The Role of ESU in Creating and Values-Driven DH Community

Carol Chiodo / Lauren Tilton

Abstract

In this essay, we illustrate how the European Summer University in Digital Humanities at the University of Leipzig (hereafter referred to as "ESU") under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Burr has set forth a set of values that have built and continue to model a collaborative, communal, and compassionate future for higher education. We identify three values that sit at the center of the ESU's activities – inclusiveness, experimentation, and vulnerability. We reflect on these values from our position as workshop leaders who have had the privilege to be part of the ESU community over the past years.

Sommario

In questo saggio, si illustra come l'ESU, sotto la guida di Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Burr, abbia creato un modello per il futuro dell'istruzione a livello universitario fondato sui valori della collaborazione, della collettività e della compassione. Identifichiamo tre valori caratteristici delle attività dell'ESU – l'inclusione, la sperimentazione, e la vulnerabilità. Riflettiamo su questi valori dalla nostra posizione di istruttori che hanno avuto il privilegio di far parte di questa communita' negli ultimi anni.

1 Introduction

For fields in formation, scholarly communities are often found, at least initially, outside of traditional institutional structures. Whether out of necessity, creativity, or convenience, these spaces precede or transcend the built environment of the university. They may sit on the periphery or even outside of institutional structures. They may take the form of scholarly associations or loosely connected networks. They require substantial labor and an equal amount of passion for their creation and their sustenance. While new communities may form on the edges of existing structures, it does not necessarily follow that such communities are capable of articulating and embodying different values. Exacerbated by global ranking systems and impact factors, the resulting neoliberal university centers individualism over community, production over substance, and competition over cooperation, further cementing the idea that rapid-fire single-

author scholarship in its legacy media forms continues its reign as the undisputed currency of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences (cf. Greyser / Weiss 2012). Resisting these tendencies to reimagine an alternative value system is a herculean task, particularly when one centers values which run counter to such a hegemonic currency.

Lisa Spiro has proposed that we organize our identity as a field in formation around a set of values, rather than organizing it around any specific definition of digital humanities (cf. Spiro 2012). Communities form around shared value systems. By articulating our priorities and defining who we are, she argues, we form and shape communities. In this essay, we illustrate how the European Summer University in Digital Humanities at the University of Leipzig (hereafter referred to as "ESU") under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Burr has set forth a set of values that have built and continue to model a collaborative, communal, and compassionate future for DH and higher education. We identify three values that sit at the center of the ESU's activities - inclusiveness, experimentation, and vulnerability. We reflect on these values from our position as workshop leaders who have had the privilege to be part of the ESU community over the past years.

2 Inclusiveness

As GO::DH, a Special Interest Group of the ADHO, has compellingly argued, creating bridges that enable collaborations across economic, geopolitical, and cultural differences should be a part of the field's work (Global Outlook::Digital Humanities). In its practice, ESU predates this work and has modeled how to create systematic exchange across multiple categories of social differences. Inclusiveness guides every effort of the ESU, from admissions to organization to decision-making. The painstaking admissions process centers on creating an international community with participants from around the world. This community is possible through tireless fundraising efforts throughout the year.[1] Generous funding is provided by ESU to scholars with limited resources. Independent scholars, librarians, professors and students from underfunded institutions, and those from outside academia pursue courses alongside colleagues from around the world. And, through organized events beyond the classroom such as

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[1] Long-time supporters are the DAAD, Clarin and ETCL.

museum visits and dinners, participants exchange ideas, interests, and insights that lead to new connections.

The challenge of creating an environment for universal participation informs all stages of course preparation. It is not uncommon for a participant from Israel working on court proceedings to be seated next to a scholar working on Palestinian protest literature, or a participant from an affluent institution with copious resources to be paired with a participant from a resource-strapped institution, or for a student fluent in multiple languages to converse with a classmate whose linguistic portfolio is more limited. Such a setting calls for a willingness to embrace instructional examples or corpora in a number of different languages, and an awareness of the challenges posed by different writing systems for optical character recognition, text analysis and other popular software tools developed and used in a strictly Anglophone context.

ESU has also expanded how we think across categories such as class, gender, language, race, and religion that extend beyond the American discourse. As a result, we have enhanced our pedagogical repertoire by commencing the course with an exercise in setting community guidelines. This exercise requires the students to collectively reflect on the values they would like to see inform the classroom environment. These value statements change from year to year, but some examples from recent years include:

– When referring to own research as an example, draw on examples that would be of benefit to the group.

– When referring to another person's idea, draw on their contributions to the conversation and give credit for the idea.

– Assess whether the question would be of benefit to the larger group. It maybe could wait for a private conversation.

– Be polite. Be kind, honest, and candid when expressing an opinion.

– Awareness of different professional backgrounds of participants.

– Everyone has an opportunity to complete their sentences. Please wait until the speaker is finished their thoughts. Raising one's hand is one option.

– All questions are good questions and encouraged!

- Be aware that English is not everyone's first, second or even third language.
- Humor!
- Save side conversations for coffee hour.
- Make sure everyone is at the same point.
- Drive your own computer. Ask your neighbor for help.
- Be brave!
- Make time at the end of class for questions.

This exercise has the advantage of both gauging and setting expectations, while encouraging students to take their first steps together in working as a group. We also frequently break out into small groups, allowing students to get to know a number of other members of the class and their interests, even when those interests may not apparently intersect. We make an effort to diversify our readings and examples (cf. Risam 2019) and we are explicit about such efforts. By centering inclusivity, community creation has had a ripple effect. Taking the larger ESU as a model, our classroom is a microcosm of a supportive environment that reaches across many kinds of difference. It has changed our teaching practices in Leipzig, but it has also contributed to how we teach further afield. The inclusion and connection modeled at ESU creates a larger community of practice across DH as a disciplinary field, but it also informs the values that undergird the community itself.

3 Experimentation

For those who have attended the ESU, this practice may be less intuitive. The organization of ESU is meticulous. Almost every hour of the day is accounted for with workshops, talks, and cultural events. Even the meals are selected over a month in advance. Accommodating over one hundred people from all over the world for an intensive DH summer program in Germany requires endless organization. These extensive efforts provide the necessary infrastructure for ours. We are all indebted to the labor of Prof Dr. Burr and her incredible team.

Less visible, however, is how this type of seamless organization provides ample latitude for experimentation, for workshop leaders and students alike. When it comes to the contents and style of the workshop, there is no

prescription. Drawing on DH pedagogy, we do set learning goals and provide a general overview of the course so that participants can make an educated choice about which workshop to register for (cf. Hirsch 2012). But it is only after reading each participant's application, that we decide which modules to develop and select readings. We adjust the course according to enrolled students interests and topics. This often places us outside of our disciplinary comfort zone. Yet, it is also an exciting opportunity to broaden the boundaries of our research and explore that method with workshop participants.

In doing so, we model the process of experimentation in the workshop. For example, we'll design a lab where students work with a tool like Voyant In doing so, we model the process of experimentation in the workshop. For example, we'll design a lab where students work with a tool like Voyant to explore text analysis. We begin with a short overview of text analysis and then several methods such as concordances, term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF/IDF), and word frequencies. We then discuss how to prepare data for text analysis so that participants can create their own data set or use one of the provided example data sets. After a brief overview of Voyant, we turn the class over to them to explore for at least 30 minutes. We then invite participants to explain what they have discovered and to walk through how they used Voyant to learn this new insight. The feelings of frustration, such as when a tool doesn't work as expected or the results are initially inscrutable, and excitement, such as when the possibilities of a method and tool become apparent, accompany experimentation. Not only does such an approach model experimentation but we also learn as participants discover new approaches and glean new insights. Finally, experimentation centers process over production and challenges facile claims that DH is neoliberal while offering an exciting path for higher education (cf. Allington / Brouilette / Golumbia 2016).

4 Vulnerability

Along with experimentation comes a connected value, vulnerability. Experimentation requires an openness to trial and error, or to different perspectives and provocations. Such a position can be difficult for academics whose training is often about developing and demonstrating expertise. This can be particularly challenging for humanities scholars whose training in experimental methodologies is limited, and who are unfamiliar with ways

of knowing that center trial and error. Gendered understandings of this value present further challenges. Often equated with weakness, and subjugation, vulnerability is often gendered as feminine in an un-nuanced binary opposition to masculinity, with its associated traits of strength and power. Cultures of masculinity permeate higher education and result in institutions and communities built around male life cycles, virility, and individual achievement (cf. Edwards 2006). ESU models a different path.

ESU offers a supportive space for vulnerability because it is built around process, rather than results. The process of experimentation through collaborative and communal engagement with new concepts asks participants to be open and unguarded. This begins by acknowledging that one is learning new ideas and posing new questions. Not knowing a concept or not immediately having success with a tool isn't a sign of weakness, it is part of the process of learning. This requires courage and playfulness, impossible to accomplish unless we let our guard down. Creating a community that can be vulnerable together is creating a learning community.

Yet in asking our participants to be vulnerable, we must do so as well. We set aside our need to be in complete control and listen to interests and adjust. For example, one year it was clear early on that data visualization was a significant area of interest for the students. We quickly identified and explored a data visualization tool and, after providing a very brief overview, we shared with the class that we were also new to the tool. We proceeded to learn about it together. We didn't pretend to be experts about the tool and were straight forward about what we did and didn't know. Rather, we invited the participants to join us in a process of discovery and experimentation as a workshop. An ungenerous reading of these events would be to understand such a workshop session as the result of a lack of preparation that dismantled our expertise. We would argue that instead we modeled a process of experimentation and exploration that revealed our own openness to new methods and is critical to DH (cf. Wernimont 2015).

Vulnerability is not just a part of how one structures a class, but built into the very foundation of ESU. One will notice that ESU does not use the language of a "class" or "course" but of "workshops". Workshops are collaborative spaces that may be guided, but don't necessarily reflect asymmetries of knowledge or power. We have changed our language to reflect this positionality. We are not "teachers" who bestow knowledge on "students", but guides who illustrate the new terrain surrounding humanities data, and encourage participants to find their place within the field. In

this spirit, we often turn the floor over to the workshop participants. Many of them already have PhDs themselves, and come with an expertise from which we can all benefit. We also ask participants to share their challenges and struggles so that we can see together how vulnerability through openness to experimentation actually results in exciting discoveries (cf. McCarthy / Witmer 2016). Letting oneself be vulnerable is made possible through a focus on experimentation as well as through building an inclusive environment where each participant can fully participate.

5 Conclusion

The three values that we have outlined are a part of why we return to ESU each year. Realizing a different kind of community for DH and for higher education is a difficult project. Paddling upstream is exhausting. Unfortunately, the tide of neoliberalism isn't as calm as our boat tours on the Karl-Heine-Kanal. Fortunately, the boat is getting stronger as a decade of DH scholars from ESU enact a collaborative and participatory DH built around a set of values that are imagining a brighter future for higher education.

We will be forever grateful for the vision and fortitude of Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Burr.

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