cadre of straight white men.

With the increased participation of LGBTQ+ digital humanists, and what Tara McPherson calls “**new hybrid practitioners: artist-theorists, programming humanists, activist-scholars; theoretical archivists, critical race coders**” (2012), we can harness the brainpower and skillsets to help make hypothetical projects like these into realities. Ms. Crompton is a particularly good vector for this directorial direction, but I think it would be helpful to add another voice to the mix.

People with Disabilities in DH

The digital humanities can open doors for people with disabilities. Technological advancements afford greater potential for humanities projects to deliver information and develop even better technology that caters to various disabilities.

However, it is hard to anticipate (and therefore solve) the problems that people with disabilities face in DH if an outsize number of people working on these problems are able-bodied.

Some digital humanists prioritize “making” – coding, constructing digital instruments and databases, using those instruments and databases to transform a text, and so on – as a main priority, and sometimes even a prerequisite, to be a digital humanist. **But what if the instruments we use make it impossible for people with disabilities to contribute?** Do we simply throw our hands up and say it can’t be helped? Or do we work *with* people with disabilities to fill the gaps in our own tools we have not yet thought about?

The answer seems obvious to me. The field, and DHSI by extension, should resist the Silicon Valley-ish impulse to pass endless reinventions of the wheel as “innovation.” The most impactful way to do this is a commitment to creating learning environments that pay more than lip service to people on the margins of the discipline.

PROJECT-BUILDING

Next year, DHSI will host a **handful of noteworthy courses that engage pointedly with questions of intersectional practice.** *Indigitization*, the “symposium on Indigenous new media,” is a particularly good example; it’s locally relevant and it identifies a practicable approach to rendering Indigenous modes of thought in digital settings.

“Intersectional digital humanities asks us to begin with the specificities of a data set, identify the layers of difference that intersect with it, and use that knowledge as a basis for project design. The fluidity of intersectionality is a natural fit for the flexibility that digital humanities connotes.” – Roopika Risam (2015)

To take this idea a step further, **I suggest that DHSI tries to broaden its horizons over time – using its robust network of scholars to continue building and promoting these intersectional digital humanities projects outside the bounds of a once-per-year conference.**

I realize this shift cannot happen overnight; the directorial board has career obligations beyond DHSI. But I suspect the scholars that already teach courses at the conference will jump at the chance to do career-advancing work with the backing of an emergent digital humanities organization.

A project like Amy Earhart and Toniesha Taylor's *White Violence, Black Resistance* (2016) is an excellent example of something DHSI could support. *White Violence, Black Resistance* is an initiative (a collaboration between Texas A&M and Prairie View A&M) that encouraged undergraduate students to unearth and digitize historical sources depicting contentious race relations in mid-nineteenth century East Texas.

This project is an exponent of a wider category that Earhart and Taylor calls “grassroots recovery,” which “emphasize[s] the use of entry-level technology and broad partnerships, with particular attention to community and student participation” (2016). It's a straightforward way to demonstrate the value of DH to students who may not have otherwise encountered it.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's IRIS Center has developed a similar summer project with even younger students: middle-schoolers from majority-black East St. Louis, who use entry-level technology under a DH specialist's supervision to help preserve their town's history. **This type of early introduction to the digital humanities may be a hook for future generations of scholars, especially for underprivileged students who may simply need an engaging, collaborative outlet for their curiosity.**

The Humanities and Critical Code Studies Lab is a more “high-level” initiative – as it requires a baseline understanding of code in order to explore “the rhetoric, material history, style, and culture of code — aspects that have previously been only marginally discussed in computer science courses and scholarship” (“About”). It also aims to extend “the pursuit of code analysis beyond what the code does to ask what the particular configuration of signs means for the culture at large” (“About”). **The Code Studies lab treats code as a subject to be analyzed in itself, and works in tandem with computer scientists to help construct (and deconstruct) meaning from code through different interpretive lenses.**

These are only a few examples. Roopika Risam stresses the need to find “critical approaches that transcend the false binaries between ‘hack’ and ‘yack’” (2015), or the perceived rift between the makers and critical theorists in the digital humanities. **DHSI would do well to support initiatives that reconcile these two approaches, so that practitioners are better equipped to engage with both come conference week.**

NEXT STEPS FOR DHSI

- Build upon existing offerings in areas like gender studies, cultural studies, and pedagogy
- Find engaging ways to bridge traditionally “masculine” digital humanities subfields to “feminine” subfields, and vice versa
- Continue to give platforms to DH practitioners, Western and non-Western, who work to identify and define cultural faultlines within the field
- Bring at least two non-white professionals, and at least one more LGBTQ-identified person, into the directorial group so that valuable perspectives are never far from the administrative process
- Slowly expand the parameters of DHSI to a “working group” that exists well beyond the scope of a once-per-year conference
- Make efforts to bring more diverse humanities practitioners in the academy – who may not be digital humanists – into the fold with more user-friendly introductions and substantive applications to their areas of interest
- Step out of the academy, too – advocate for programs that offer early DH engagements and applications, especially in less privileged secondary schools
- Reach out to critical digital humanities organizations, like Digital Native American and Indigenous Studies (dNAIS), to pool resources and help facilitate projects

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