

Digital Literary Studies in the High School Environment
Eric Rettberg, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy
Digital Humanities 2018, Mexico City, Mexico, June 28, 2018

In my time today, I'll discuss some of the challenges and opportunities of adapting a college-level digital-centric course for the high-school classroom. The two courses in question are a class called Literature in the Digital Era, which I taught as a postdoc at the University of Virginia in 2014, and a class called Digital Literary Studies, which I'll teach at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, a state-run boarding school for high schoolers talented in math and science, in Spring 2019. While there's been a lot of continuity in the design of the two classes, teaching high school does present new challenges for digital work, and at the end of the paper I'll offer up some problems for us to consider in the Q and A. As a way of thinking about a couple larger questions, though, I'll start by addressing two potential problems that don't much worry me—that is, “will my students be able to do interesting digital work,” and “will it be good for their humanities educations?” My answer to both is already a confident yes. The reasons why get to the larger questions in the conversation of this panel—why is it desirable to teach classes with a heavy digital humanities component to high school students, and more broadly, what should a high school English curriculum look like in the first place?

This question has been heavily on my mind in the two years I've been a high school teacher, in part because it's made me think about how little I'd thought about it as a college instructor. Insofar as high school came up in my college-level composition and literature classes, it was as a faulty status quo I was asking my students to abandon and move beyond. In the rhetoric of many college classrooms, high school becomes a hapless past—a space of rules and discipline, of Scantron bubbles and five-paragraph essay responses, of state standards and AP

tests, of “failing schools” narratives, of outdated ideas to which university-level free-thinking offers a much-needed corrective.

Some of this sense of what goes on high school, I think, is reflected in the comments of one of the anonymous reviewers for this panel, whose reservations had to do with what students brought to a classroom doing digital work in the humanities on the first day: “I do have some hesitations around the notion of DH as an approach well-suited to those without a firm pre-existing background in H.” The reviewer hoped, moreover, that the panel would be sensitive “to the distinctiveness of the humanities, with all of their mess and complexity.” At some point, the reviewer implies, a humanities background becomes firm enough to qualify students with a digital-humanities learner’s permit. Paradoxically, though, the firm foundation on which those pre-qualified humanists stand is also composed of messiness and complexity. It is in this aspect of the reviewers’ comments, I argue, that we can find a solution to the dilemma of pre-existing knowledge. The firmest, most rule-bound versions of the humanities, after all, are the ones many college teachers associate with that hapless high-school past: think of the student who can define *metaphor*, but can’t seem to say anything interesting about metaphors in a particular work or the student who can produce an argument that would get a passing score on the AP test using formulaic strictures but whose rhetorical inflexibility falls flat in first-year comp.

An embrace of digitally inflected content and methods in high school classrooms offers a clear alternative to this firmly traditional view. A class focused on the digital can offer students a fuller window into the distinctively messy and complex humanities than we might be able to give them otherwise. My claim, then, is that a catholic, playful digital humanities approach in the high-school classroom can be well-suited to helping students build a background in the complex, messy distinctiveness of the humanities.

It is with some embrace of messiness and complexity that I've approached the design of my Digital Literary Studies elective. If it's true, as Ryan Cordell claims, that undergraduate students do not care about digital humanities" *qua* digital humanities, it's likely even truer of my high-school students. But they certainly care about digital changes to culture—especially at a math and science academy, they even care about the digital *qua* the digital. The course, then, treats DH not as an end unto itself but as a subset of a larger question: as it's stated on the syllabus, "How have computers, smartphones, and the internet changed the production and study of literature, and how do they promise to in the future?" Students know they're buying into a new and provisional set of ideas and methods when they sign up for the course, but they also know that they'll be part of something exciting—I've assured students who've asked that they'll have the opportunity to shape a course that will draw IMSA students for years to come.

The class approaches the question along three intertwined areas of focus: representations of digital culture, which we'll explore by reading novels such as Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* and G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*; electronic literature, which we'll explore by reading and producing genres such as hypertext stories, generated poetry, conceptual poetry, and Twitter bots; and digital methods for exploring literature and culture, which they'll explore in a series of labs about visualization tools, ngram searches, digital mapping, timelines, etc. As they use such tools, they'll reflect on their possibilities and limitations—and also on the possibilities and limitations of the ways they've been acculturated to read in other classes. Students in the course will write in more or less traditional ways—they'll do an analysis, for example, of a representation of digital culture. But they'll also pursue more digitally inflected projects, such as working with a partner to create a work of electronic literature. The centerpiece project for the semester asks student groups to select a work in the public domain and to make a

digital resource about it. Afterward, they will break into smaller groups to apply digital methods they've explored earlier in an argument about their historical literary text.

I can't be quite as improvisational with expectations for my students as I was at UVA or Georgia Tech, but I do intend to let students dream up new possibilities for their work even as they go through a series of structured experiences exposing them to new methods and provocations. The course has proven attractive to students at IMSA already: 54 of them preferenced it as their first-choice elective for next spring out of about 400 potential students. The course also has a potential afterlife in the independent research projects students at my school can do—I hope that some juniors who take the course will design more in-depth DH research projects during their senior years.

I'll acknowledge that teaching at my school affords me a fair bit of flexibility and freedom, and that my students now are among the strongest students I've ever taught. While the particularities of my school have helped me design a class like this, I don't think that this class or components of it are possible only at schools like mine—and I think the problems I'm still working through will have even more relevance at many other schools.

So, to conclude, some problems I've been working through:

- Student privacy. This is a concern at the college level too, but even more in high schools, with minors. How do we embrace the values of the Digital Humanities, including producing public-facing work that promises to benefit people beyond our classrooms, even as we protect the privacy of our students?
- Technical infrastructure. My school has comparatively strong IT resources, but they pale in comparison to those of a Georgia Tech or a University of Virginia.

How do we adapt what's possible in our classrooms to environments more constrained in terms of resources and expertise?

- Curricular alignment. Some of my projects will look different from traditional essays, and fairness between classes proves a larger concern in K-12 education than at the college level. How do I make sure my digitally inflected assignments are offering students skills that mesh with what they're working on in other English classes?
- Sustainability beyond a single teacher. My department designs courses with an eye to the future. How do I invest colleagues in these ways of thinking to make the course a lasting and evolving one?
- Making sure the class is a humanities class and not a help desk. This is a persistent challenge in digitally inflected classrooms.

I thank you in advance for helping me think through these problems, I welcome insights about other problems you'd anticipate for the class or ideas you have for it, and I thank you for coming to participate in this discussion.

Works Cited

Anonymous Review of Conference Proposal “Digital Humanities in Middle and High School:

Case Studies and Pedagogical Approaches.” Digital Humanities 2018 Conference, 23

Jan. 2018.

Cordell, Ryan. “How Not to Teach Digital Humanities.” Ryancordell.org, 1 Feb. 2015,

<https://ryancordell.org/teaching/how-not-to-teach-digital-humanities/>. Accessed 27 June

2018.