

## Digital Literacy for the Dumbest Generation - Digital Humanities Programs 2010

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Marc Baurlein argues that undergraduates now and undergraduates to come soon are “the least curious and intellectual generation in national history.”<sup>1</sup> Dubbing them “the dumbest generation” and “mentally agile” but “culturally ignorant,” Bauerlein decrees that “The Web hasn’t made them better writers and readers, sharper interpreters and more discerning critics, more knowledgeable citizens and tasteful consumers” (Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation* 110). The crux of this attack on digital culture lies in the link that Bauerlein and others (“Reading at Risk” xii) make between paper and digital texts: “the relationship,” Bauerlein explains, “between screens and books isn’t benign” (“Online Literacy is a Lesser Kind”). Like Bauerlein and the authors of the NEA report, Sven Birkerts maintains that book readers learn more because the book is a system that “evolved over centuries *in ways that map our collective endeavor to understand and express our world*” and that “the electronic book, on the other hand, represents—and furthers—a circuitry of instant access” (“Resisting the Kindle”). In contrast to this perspective, scholars and educators in the digital humanities have spent decades working with digital texts and arguing that advanced knowledge production is the primary function of using computational methodologies in the

humanities (Busa 1980, 89; Smedt 2002, 90; McCarty 2005, 13).

The three papers in this panel will give an overview on university programs teaching digital humanities in the US, the UK and Germany. The first paper will treat undergraduate programs, the second graduate programs and the third will describe in depth one PhD program. Like others before us (McCarty, Orlandi, Terras, Unsworth, “The Humanities Computing Curriculum”), we are especially interested in comparing these programs, because this allows us to consider a common understanding of the essential aspects of the work in digital humanities. On the other hand we are interested in analyzing the differences and to explore as much as possible the reasons for them. So an analytic charter of the curricula is complemented by a closer look at the institutional affiliations of the programs and the people mainly responsible for them. Undergraduate programs, for example, have to manage the challenge to offer an introduction not only into *digital* humanities but into the humanities in general while graduate programs have to determine what kind of knowledge they demand from the students entering them. Although our overall perspective on these programs is similar, not only the personality of the three authors but also the specific problems of the different forms of programs motivate quite different papers. Thinking about the work that scholars do in the digital humanities from the perspective of the work we need to do to produce culturally literate and critically savvy—that is, *intelligent*—students is essential.

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#### Notes

1. Please see [www.dumbestgeneration.com/home.html](http://www.dumbestgeneration.com/home.html).

## An Undergraduate Perspective

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The scholarship done by the digital humanities community demonstrates that inquiry enabled by modes of research, dissemination, design, preservation, and communication that rely on algorithms, software, and or the internet network for processing data deepen and advance knowledge in the humanities. Marc Baeurlein complains that undergraduates are passive consumers of “information,” that they convert history, philosophy, literature, civics, and fine art into information,” information that becomes, quite simply, “material to retrieve and pass along” (“Online Literacy”). In contrast, Wendell Piez and other digital humanities scholars insist that when we study “how digital media are *encoded* (being symbolic constructs arranged to work within algorithmic, machine-mediated processes that are themselves a form of cultural production) and how they encode culture in words, colors, sounds, images, and instrumentation,” we are “far from having no more need for literacy;” in fact, the cultural work done by and through digital media requires that students “raise it to ever higher levels.”

At this time, however, discussion concerning undergraduate pedagogy within the digital humanities community remains limited and scattered. For instance, a search for the word “undergraduate” in the past five years of abstracts from the DH conference (or the joint ACH/ALLC conference) shows that there have been less than five presentations specifically concerning undergraduate pedagogy (Jessop 2005; Mahony 2008; Keating, *et al.* 2009). This trend may be linked to the notion that an undergraduate curriculum is more about teaching and less about research (Smedt, *et al.* 16), but this answer is reductive if not partially untrue. At the same time, if we believe that the work digital humanists do “can help us to be more humanistic than before” (Busa 89), why isn’t there more discussion within the DH conference and publications about this essential aspect of undergraduate study?

This paper will discuss work in place to lay the foundation for further (both in terms of more and deeper) discussion

about undergraduate education in the digital humanities. First, this paper will present an updated and annotated bibliography of current undergraduate programs that are inflected by the digital humanities. Though Willard McCarty and Matthew Kirschenbaum’s list of “Institutional models for humanities computing” is extensive, it does not include an updated account of specifically undergraduate programs. That undergraduate studies are not well discussed within the DH community is part and parcel with the fact that it is a field that engages a wide range of disciplinary perspectives and it is a field that is represented by programs of study that are inflected by, but not necessarily called, Digital Humanities. Because this annotated bibliography will be developed as the result of an ongoing discussion with a disperse community, it will reflect a wide range of programs that the community has itself defined as “inflected by digital humanities.” Already, I have created an online list of undergraduate programs generated through an informal survey conducted on *Twitter*, the *Humanist Discussion List*, and the blog U +2E19.<sup>1</sup> To date, the website at King’s College London still touts itself as “one of the very few academic institutions in the world where the digital humanities may be pursued as part of a degree” in undergraduate studies—a fact that is largely still true—but there are many programs without formal degrees where important pedagogy concerning digital culture happens.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the list already includes a broad range of programs encompassing information science, digital cultures, new media, and computer science reflects the difficult nature of training an undergraduate student in the “methodological commons” (McCarty 131) of the digital humanities, but it also reflects the provocative nature of describing what that curriculum might look like. According to Unsworth, “the semantic web is our future, and it will require formal representations of the human record” requiring “training in the humanities, but also in elements of mathematics, logic, engineering, and computer science” (Unsworth). Patrik Svensson sees work in the digital humanities as a kind part of a spectrum “from textual analysis of medieval texts and establishment of metadata schemes to the production of alternative

computer games and artistic readings of nanotechnology” (Svensson). Smedt and his colleagues choose to limit their definition of DH undergraduate programs in order “to concentrate on *computing* and to avoid the fields of information, communication, media, and multimedia since these are generally considered as social sciences rather than as humanities” (16). Just as asking the question “What is Humanities Computing and what is not?” (Unsworth) generates more questions, asking the community to identify programs inflected by the digital humanities is sure to provoke more discussion concerning existing models. What is important to teach these students? What is the core knowledge base needed?

When discussing current models, it is equally important to make transparent the institutional and infrastructural issues that are specific to certain universities. What works for one institution will not necessarily work for another. By the same token, simply providing examples of existing programs would belie the extent to which scholars and administrators shape these programs (whether they grant degrees, certificates, or nothing at all) according to the needs of their specific communities. Consequently, in order to make these matters transparent and broaden discussion about the broad range of issues that underpin the formation of an undergraduate curriculum, I will disseminate a survey to the digital humanities community asking basic questions concerning how an undergraduate program inflected by the digital humanities has been and might be developed within a variety of university settings. These questions are based on previous conversations (Hockey 2001; Unsworth, Butler 2001), but this previous work has focused primarily on graduate (or post-graduate) work. In my attempt to update the conversation with a focus on undergraduate study, I incorporate questions that concern curriculum and questions, which point to infrastructural and institutional concerns that are specific to undergraduate education:

1. What are the aims and objectives of your undergraduate program?
2. How is the academic content of the program structured? What are the core modules/courses?
3. What are the academic backgrounds of students accepted for the program? Are there any particular requirements?
4. Does the program involve participation in research projects at area institutions or centers? If so, what factors influence which projects are chosen? How is participation monitored and assessed?
5. What is the program’s relationship to the larger undergraduate community? Does the program include events, publications, or other opportunities for outreach? Does the program include a residential component, or other opportunities for community building?
6. Does the program grant a certificate or degree? What are the key issues in establishing a certificate or degree for students in your program?
7. How does the program fit into the overall structure of the institution?
8. Are there classes already being taught at your institution? What are the key issues in bringing these classes together under the rubric of a single curriculum?
9. What technical facilities are needed for the program and how are these supported?
10. What are other important infrastructural issues and challenges in setting up a program within your institution?

This paper will present and analyze the findings from this survey.

Finally, this paper will conclude with a case study describing the development of Digital Cultures and Creativity,<sup>3</sup> an undergraduate living and learning program at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD) that we have designed for the 21st century student who was born into the world of windows and the web. The result of a partnership between the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH) and UMD’s Arts and Humanities College, DCC is part of the university’s new Honors College and will commence in the fall of 2010 with classes run by faculty from the Computer Science Department, the Information School, the Art Department and the English

Department. In an effort to make transparent how a program of this nature is developed across disciplines within a large research university, this paper will detail the various stages of development—curricular and administrative—we have navigated during the 2009-2010 planning phase.

In 2001, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek observed that because undergraduates began their research online, scholars should create more and better online resources for academic study (Tötösy). A glance just at the last ten years of the journal of *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, the abstracts from the annual Digital Humanities conference, and the first issues of the *Digital Humanities Quarterly* prove that the DH community has worked hard to create these resources. Scholars in the digital humanities are already teaching the next generation of students not only how to use electronic resources, but how to create them, expand them, and preserve them. Now is the time to make that work transparent and to provide a resource for others who wish to continue, broaden, and support this work.

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#### Notes

1. Please see Blog post “Digital Humanities Inflected Undergraduate Programs” at <http://www.palms.wordherders.net/wp/2009/11/digital-humanities-inflected-undergraduate-programs-2/>.
2. At the time of this writing, Martyn Jessop has written in the *Humanist Discussion Group* to clarify: “Sadly the . . . minor at King’s College London has been closed down” though they “still operate ‘standalone’ modules in digital humanities for 1st and 2nd year students” (Jessop 2009).
3. Please see <http://dcc.umd.edu>.

## Graduate Programs

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In the last five years new graduate programs for digital humanities have been developed in Germany or are actively developed at the moment in four to five universities. This could be understood as a sign that digital humanities have been accepted as part of a modern

university and its spectrum of disciplines. On the other hand it may also point to the fact that in the context of the Bologna process in Europe (i.e. recreating all programs in BA and MA formats to allow students more freedom to change their place of study) Digital Humanities is seen by many people in university administration as uncommon enough to provide the possibility of contributing effectively to the profile of a university. For some, Digital Humanities seems also to contribute a solution to the problem or the tension between the self image of German universities as institutions which are not tasked with providing practical knowledge immediately useful for any profession, on the one hand, and the demands of students and the public in general at least to diminish the gap between the knowledge taught at the university and the demands of professional life outside it.

This paper will give an overview of these new graduate programs in Digital Humanities in Germany and will compare them to those in the US and the UK. As some programs are in the process of being developed just now, there are no definite results at the moment. The analysis will follow these questions:

- What previous knowledge is required by the programs, especially, in respect to computer science, technical skills and the humanities?
- How is the knowledge taught by the programs modeled: primarily as practical, as conceptual, as theoretical, and what is the dominant knowledge model for the program: for example computer science, some form of applied science, humanities?
- How is the program positioned institutionally: What school or department does it and the larger part of its teaching staff belong to? What kind of degree can students earn with the program? Can the program be combined with others and from what kind of department?
- How concrete or abstract is the program defined? Is there a detailed course description or a syllabus of required texts?
- What elements of the program can be found in more general humanities, library science or computer science programs?

There will be a systematic chart comparing the German programs with a selected list of

programs in the US and the UK based on the aspects mentioned above and a systematic analysis of earlier research on digital humanities education. But the paper will also include anecdotal evidence on the problems and difficulties of developing and maintaining such a program.

It will be of special interest to find communalities between all these programs. It is to be expected to find some on the level of practical knowledge like text encoding using XML and TEI, but it is an open question whether more abstract competences like data modeling are shared by all or even most. The same is true for knowledge and expertise usually associated with the humanities: the ability to analyze fictional texts and art, in this case digital texts and digital art.

It has been pointed out that in the long run the discussion on curricula is probably more important for our conception of digital humanities than the theoretical discussion about the topic or at least it is an important contribution to the discussion (cf. Terras). This paper also understands each curriculum as a statement in this discussion, a statement not only directed at the digital humanities community but also towards the humanities. This statement delineates what kind of knowledge about the digital is taken for granted as part of the humanities and what is (still?) marked as special knowledge not shared by most humanities scholars. This borderline is also under discussion and an analysis of what kind of modules and courses are taught by the staff mainly engaged in the digital humanities program can show what point these negotiations have reached.

At last some questions will be discussed which cannot be answered based on the information available now: For example, what kind of professional profile will students with degrees in those programs have? Will digital humanities as a discipline recruit its academic teachers in future from these new programs? Even if the answers cannot be given at the moment, maybe the discussion can contribute to the reflection on question of what a successful graduate program in the digital humanities would look like.

## **PhD in Digital Humanities, King's College London**

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### **1. The PhD in the UK and at King's**

In the United Kingdom the PhD (DPhil at Oxford) is normally a 3-4 year, research-only degree (6-8 years part-time). No course-work or qualifying examinations are required. At King's College London the candidate enters officially into an MPhil; after 9 months to a year he or she then applies for an upgrade to PhD. To gain this upgrade the candidate must demonstrate that he or she is producing work to the standards of a PhD.

### **2. The PhD in Digital Humanities at King's**

The Centre for Computing in the Humanities, King's College London, has offered the PhD in Digital Humanities since 2005. Its first student dropped out after approximately a year, but since then the programme has taken on a further ten. Its first graduate will likely take his degree in Autumn 2010. All of the students have come to the PhD from other institutions, 3 from the U.K., 5 from elsewhere in the European Union, 1 from Norway and 1 from the United States. Of the total 3 are enrolled part-time, the remainder full-time. None has had prior degree-training in the subject. Currently 3 others are in process of developing their research proposals before applying. Since the programme was created there have been in addition 41 serious enquiries, likely at least a dozen of which would have proceeded to enrolment had adequate funding been available.

Apart from two studentships, one from the School of Humanities in 2006 and another from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2009, the programme has had no funding. Teaching assistantships are not available, but the department has begun to offer limited part-time research positions for work on collaborative projects. Lack of funding remains

the most serious impediment to growth of the programme. No serious efforts have yet been made to advertise it.

The primary criterion for admission to the PhD in Digital Humanities is a cogent research proposal supported by letters of recommendation. Usually the applicant develops this proposal in consultation with the departmental Director of Research (Professor McCarty). Proposals of sufficient quality are accepted providing that the department, possibly in collaboration with one or more other departments, can support the research adequately. In a majority of cases to date (7 out of 10) supervision is cross-departmental: 3 with History, 1 with German, 1 with Portuguese, 1 with Computer Science, 1 with the Department of Education and Professional Studies, School of Social Science and Public Policy. Of these 2 are associated also with the King's cross-school Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication. Usually the balance of supervision is equally divided between the CCH and the other department but can vary from 70% to 30%.

Of the current students, 8 out of 10 have come to the programme directly rather than on referral from other departments. In other words, the PhD in Digital Humanities is the primary attractor for those wishing to involve computing as a major component in their research.

From 2009 students for whom living in London would pose a significant hardship can with approval pursue a "semi-distance PhD", with face-to-face supervisory meetings according to an agreed schedule and meetings by Skype as needed. Two students now take advantage of this arrangement, one full-time, one part-time.

Apart from individual supervision, all students in the programme meet in the monthly PhD Seminar, face-to-face or via the Internet, to present and discuss their work. Some meetings are partly devoted to special topics of interest to all. The PhD Seminar also includes students at the University of Alberta and, in a special credit-course, students at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, in real-time via Skype and Dimdim.

### **3. Development of the PhD in Digital Humanities**

The PhD in Digital Humanities has been shaped primarily by the interests of applicants rather than by a pre-conceived notion of what a doctoral degree in the field should be. Technical competence at a level appropriate to computer science or information science has not been assumed or required, although critical thought on computing has been stressed from the beginning through development of research proposals and required subsequently. Practical work is strongly encouraged though it has not been required. A central chapter on the relevant computing methods has become the norm, with a thorough knowledge of the secondary literature attested in a survey or in the citations. In a few cases students have needed and been given technical support from within the department to develop an application of computing. In equally many cases, however, students have come with a high level of technical knowledge and skills. In two cases arrangements are being made to provide specialised training, and in one the student separately obtained an 18-month paid fellowship to work abroad in a technical research institution (some of this work with engineers to design and construct relevant hardware). In brief, highest priority has been given to critical reasoning with and about computing in a manner consistent with the interpretative, problematizing disciplines of the humanities.

In all cases the subject of the research has been a problem within or recognizable to one or more of these disciplines. We have assumed that those who wish to practice computer science on material usually studied in the humanities are altogether better served by that discipline, although we are open to requests for collaborative supervision originating in computer science. In general no decision has been made a priori to restrict primary areas of investigation to the humanities. Students from elsewhere are most welcome to apply, especially since they may well assist us in extending an already broad church.

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