“Expanding Access to the Digital Humanities in St. Louis”

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Meg Smith:

The St. Louis Area Digital Humanities Network supports DH pedagogy across the St. Louis metro area in Missouri and Illinois, focusing especially on the often neglected arenas of secondary and undergraduate education. In particular, we seek to create collaborations and partnerships across institutions to provide more equitable access to DH pedagogies for students from underserved groups and at under-resourced institutions. We hope not only to cultivate 21st-century digital literacies among students, but also make the field of digital humanities more diverse, inclusive, and equitable.

The goal of the network is to provide an infrastructure and community of practice for DH pedagogy that bridges the K-12-college divide and accounts for the region’s particular contingencies. Although we’re firm believers in the power of DH to both broaden and deepen student engagement with our respective fields, the resources that sustain that work are undeniably unequally distributed. This includes tangible resources, like hardware with sufficient processing power, software that often comes with prohibitive price tags, and bandwidth that may be metered or simply unavailable. It also includes intangible resources: time for teachers to learn and implement new skills or adjust syllabi, digital literacy skills that facilitate engagement with and interrogation of technologies, and a sense of belonging and belief that tech and tech-adjacent fields are a welcoming and hospitable space - which is not always the case. These resources are all components of a persistent and pervasive digital divide locally and nationally. A report on St.

Louis's digital divide issued in March noted that 55% of residents in St. Louis City and County "live in areas meaningfully impacted by two or more digital divide pillars." And this doesn't even account for St. Louis's Metro East, the communities just on the other side of the river that are even more starkly impacted - this map shows areas that have little or insufficient access to broadband in the Metro East. The barriers to DH pedagogy in St. Louis are inseparable from the historical and contemporary pressures that have resulted in stark inequalities and sharp lines of economic and racial segregation across the region.

Despite these challenges, the St. Louis region offers rich and meaningful opportunities for DH pedagogy and collaboration. St. Louis has a booming tech community, especially in the areas of GIS and other spatial technologies, including a new hub for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency that promises new educational opportunities. There are DH practitioners and centers across the region engaged in innovative pedagogy, research, and community engagement. And St. Louis has a rich community of cultural heritage institutions and practitioners ready to partner with students and educators. Our goal in the network is to create lasting partnerships and collaborations that leverage these resources and make them more broadly accessible, breaking down institutional silos.

The network was founded by Geremy Carnes of Lindenwood University as a Slack group in 2020. Since that time, it's grown to 65 members, including college faculty from a variety of disciplines, librarians and information professionals, high school teachers, cultural heritage practitioners, and community partners. In 2021, we developed a partnership between Geremy at Lindenwood and the IRIS Center, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's digital humanities center. That partnership, which bookends the metro area, has been particularly valuable in thinking about the different communities and institutions we serve. The partnership has also been

instrumental in receiving two grants that are helping drive the network's agenda forward in tangible ways by supporting two workshops dedicated to needs assessment, information sharing, and community building.

As we develop and carry out these workshops, three essential, interconnected guiding principles underpin our work. The first is equity. One of the network's chief aims is to reduce barriers to entry into DH and make it not only more accessible and more attainable, but to make the field more welcoming, hospitable, and culturally affirming. While that's happening in individual projects and institutions around the region, we're especially invested in building necessary infrastructures, which constitutes our second pillar. Too often, DH work falls on the shoulders of individuals - and that's especially true of pedagogical and community-building work, which also isn't compensated or recognized in ways comparable to research outputs. So building infrastructures that generate institutional support and recognition is imperative for equity - and for sustainability, which is our third principle. Grassroots networks often tend to generate an initial wave of enthusiasm but peter out due to lack of funding and institutional supports. So our focus on infrastructure and creating institutional linkages and partnerships is also a sustainability measure that ensures the network doesn't depend on any single individual, project, or institution.

So that's the foundation of the network - now we're excited to report on the first of our workshops, which we held in April at Lindenwood.

Geremy Carnes:

The kick-off event for this project was a workshop titled "Improving Digital Humanities Pedagogy in St. Louis," which was funded in part by the Missouri Humanities Council. The

grant provided us with funding to invite St. Louis area high school faculty to join three higher education faculty in discussing the current state and potential future of digital humanities practices in high school classrooms.

The only significant challenge we had in developing and carrying out this event was recruiting participants. Spring 2022 was not an ideal time to be hosting a workshop for high school faculty, to put it mildly. In fact, the workshop was originally scheduled to take place in early March, but we pushed it to April to wait out the worst of the Omicron Covid variant. Even then, we provided an online participation option but there was no getting around the fact that high school faculty are quite simply exhausted right now as they continue to deal with the fallout of two years of teaching in pandemic conditions. This is something that anyone seeking to bridge the high school-college divide right now needs to be particularly mindful of. With our workshop, half the faculty who had originally signed up to attend ended up canceling, and so we had only five participants on the day of the workshop.

While that meant we did not receive as many different personal and institutional perspectives as we would have liked, the workshop still ended up being great and extremely illuminating, an experience that everyone attending found very useful. Certainly we, the higher ed facilitators, were very excited by what we gained from the experience and the post-event survey showed that all the high school faculty felt that they learned things that would be useful to them in their classroom work as well. Our goal with designing the workshop had been to make a mutual learning experience. We higher ed facilitators did not go into the workshop posing as the "experts" who were going to explain how high school faculty should teach. We wanted to learn from the high school faculty at least as much as they were going to learn from us.

To give you a sense of the day's agenda, the workshop was divided into a morning session and an afternoon session. The morning session focused on practice. The high school faculty shared their own digital humanities practices, while the university faculty presented a showcase of digital humanities projects that had been produced by high school and undergraduate students and also gave quick, 20-minute introductions into the use of particular digital humanities tools, such as Storymaps, Twine, and Omeka. Because the facilitators had experience with many different tools, we were able to customize our presentations to focus on the tools the high school faculty were most interested in learning about, and there was a lot of excitement over the possible uses they could make of some of them. The GIS tools in particular were a big hit.

In the afternoon session, we took a step back to look at the big picture of digital humanities instruction at the high school level. We discussed the obstacles in the way of greater adoption of digital humanities practices, the supports high school faculty would need to overcome those obstacles, and how it might be possible to involve high school students in digital humanities projects taking place at area universities. We ended the day by asking the high school faculty to collaboratively produce a set of priorities for the St. Louis Digital Humanities Network to focus as it continues its work to bridge the divide between the high schools and universities and to improve pedagogy in the region. I'd like to share those priorities.

1. *Provide conversations around what digital humanities is and how to practice it in the classroom.*

   In preparing for this event, the other facilitators and I expected that the term "digital humanities" would not be familiar to many high school faculty, and we avoided the term in most of our advertising for the event, using terms such as "digital tools" and "digital

practices" instead. Among our attendees, about half were familiar with digital humanities as a term and half were not. We took some time early on in the day of the workshop to define the term a bit, primarily by showcasing concrete examples of digital humanities projects. The workshop confirmed for us that we will need to continue clarifying this term in our future partnerships with high schools.

2. *Expose faculty to more digital humanities tools and help them identify which tools would be most effective.*

   Meg and I are continuing to discuss how best to do this in a manner that isn't overly demanding for overworked high school teachers as well as for us, and Meg will talk about that in a moment.

3. *Establish best practices for implementing digital humanities in the classroom and provide a model of what a classroom deeply engaged in digital humanities practices looks like.*

   This priority is one of the most intriguing to me and also one of the most challenging. One fact that came up repeatedly at the workshop is that digital humanities practices are only as valuable as the instructor makes them and that we want to avoid implementing technology for technology's sake. Many humanities classrooms make the best use of the digital humanities through relatively minimal use. But what might a high school humanities course that makes extensive use of the digital humanities look like? A partnership between a high school and a university to develop such a course could prove very valuable, which leads us to the next priority.

4. *Establish relationships between universities and teachers/communities.*

Our participants all believed that high schools would be more likely to participate in digital humanities projects if they had a strong relationship with digital humanists in an area university. Many such relationships already exist between area institutions, but they're not necessarily being leveraged to improve education in the digital humanities.

5. *Create point people for a particular digital humanities tool in a professional learning community, or a contact person in a college.*

   Faculty would be more willing to use a tool if they know there's someone they can reach out to for help. This priority could also be labor-intensive for that point person, though, so it would be important to determine how to appropriately compensate someone for their time.

6. *Frame the digital humanities as something the world is moving toward as opposed to a program that teachers are expected to implement.*

   Faculty are understandably wary of being asked to teach new things or undertake new programs, as it is common to see such programs lose steam within a few years and fall by the wayside to make way for the next big thing. The participants suggested that if we avoid framing our elevation of digital humanities instruction as a program and instead simply focus on how experience with these tools and practices would be valuable to students in the future, faculty would be more likely to support their adoption.

7. *Bring more voices to the table to establish further network goals.*

   As noted early on, we had only five attendees, and they also felt that more perspectives were necessary to be able to determine the long-term priorities of the network. We're hoping to do just that in another workshop this September. Now I'm going to turn things

back over to Meg, who will discuss some of the specific plans we're developing to further the priorities identified during the April workshop.

Meg Smith:

Despite the challenges of a pandemic workshop, our time together was both cathartic and generative. Let me just flesh out a few of the future initiatives we've identified as takeaways.

One short-term agenda item is to build out a pedagogical resource library for secondary education settings. This might include short, one-session "bloom and fade" activities, lesson plans, scaffolded assignments, readings, tool guides - really anything that facilitates low-investment, low-cost of entry engagement with DH. That's especially useful for teachers who are new to DH and, confronted with the field's vast and sprawling landscape, might not know where to start and where to invest their time. Although secondary ed receives less attention than undergrad or graduate education, there are plenty of well-developed resources out there - it's just a matter of knowing how to look for them. We've also done some resource development ourselves, creating a resource showcase for the Cleveland Teaching Collaborative on free, easy to use DH tools for the classroom.

An important corollary to lesson plans on tools is offering or pointing to tool trainings and demos. Hands-on experiences have a number of benefits: they're the quickest and easiest way to develop baseline knowledge about a tool, and seeing a tool being taught also gives a good sense of how much training and scaffolding students will need - something that's sometimes elided in assignments and lesson plans. We're thinking through what that might look like - whether it's informal tech meet-ups throughout the summer, an in-person or hybrid workshop environment, asynchronous recordings, or some combination of those.

Slightly longer-term is our goal of continuing to grow the Slack as a space for creating partnerships and collaborations. So much of DH operates through word of mouth and informal networks, which can be difficult to find an entry point into. So creating an active network and disseminating it are crucial to the network's longterm health and to creating pathways for new practitioners into the field. Long-term, we also hope that those collaborations lead to other grant projects and initiatives that carry the network forward beyond how we've imagined it.

So we've got our work cut out for us, but we've also got a wonderful community of practice, and we're looking forward to seeing what else emerges from our workshop in the fall. We'd love to connect with colleagues locally and further afield, so we're looking forward to your questions and comments!