Valuing Digital Scholarship: Are We There Yet?

Shortly after earning promotion from Associate to Full Professor of English at Southern Polytechnic State University (SPSU), my Department Chair and I agreed that I should shift my career focus toward administrative service in order to help establish and direct a writing center for our university. About 15 months into my role as a writing center director, our institution was mandated to consolidate with Kennesaw State University (KSU). With that mandate, I became a tenured full professor for the third largest institution in the University System of Georgia.

Consisting of more than 35 thousand students, the current size of my new institution reflects consolidated campus enrollment and continued growth. Tenure track faculty hired at SPSU prior to consolidation were expected to focus on excellence in teaching. Peer reviewed conference presentations and publications were needed for tenure; however, institutional promotion guidelines made clear that excellence in teaching was the hallmark necessary for tenure. After consolidation, the new university (KSU) made clear that expectations for scholarship would be greater than before. Incoming new faculty would have the opportunity to meet the higher expectations for publications and of course qualifying for promotion and tenure would be a significant motivating factor. For tenured faculty already in place, meeting the higher expectations for publications would have to be driven by intrinsic motivating factors rather than extrinsic ones. As a tenured member of the faculty, I decided to focus on digital scholarship to satisfy the increased expectations.

The decision to pursue digital scholarship came about after much contemplation of my academic endeavors and research interests. Passion for subject matter stayed at the forefront as the most significant reason. Having engaged in online pedagogy since 2004 to expand my teaching skills and format options, activities connected to digital scholarship already existed in my annual review materials and could be viewed as a logical scholarship trajectory. A ten year period of accomplishments related to online pedagogy included course developments, peer reviewed conference presentations, review publications, and a published co-edited collection of essays. It was in fact the aforementioned scholarly activities that helped me to earn promotion to associate professor in 2006 and then full professor in 2012; however, I was not describing these activities as digital scholarship during annual faculty performance review write-ups.

As I prepared to adjust to the higher expectations for scholarly and creative activity at Kennesaw State University, my understanding of the connection between online pedagogy and digital scholarship matured. The concept of digital scholarship and digital writing was also impacting how many English Departments (including those at my old and newly consolidated university) were envisioning their future program offerings. All factors considered, deciding to focus on digital scholarship did indeed seem a logical trajectory. Thus, I set long-term faculty performance goals in the spring of 2015 that would be met by producing scholarly and creative writings that aligned with my interests.

I believed my activities in the area of digital scholarship were aligned with the recognizable scholarship activities of professors at my university, but after receiving evaluation feedback in 2018 that

showcased my academic blog publication for a higher education organization, those beliefs turned out to be faulty assumptions. For that annual evaluation period, my academic blog publication was a praiseworthy activity; however, it was not a "creditable" scholarly activity. After consulting with other colleagues and carefully reviewing departmental scholarship guidelines, I learned that digital publications such as academic blogs were not clearly designated as a scholarly and creative output. I later learned through informal internet research that many institutions and departments across the nation did not have written guidelines to account for digital scholarship. Before continuing to invest more time into digital scholarship activities, I decided to learn more about its history.

During the summer of 2018, I spent time querying my institution's library databases for journal articles and books using "digital scholarship" key word searches; eventually I was able to select five publications for in-depth reading that were related to the topic. The dates of the publications I chose to read ranged from 2007 to 2017. In addition to searching the library databases for reading material, I also reviewed web accessible departmental, college, and university level guidelines that describe faculty expectations for research and scholarly activities. From the late summer of 2018 up until the early winter of 2019, I read, reviewed, and annotated the aforementioned source material in an effort to be able to surmise my own view of the topic itself. Once I had completed my readings, my comprehension of the potentials and the pitfalls of claiming engagement in digital scholarship had indeed increased.

The remainder of this article provides a listed synopsis of what I learned about the history of digital scholarship and offers advice for faculty who may be considering engaging in it to satisfy scholarship performance expectations:

- Discussion about digital scholarship has been an on-going conversation for almost two decades now. The Modern Language Association (MLA) approved in May of 2000 "Guidelines for Evaluating Work in Digital Humanities and Digital Media" to help disciplines contextualize the credibility of this type of scholarship, yet articles and books published since that time demonstrate the academy as a whole continues to question the meaning and value of digital scholarship (Borgman, 2007; Friedberg, 2009; Ren, 2015).
- Digital scholarship's meaning is not static; it may refer to research about the impact of digital publications as well as digital platforms used to disseminate information (Ren, 2015; Rafaffaghelli, 2017). The disciplines that lay claims to engaging in digital scholarship activities include the humanities, information science, and information technology. Due to multiple discipline specific engagements with digital scholarship, users of the term should provide a contextualized definition to provide readers with clarity.
- Reliance solely on digital scholarship type publications such as academic blogs, deposits in digital repositories, and multimedia products is not a good idea for faculty who are required to publish scholarship for promotion and tenure. The quality and significance of such publications may be sound; however, institutional guidelines may not allow for full recognition of such digital publications (Braun, 2014; Ren, 2015). Furthermore, even when guidelines do exist, the interpretation of the quality and significance of such digital publications is often less favorable in comparison to traditional print and peer reviewed publications.

With the information stated above in mind and based on my experiences, I would advise untenured professors to be careful when pursuing digital scholarship projects to meet requirements for scholarly

activities. They should ensure there are specific departmental, college, and institutional guideline before starting such projects. A step beyond verifying written guidelines is also recommended; very explicit conversations with faculty and administrators who will be responsible for judging the merits of faculty publications is a must. Likewise, I would advise tenured professors to be careful; however, based on the point of view of other academics (Braun, 2014, p. 95) and my own observations, I would actually encourage them to pursue their interest in digital scholarship in order to set precedents that will hopefully benefit the upcoming generations of academic professional who must increasingly become invested in digital scholarship activities to maintain relevancy in their disciplines.

With hindsight in mind, I would have been more strategic when setting my long-term faculty performance goals during the spring of 2015. I would have searched the departmental written performance guidelines for language related to my interests in digital scholarship. I would have been more direct with my evaluators about my interest in pursuing digital scholarship so that my scholarly activity outputs would have not only been "praiseworthy" but also "creditable" and in alignment with written performance guidelines. I would have asked for examples of recognized "creditable" digital scholarship type activities documented by other faculty. I also would have been more precise about the types of digital publications or projects that I would be aiming to deliver. In closing, I hope others who read this information find it helpful if they too decide to pursue digital scholarship type activities to meet faculty performance goals.

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