Building Community and Generosity in the Context of Graduate Education

Brandon Walsh
Amanda Visconti
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In the Scholars' Lab's [Praxis Program](#), we regularly introduce a cohort of humanities students to digital humanities by way of project-based pedagogy. Over the course of a year, these students develop and implement a digital project of their own design. The activity often works quite well while the conversation is theoretical, but we consistently noticed tensions in our fellowship cohorts once work on the project got underway and deadlines loomed. It is in moments like these that a group has to rapidly make decisions about the scope and intervention of the project. In other words, the group has to come to articulate and narrow what the project will be and, ultimately, what the group itself will say. In these moments, especially, we often noticed that conflicts centered around a series of interrelated problems. The students would come to us and describe them as interpersonal issues: person A was not contributing to the project adequately, or person B might be causing tensions within the group. There is, of course, some truth to this framing: there will always be difficult collaborators. But, as facilitators seeing the same problems year after year, we began to question the ways in which our framework itself might be setting the students up for these sorts of issues.

We began to wonder whether the issues we were seeing might, in fact, be better characterized as individual manifestations of structural problems. After all, the academy trains humanities graduate students to be proficient in complex intellectual work and tends to reward the performance of one's own intelligence. In seminars, coursework, conferences, and in publications, a premium is placed upon demonstrating one's own viewpoint. On arguing. On critique. Digital humanities is often framed as a fundamentally different activity, as digital projects often involve collaboration among many different people, each with different skillsets, towards a common end. For many, this collective spirit is what drew us to digital humanities in the first place. After all, digital projects require a different approach to the work than what newcomers might be used to. While each person might bring something unique to the project, the work necessarily takes shape around more than just the individual. Groups often break down precisely when one voice takes over, when others are not heard or are devalued. A project might still be completed under these circumstances, but we should aim higher than capitalist indicators of success for collaboration (project completion, efficiency, grants awarded). Instead, we should consider how the important work of the [Postdoctoral Laborers Bill of Rights](#),[1] the [Collaborators Bill of Rights](#),[2] the [Student Collaborators Bill of Rights](#),[3] and of Kathleen Fitzpatrick's [Generous](#)

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[1] Collaboratively authored by the Postdoctoral Laborers Group and outside reviewers. This group includes Hannah Alpert-Abrams, Heather Froehlich, Amanda Henrichs, Jim McGrath, and Kim Martin.

[2] Clement, Tanya E., Douglas Reside, Brian Croxall, Julia Flanders, Neil Fraistat, Steve Jones, Matt Kirschenbaum, Suzanne Lodato, Laura Mandell, Paul Marty, David Miller, Bethany Nowviskie, Stephen Olsen, Tom Scheinfeldt, David Seaman, Mark Tebeau, John Unsworth, Kay Walter. "Collaborators' Bill of Rights." In Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital Humanities Scholars, by Tanya E. Clement and Douglas Reside, 9–10. Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, 2011. https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:12069/

[3] Di Pressi, Haley; Stephanie Gorman, Miriam Posner, Raphael Sasayama, and Tori Schmitt, with contributions from Roderic Crooks, Megan Driscoll, Amy Earhart, Spencer Keralis, Tiffany Naiman, and Todd Presner. "Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights". UCLA DH Program. https://humtech.ucla.edu/news/a-student-collaborators-bill-of-rights

[Thinking](#)[4] guide towards a more just and ethical version of collaborative digital humanities work. These foundational documents rightly point to the structural and often economic contexts that condition ethical and just collaboration.

Less frequently discussed, however, are the difficulties trained academics can have as individuals transitioning into collaborative contexts framed in such terms. One problem with our work in the Praxis Program was expecting students to easily adopt different practices of collaboration than what they were used to. We realized that the problem was one of training - our students were trained to engage in seminar-type environments in a particular mode, and it was a mistake to expect them to do anything else (especially when the actual environment - academics sitting around a table - was often virtually identical). In the Praxis Program, we consistently struggled to promote healthy collaboration centered on shared buy-in and generosity; our students instead remained focused, foremost, on what a group project would mean for them as individuals. While these are important needs and understandable desires that we need to account for as instructors, we hoped to use the year with us as an opportunity for them to work beyond this framing, learning about effective collaboration at the same time that they gained valuable career experience. Rather than hoping that things would work out differently each year, we decided to make our program more intentional about incorporating training in collaboration for our students. Our goal was to reorient their collaborative practices away from a focus on the self and towards creating more generous and kind community spaces. We did this in three ways: reviewing and writing charters together, frank discussions about collaborations good and bad, and discussing concrete practices to promote more equitable collaboration. The goal of each of these activities was to help the students practice de-centering themselves, to gain experience building up rather than deconstructing, and to learn to lead from trust and kindness.

Charters

Our first foray into these topics with students is to encourage them to think intentionally about the values they bring to the group. This session is run as part of a larger exercise in producing group statements of values - charters - that require the students to examine their own personal goals, experiences, and backgrounds in relationship to the whole. When we introduce charters to our Praxis Fellows, our in-house expert Ronda Grizzle teaches them to think through a charter as an internally-focused document setting aspirations and expectations for how they want to work and be with one another. Brandon Walsh shares his [Praxis Program Charter](#) to frame the coming year's work, as well as the (now 11) [charters created by each past year's Praxis Fellows cohort](#). We share the foundational [Collaborators' Bill of Rights](#) and [Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights](#) to give students a sense of what DH as a field aspires to in terms of collaborative care and justice. We also discuss how similar documents can operate to advance other goals with different or multiple audiences, such as how the [Postdoctoral Bill of Rights](#) serves both to inform potential and current postdoctoral workers in the humanities about what they might seek and demand in postdoc position design, and advise designers and supervisors of humanities postdoc roles how to make these positions more just. Amanda Visconti shares the [Charters & Values Statements Gsheet](#) that they maintain with help from community members, as a source for further charters, values statements, and similar written commitments related to DH, digital or experimental scholarship, GLAM, and related work; links to writing about how these documents were crafted; and related resources like memorandums of understanding among collaborators around resource commitments. Thus, we start from strong examples of good and ethical collaboration. For a number of our students, these documents might be the first of their type that they might have seen during their academic experience, and the very idea of a collective statement of collaborative values as a professionally legible document might be unusual. By sharing the degree to which these documents circulate in the broader digital humanities community, we hope to

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[4] Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. *Generous Thinking*. Baltimore, Maryland : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

emphasize their value as intellectual activities. We also hope they begin to frame discussion of intentional, kind, and just collaboration, not as a means to an end, but rather as a key good of any successful scholarship. The final goal of this learning unit is for the cohort of students to produce a shared charter-like document of their own.

Discussions

The charter activity has long been a fixture of the Praxis Program. The new components, inspired by collaborative tensions in past cohorts, are intended to go further by inviting the students into discussions of the difficulties that come with collaboration. In particular, we aim to be transparent with the students: we want the collaborative process to be generous and inclusive, and we describe the sorts of tensions collaborative work can produce in this fellowship year in particular. We are quite explicit, even going so far as to flag particular months (March and April) when a fellowship cohort working on a shared project is likely to be challenged and why (those are the moments when the group must finalize their shared sense of identity). Perhaps most importantly, we are careful to invite the students into the conversation as equals. Collaboration is difficult for us as well, even after years of working on digital projects together. We make it clear to the students that this is a challenge we should all expect over the course of the year and that we will all try to address as a group, staff and students together, using whatever strategies we can generate together.

Part of this conversation entails a frank discussion of the challenges of interdisciplinary work. A collaborative project requires buy-in from everyone in the group in order to create a positive space for work. But any given Praxis Program cohort is composed of six students from a range of disciplines, each of which have their own particular practices, methods, and values. These are all valid structures, but we discuss the need for students to look beyond disciplinary outcomes for takeaways from a group project. This sense of personal buy-in to the project is not static but must be consistently negotiated over the course of the year. It also might take many shapes: specific research outputs, technical skills gained, collaborative processes learned, and more. We also elevate the value of just and ethical working conditions as a goal, worthy of personal investment on par with any value they might take away as individuals. In this way, we hope to articulate for themselves and for the group how their own narrative for the year will intersect with the collective.

These conversations often begin quite abstractly, more about the types of working conditions the students want to see in the academy and in their group than about how to carry them out. In facilitating these conversations about collaboration and generosity, we aim to encourage the students to think quite practically about how they plan to enact values. If we say we value good communication, what does that mean? If we say we will respect the personal needs of all group members, what does that entail? If we want to value just and ethical thinking in our work, how does that look? Put simply, what sorts of verbs go with the nouns? Each student cohort comes to these discussions and shapes them differently, and the staff always learn from them. One common thread we find, though, is the need for a system of accountability. For some groups, this involves regularly returning to their written charter to make sure they honor it. For others, this entails actually iteratively rewriting the document over time. For many, this involves formalizing a system of resolving disagreements either through voting practices or through appealing to designated impartial staff members.

Practices

Rather than simply discuss concepts abstractly and then launch into the year of working together, we often draw in specific tools and practices the students might consider as models or provocations for generating good collaboration. Three, in particular, come to mind.

A practice we often start with (or that the students bring up on their own) is drawn from the performance world. Lisa Rhody has done excellent work to introduce "yes, and", a concept drawn from improvisational comedy, to digital humanities.[5] In her reading of Tina Fey, Rhody offers three rules drawn from comedy for a more generative digital humanities practice :

    1. Respect what your partner has created.
    2. It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure that you're adding something.
    3. Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don't just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles.

In terms of a collaborative practice, we appreciate this model offered by Rhody because of its flexibility: it can apply to virtually any conversation or situation. The practice also offers specific actions as a model for how to engage with others, tying abstract notions of how to create a collective to the specific means by which to do it.

A common extension of "yes, and" comes to us by way of the practices of female staffers in the Obama White House.[6] As a means to combat implicit bias towards the gender of speakers, they practiced something they called "amplification": "When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own." Amplification builds on "yes, and" in that it specifically credits ideas to specific speakers, an important model for building both individual legibility and a generous group mentality. This practice can be especially useful for destabilizing dynamics between enthusiastic talkers and more reticent, quieter students as well as introducing the structural reasons why some might be less able to participate in conversations or less recognized for doing so.

Finally, amplification leads quite naturally to GenderTimer, a now defunct app that aimed to raise attention to gendered meeting practices by allowing users to track how often men and women speak in the workplace. There are clear problems with the app–reinforcing a binary model of gender, and requiring someone in the meeting to assume and manually log the gender of the speaker–but the concept can prove useful for helping students to self-examine their own speaking practices both as individuals and as a group. Whether or not you actually encourage students to measure participation in meetings in such a way, the provocation can offer students the chance to think about systemic and implicit practices that they can work against together by developing more equitable strategies as a group.

Conclusion

One danger in activities like these is that they can feel as though they shift institutional issues onto individuals in precarious positions. In this case, it is dangerous to assign the burden of pushing back against academic structures onto those very students most affected by them. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of those in positions of relative power and privilege–staff, faculty–in charge of designing digital humanities learning spaces like these to carefully do so in a way that ensures that students can safely design more generous and collaborative practices for the academy together. One way to do so is to offer space for discussions about fears and concerns about such collaboration as much as about hopes and dreams. Our institutional context–the Scholars' Lab is part of the UVA Library–has been especially useful in this regard. We serve faculty and students from across the university, and, accordingly, the Praxis cohort itself is drawn from a

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[5] Rhody, Lisa. "What can DHers learn from improvisation and Tina Fey?" https://www.lisarhody.com/what-can-dhers-learn-from-improvisation-and-tina-fey/
[6] Eilperin, Juliet. "White House women want to be in the room where it happens." *The Washington Post*. September 13, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/

range of disciplines. As such, we can offer a space to discuss risk in a way that is slightly at a remove from any student's professional context.

For many of these students, our fellowship might be the first time they have been asked to engage with–or contribute to–intellectual work outside their disciplinary training. Working with an interdisciplinary audience like this is common for librarian instruction. Interdisciplinary spaces like these offer real challenges for students beginning to work on digital projects, but they also offer an opportunity to reconsider received assumptions about the nature of academic work and how it is conducted. The activities mentioned above are meant to help the students recognize that these conversations deserve a space in academic discourse, that academic practice can be different than what they find elsewhere, and that conversations around collaborative practice can be a space in which they may, in some small way, begin to shape this new kind of scholarly work. The library is an especially fruitful space in which to begin this discussion.