Being Human in Digital Humanities Project Management  
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Review category: This session is on a comparative or general topic that would be of interest to scholars from across languages and fields or is on a topic not tied to a particular nationality, language, or cultural tradition.  
Subject: Genre, Theory, Method: Electronic Technology (Teaching, Research, and Theory)  
Authors: Laura Braunstein, Jacob Heil, Carrie Johnston, Rennie Mapp, Paige Morgan, Sylvia Fernández Quintanilla

Session description

This panel will consider the changing landscape of research support for digitally-inflected scholarship in higher education through the lens of digital humanities project management. Digital humanists acting as project managers must continually adapt their practices in response to shifting institutional priorities and concomitant changes in the research ecosystems and technological infrastructures that sustain digital humanities (DH) projects, programs, and funding. As a result, DH project management is not so much a fixed set of best practices as it is a flexible and engaged mode of inquiry itself that must function within sometimes rigid, modular environments: digital, virtual, and institutional. The convention theme, Being Human, provides a useful template for assessing and refining the ways that we document, manage, and promote DH projects to ensure that humanistic inquiry remains at the center of digital work in the face of institutional and technological barriers.

This conversation is particularly timely in the context of the maturation of digital humanities as a method and its emergence as a prominent field over the past two decades. The publication of the MLA Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media in 2000 (updated in 2012), the establishment of the NEH Office of Digital Humanities in 2008, and the steady growth of digital humanities units in academic libraries all point to growing support for and recognition of digital humanities research and scholarly output. We are arguably entering an era in which digital humanities is both widely accepted and expected in higher education. Take, for instance, the 2015 NEH Summer Institute for Advanced Topics in the Humanities for community college digital humanists (led by Anne B. McGrail), and Matthew K. Gold’s 2017 remarks in Insider Higher Ed that DH work “increasingly extends across institutional types and institutional spaces.” In this context, this panel seeks to reframe digital humanities project management by increasing focus on the human collaborators and on the humanity of those communities represented on the screen or in the database.

Panelists will address the range of labor issues and institutional networks that DH project managers navigate, as well as the intellectual work required of project management. The panel will open with two presentations that consider histories of DH project management in higher education to provoke discussion about the increasingly important role of project managers in orchestrating flexible projects that can
withstand changes in institutional research environments. The latter half of the panel will focus on project management practices that generate, as Theresa Burress and Chelcie Juliet Rowell recommend in “Project Management for Digital Projects with Collaborators Beyond the Library” (2017), “an understanding of collaboration as engagement, rather than collaboration as service provision.”

Paige Morgan will open the discussion by addressing the tension in DH work between the need to follow documented, organized procedures and the strong conviction that adherence to such organization is antithetical to the spirit of humanistic inquiry in “Reconsidering Skunkworks; or, What Might a Politics of Work Look Like in a Digital Humanities Project Management Context?” Revisiting Bethany Nowviskie’s influential 2011 talk, “Skunks in the Library,” Morgan will consider administrators’ underestimation of the additional labor needed to implement the products of skunkworks—innovative, experimental lab spaces—into larger organizational systems. The result is poor work conditions and projects with a high risk of unsustainability. Morgan’s talk will revisit the idea of skunkworks and innovation spaces nine years later: do we still need them and are they still feasible? How might we resituate them, or critically rethink how humanities practitioners’ pursuit of free-ranging inquiry and experimentation shapes labor conditions?

Jacob Heil will take up the conversation about DH project management in its institutional landscapes in “Centering Humanness in Digital Initiatives” by pushing against the instrumentalization of human labor that is evident in terms such as “human infrastructure.” Noting the shift on emphasis from “product” to “process” in DH project evaluation, Heil will discuss what we have gained by positing learning and experience as metrics for DH work. Building on an ethics of care and generous thinking, as put forward by thought leaders such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Bethany Novwiskie, he will explore the possibility of interrogating process-oriented language and evaluation to recenter the importance of human relationships in DH research. This presentation will ask: Is it possible to foster a bleeding-heart project management style while working at the bleeding edge of technological development?

Laura Braunstein will consider the emotional toll required to implement such human-centric DH labor practices in “Managing Projects, Managing Emotions: Project Management as Emotional Labor.” Drawing on recent scholarship by Paige Morgan, Braunstein will argue that an absence of emotional labor to mitigate the anxiety in DH projects that may arise when learning new technologies and rethinking longstanding practices can result in missed opportunities to expand disciplinary boundaries or develop collaborative partnerships. The presentation will demonstrate that project managers’ emotional labor, while often overlooked or disavowed, constitutes skilled labor and is crucial to the success of DH projects. Braunstein will recommend practices that value and recognize the emotional labor necessary to conduct collaborative digital work.

Concluding the discussion, Sylvia Fernández Quintanilla will present “An Act of Border Humanization through Digital Humanities,” in which she will identify emerging research practices of borderlands digital humanities that can help us move beyond a “basic engagement” model that still risks dehumanization, stereotypes, and homogenization through reinforcement of images of marginalization and oppression in borderlands. Drawing on her experience collaborating on the DH projects Borderlands Archives Cartography, Torn Apart / Separados, and United Fronteras, Quintanilla will propose DH project
management as a form of humanistic intervention through the ways it directs the creation of data and facilitates the integration of transnational archival material and public data with mapping and visualization tools.

To promote discussion, respondent Rennie Mapp will highlight unifying themes among the panelists’ 10-12 minute presentations and pose questions to engage the audience in a 20-minute Q&A that considers the importance of DH project management in negotiating the changing landscape of institutional support for digital humanities scholarship.

Participant bios

Presider:

Carrie Johnston is the Digital Humanities Research Designer in the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University. In this role, she is the project manager of all digitally-inflected humanities research supported by the library. In 2015-2016, she held the position of Council on Libraries and Information Resources Postdoctoral Fellow in Digital Scholarship at Bucknell University. Her research considers the ways that technology has historically informed women’s literary labor, and this work has appeared in *Studies in the Novel* and is forthcoming in *College Literature*. In 2014, she earned her Ph.D. in English from Southern Methodist University, where she became interested in digital humanities through a partnership with the university libraries to create a digital collection of rare Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad advertisements and ephemera.

Panelists:

Paige Morgan is the Digital Publishing and Copyright Librarian at the University of Delaware Library, Museums & Press, and head of the new University of Delaware’s Digital Scholarship unit. Previously, she has worked to develop activities and support for Digital Humanities at the University of Miami, McMaster University, and the University of Washington. In the past ten years, Morgan has worked within the field of digital humanities in several capacities: as a researcher, instructor, data wrangler, and community/curriculum builder. She specializes in contexts where digital scholarship is a new endeavor for an institution, and there are few formal courses, training programs, or local experts available.

Jacob Heil is the College of Wooster’s Digital Scholarship Librarian, where he partners with library colleagues, faculty, and students to explore digital technologies for teaching and research. He also serves as the Director of the Collaborative Research Environment (CoRE) at Wooster to encourage students’ process-based projects through the development of a flexible research infrastructure. Previously, he was a Mellon Digital Scholar for the Five Colleges of Ohio, a role that facilitated interdepartmental teams to imagine, plan, and develop digital pedagogy. As a graduate student, he worked as the project manager for the Mellon-funded initiative, the Early Modern OCR Project. He holds a PhD from Texas A&M University.
Laura Braunstein is the Digital Humanities Librarian at Dartmouth College. She has a PhD in English from Northwestern University. She is the co-editor of Digital Humanities in the Library: Challenges and Opportunities for Subject Specialists (ACRL, 2015), and has published and presented widely on digital library labor and infrastructure.

Sylvia Fernández Quintanilla is a border native from El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston. Her research is on US Latino/a Literature with a focus on US-Mexico Border, Transnational and Intersectional Feminism, Hispanic Archives, Digital Humanities and Decolonial and Postcolonial Theory. Among her digital humanities collaborations, she cofounded Borderlands Archives Cartography (BAC), is part of the core team of Torn Apart / Separados, and currently she is a member and the coordinator of a forthcoming team-based initiative titled, United Fronteras. Other projects she participated with Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Program and their US Latina/o Digital Humanities.

Respondent:

Rennie Mapp is Project Manager for Strategic Digital Humanities Initiatives at the University of Virginia, Administrative Director of UVA’s new graduate Digital Humanities Certificate program, directs the DH@UVA website, and co-leads the Network/Corpus working group of the Humanities Informatics Lab hosted by the Institute of Humanities and Global Cultures. She holds a PhD in English literature from UVA (2009) and an MS in IT Management from the McIntire School of Commerce at UVA (2016). Formerly the project manager for Alison Booth’s Collective Biographies of Women project (hosted at the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities), her current research project traces connections between travel souvenirs and aesthetic norms, focusing especially on representations of women who exercise and/or embody “good taste” or “vulgarity” in English and anglophone texts from the long nineteenth century.