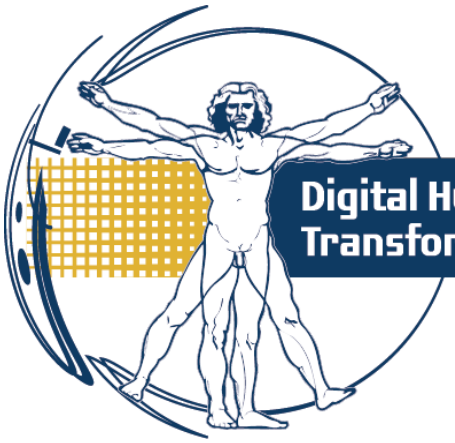

Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship

A SUNY CONVERSATIONS IN THE DISCIPLINES CONFERENCE

A Guide for Students

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Suffolk County Community College

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SUNY The State University of New York

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WHAT HAPPENS AT AN ACADEMIC CONFERENCE?

The faculty at colleges and universities are titled “professors” because their work goes beyond teaching the material in their disciplines: they also *create* it. Through research, writing, experimentation and creative endeavors, professors contribute to the body of knowledge and understanding in their fields. In addition to publishing their work in peer-reviewed journals and books, an important way for academic scholars to share their work is to present it at formal gatherings with others in their field.

Some academic conferences are very broad, such as the annual meetings of the major professional organizations in each academic discipline (for example, the American Philosophical Association, the American Historical Association or the Modern Language Association), which typically have multiple sessions dedicated to a wide range of themes in the field; others are highly specialized, such as a conference dedicated to exploring the imagery of the natural world in the writings of Virginia Woolf. In either case, such gatherings give scholars the opportunity to learn about important movements in their areas of specialization, and to receive feedback from their colleagues on their most recent work.

Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship was conceived as a multidiscipline conference, open to scholars in many fields and bringing a wide range of perspectives. In order for you to get the most out of your experience at the conference, this guide is intended to give you a sense of what

you may expect and to equip you with some background on the issues it will explore.

PANEL SESSIONS

In order to facilitate the orderly presentation of work by many participants, academic conference agendas usually are divided into panel sessions arranged by common themes or subtopics. The size of each panel will vary: Some panels may be dedicated to a major paper by one person, with commentary provided by one or two respondents; others provide the opportunity for several participants to present their own individual projects. After the formal presentations, time is set aside for spontaneous discussion amongst the panelists and for questions from the audience.

Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship will contain four such panel sessions, each with three or four presenters. While some conferences invite long papers and formal commentaries, the spirit of the SUNY *Conversations in the Disciplines* is to allow as much opportunity for open dialog as possible. Thus, the panelists have been asked to keep their presentations relatively brief, in order to permit broader conversations with one another and the audience.

POSTER SESSIONS

“Posters” provide scholars with the opportunity to showcase their research without reading a formal paper. Many academic conferences will have a designated area where attendees may

review poster-board displays summarizing the current projects of several researchers; often the scholars are nearby and available to answer questions.

In keeping with the theme of *The Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship*, the "posters" will take a digital form, with scholars and artists presenting video or slideshow summaries of their work, looping on computer screens. The formal poster session will be held on the morning of the conference, but you may view these presentations at any time throughout the day.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Many conferences will feature a keynote speaker: someone of special stature in the field who is invited to a deliver an address on the overarching theme of the conference. While many of the presenters at *Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship* are recognized experts and leaders in their fields, the spirit of the SUNY *Conversations in the Disciplines* series is to promote dialog among peers. Consequently, the conference was planned with a view to highlighting collaboration in the emerging field of digital humanities, rather than the special contributions of any individual.

However, the closing session of the conference will feature an invited guest: Will Hermes, senior critic at *Rolling Stone Magazine* and author of *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York that Changed Music Forever* (Faber and Faber, 2011). In order to provide a bridge between the themes of the conference and the world outside the academy, Mr. Hermes will be speaking on the topic of digital humanities in music and popular culture.

WHAT ARE THE "DIGITAL HUMANITIES"?

The term "digital humanities" covers a broad range of research questions and techniques that are transforming scholarship across the humanistic disciplines. Prior to the information age in which we live, the traditional fields of humanities scholarship—art and literary criticism, cultural studies, history and philosophy—were defined by the careful analysis of important texts (sometimes original handwritten documents) and careful reading of secondary literature. Today, computer technology has made it possible to automate some of the scholarly tasks needed for such analysis and has made new types of analysis possible for the first time. These possibilities allow today's scholars to address traditional questions in novel ways, but also raise new questions about the very nature of humanistic study.

DIGITAL RESEARCH

As students in the information age, you are familiar with the powerful research tools that contemporary information technology has made possible. From Google and Wikipedia to the numerous electronic databases of scholarly publications, the Internet makes it possible for students to perform literature reviews in hours or minutes that would have taken days or months just a few decades ago. Yet the same computer processing that makes it possible for you to speedily review the research that scholars produce also has redefined the type of scholarship that can be undertaken.

For example, a scholarly technique used in many disciplines involves analyzing the frequency with which a classical author used a particular word or phrase in a work to glean insight about the author's intended (or unintended) meaning, and the work's relationship to its historical and cultural context–a painstaking task in the age before computers. In the digital age, such analysis cannot only be applied quickly to a particular text but to an author's entire body of work. Indeed, the expanding digital archive and increasing processing power of computers will soon make it possible to apply this type of analysis to *all* the published work of *all* major authors of an entire era.

Consider a specific case. The question of humanity's relationship to the natural world is one that has long been explored across the humanistic disciplines. In the past, it could have taken several hours to read through the text of, say, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to see how often the word 'unnatural' appears; an entire career may have been spent tracing the appearance of that word throughout 17th century English literature, in an effort to gain insight into how authors in that cultural period viewed "nature" as a source of value. Today, anyone with an Internet connection and a browser can download an electronic copy of *Macbeth* and search for the instances of 'unnatural' in less than a minute; data mining of the world's expanding digital library makes it a very doable project to see how frequently the word appears throughout 17th century texts in comparison to the literature of the 16th or 18th centuries. In fact, you can try it yourself here: http://books.google.com/ngrams/.

The computer-based analysis of patterns in language and thematic references makes possible projects in cultural studies, history and literary criticism that were unimaginable only a few years ago. The image of the solitary scholar, carefully reading a tome in the library, has been replaced by computer-generated graphs of digital data sets that are available simultaneously to anyone in the world with a web-connected computer. Welcome to the digital humanities!

CROWDSOURCING SCHOLARSHIP

While academic scholarship has always thrived in an open environment promoting the free exchange of ideas, the digital age brings such collaboration to a new global scale. "Crowdsourcing," the distribution of a task—say designing a new product or developing new software—among many, often volunteer, participants is a method of problem solving increasingly common in the worlds of business and creative production. With the advent of the "wiki," this method also is finding a place in the academic world.

Although popular sites such as Wikipedia certainly have their critics, the availability of large-scale collaboration not only allows for convenient access to large bodies of information, but also makes possible academic projects that would take a lifetime for a solitary scholar to complete. For example, a scholar of religious studies may wish to work with a newly unearthed text that exists only in crumbling fragments of ancient material; the reconstruction, transcription and translation of the text could take years of careful attention by one expert. However, the

electronic distribution of digital scans of the fragments can open such a project to input from scholars across the globe, potentially allowing it to be completed in a fraction of the time.

But speed is not the only change that academic crowdsourcing can effect. Just as has been the case in its non-academic applications, there is a democratization of expertise and insight that this type of scholarly collaboration creates. Given the open nature of the digital landscape, one needn't be affiliated with a prestigious institution or have an advanced degree in order to access and, potentially, contribute to a crowdsourced scholarly enterprise. Traditionalists may raise concerns about the quality of work put forward by those without the usual academic résumé, but in the digital age such protests are likely to be met with equally serious questions about the inflexible politics of the traditional academy.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF WRITING

The rise of collaborative scholarship has transformed not only the type of humanities research projects that can be undertaken, but also the very nature of academic writing and publication. Although we may think of wikis as appropriate for informal projects and secondary research, the culture of open source publishing has begun to influence the way academic articles and books are written, and forcing a reevaluation of the very notion of authorship.

Traditional academic publishing is a lengthy and expensive process. Journal articles and full-length books must be submitted to peer-review by other experts in the field in order to validate the scholarly merits of the work; academic publishers need to consider carefully before devoting resources to the printing and distribution of materials that almost always have a very limited audience. Many of these publishers are affiliated with a university system that must use its own funds to underwrite the costs of publication.

But critics charge that this model of scholarly production is outmoded and unnecessarily cumbersome. For a generation that has grown up online, the authority of hardcopy publication is not transparent, and the spontaneous and interactive writing that takes place on blogs and social media has transformed into a genre all its own. Why can't the writing of the digital age be placed into service in the production of academic knowledge? Is it perhaps time for the systems of cooperation and interaction that thrive on the Internet to displace the idol of the individual author as the creator of understanding and insight?

DIFFERENT WAYS OF KNOWING

Such questions reflect a cultural shift that also affects the politics surrounding the ways in which knowledge is produced and identified. A long tradition has held that knowledge, by definition, is objective and impersonal; the methods of traditional scholarship were intended to prevent subjective influences from contaminating the claims put forth as knowledge.

Well before the digital age, however, critical theorists in various humanistic disciplines have questioned the assumptions of this model. Knowledge claims are always advanced by particular individuals and groups in particular cultural settings, and these settings in turn are unavoidably infused with the prejudices and political power structures of an age.

The digital age brings with it a new set of challenges and questions. Today's communication technology makes possible a rapid and wide flow of information that can circumvent the authority of recognized "experts." The promise of an absolute knowledge alleged to transcend the contingencies of our social existence becomes eclipsed by a plurality of local *knowledges*, reflecting the experiences and insights of the diverse agents who produce them. Is this democratization of knowledge an advancement in human liberation or, instead, a step backward on the search for truth?

RELEVANT QUESTIONS FROM ACROSS THE HUMANISTIC DISCIPLINES

Below are some questions related to the humanities classes you may be enrolled in this semester that likely will be addressed during the presentations at *The Digital Humanities and the Transformation of Scholarship*. Before you attend the conference, give these questions some thought. Discuss them with your classmates and professors. During the conference, see how the various presenters touch on these questions, and don't be afraid to ask them any questions of your own.

ART HISTORY AND CINEMA STUDIES

- In looking at the history of art and media, what is the relationship between technology and aesthetics? Is technology a neutral tool that artists can use in the service of their vision, or can technological changes actually shape our aesthetic sensibilities?
- Do the data mining techniques of the digital humanities offer anything new and valuable to the understanding of art historical epochs, or do art and aesthetics transcend what can be computed and quantified?

COMMUNICATIONS

- How well do the standard theories of interpersonal communication apply to the digital world when communication is often impersonal, anonymous and transnational?

- How have contemporary technologies affected how scholars communicate with one another? What are the advantages and dangers of these changes?

COMPOSITION

- From emoticons to Tweets, informal writing in the digital age has taken a turn toward truncated expression that seems to ignore the standard rules of grammar. Is this change all bad? Are there advantages to students doing a good deal of writing in these new forms? Are there any lessons that formal, scholarly writers can learn from these new forms of expression?

LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

- How is the experience of reading a digitized text different from reading a printed text? What are the implications for the literary-critical concept of "textuality," which focuses on the physical and material conditions of the work of literature?
- What will happen to printed texts? Will libraries continue to preserve them? Will people continue to value them?
- How might the creation of searchable databases, text mining, and network mapping change the kinds of questions literary scholars ask? What kinds of collaborations among disciplines might emerge?

HISTORY

- With the turn to digitized versions of artifacts and historical documents, does the gain in speed and convenience come at a cost? Is anything important lost when historians are no longer dealing with "the originals" when they do their research?
- Archiving in any form is a complicated process. Are there special considerations in the age of the digital archive? How do we decide what gets digitally preserved and what doesn't? *Who* should be entrusted with these decisions? What are the mechanics of searching in digital archives, and how might this affect the originality of scholarship?

LIBRARY RESEARCH

- In the digital age, the skills of information literacy have never been more crucial for students and scholars alike. What are some of the challenges you have faced during Internet-based research? What lessons have you learned from these experiences?
- Is there such a thing as too much information? Are there ways in which scholarly research might actually be hampered by the digital technologies that are available today?
- Where do you see the future of libraries and digitized forms of research?
- Do you think that there is a tendency for students and researchers to depend on digital, Internet-based information at the expense of non-digitized sources? How does this

affect your ability to locate, evaluate and effectively synthesize and use information?

- Do students appreciate the difference between research databases that are *accessed* via the Internet and non-academic Internet sources (i.e., Google results)? Does discrimination suffer when such a variety of information sources are all equally accessible?

PHILOSOPHY

- How does technology affect the production of knowledge? Is the traditional quest for absolute knowledge still valid, or has the digital age exposed that goal as a fantasy?
- Are traditional philosophical problems answerable through any of the techniques of the digital humanities? When applied to any of the humanistic disciplines, what are the underlying assumptions behind the quantitative focus of these techniques?
- How does the advent of the digital humanities relate to the prospect of a "post-human" world?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As the possibilities for incorporating digital information technology into the humanistic disciplines explodes, the body of work in and about the digital humanities continues to grow. Below are some links to quality sources of information about the field, examples of projects in the digital humanities and digital humanities research centers at various universities around the country. Also, be sure to visit the conference website (www.sunysuffolk.edu/CID) for more information about the program and the presenters.

- Center for Digital Humanities (University of South Carolina): http://cdh.sc.edu/
- Center for Digital Humanities (UCLA): www.cdh.ucla.edu
- Center for Digital Research in the Humanities (UNL): http://cdrh.unl.edu/
- Center for Digital Scholarship (Brown University): http://library.brown.edu/cds/pages/tag/digital-humanities
- *A Companion to Digital Literary* Studies (online book): http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companionDLS/
- DH Commons: www.dhcommons.org
- Digital Humanities Initiative at Buffalo (SUNY): http://digitalhumanities.buffalo.edu/
- Digital Humanities Now: http://digitalhumanitiesnow.org/
- Digital Humanities Quarterly: www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/

- Digital Scholarship in the Humanities: http://digitalscholarship.wordpress.com/
- Humanities 2.0 (*New York Times* series on the digital humanities): http://topics.nytimes.com/top/features/books/series/humanities_20/index.html
- Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities: http://www.iath.virginia.edu/essays.html
- National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education: http://www.nitle.org/casestudies/
- The Stanford Literary Lab: http://litlab.stanford.edu/
- *Vectors* (online journal/blog): http://vectors.usc.edu/journal/index.php?page=Introduction