



Spring 2021 Newsletter

Integrating Digital Humanities into Undergraduate Education: Lessons Learned from a BT2P Grant Project

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Along with Susan Hangen and Cathy Hajo from Ramapo College, we were recipients of a 2019 Multi-Institution Innovation Grant (MIG) from Bringing Theory to Practice to introduce liberal arts faculty to discipline-specific digital tools that they could integrate into their classes and teaching. Although Ramapo College of New Jersey is a public liberal arts institution, and Seton Hall University a private Catholic institution, both schools have diverse student bodies of first-generation college students, a dedication to faculty-student engagement in small classes, and a commitment to finding ways to use technology to enhance teaching and learning.

There are significant differences in technology access and support at the two schools; Seton Hall has been a leader in technology for teaching and learning since the mid-1990s, while Ramapo College was a later adopter and has a less fully developed technological infrastructure. The two schools joined forces through their participation in the New Jersey Digital Humanities Consortium, which we organized in 2016 to bring together faculty, librarians, and IT personnel in order to encourage collaboration and information sharing among colleges and universities across the state. Faculty at both schools have been experimenting with digital projects. However, these initiatives were primarily coming out of the technology division as opposed to being driven by the discipline-specific needs and interests of the faculty. Our BT2P grant aimed to enhance digital tools for disciplinary learning in the humanities.

As a result of the grant, ten faculty members were selected to develop plans for digital humanities (DH) projects that would support teaching and learning in a specific course. Our goal was to help faculty become proficient in digital tools that they could then integrate into their classes in history, psychology, language, literature, and business writing. We held a monthly series of workshops and discussions where faculty gained technical skills and created digital assignments that exposed students to new digital possibilities and encouraged new ways of learning. In addition, we organized the participants into small working groups based on common project goals—such as text annotation, mapping, data visualization, and so on—which allowed them to share ideas, strategies, and challenges in a focused way.

The responses of participants made it apparent that the project helped those concerned see even more clearly the place of digital skills in the undergraduate curriculum, especially if they are worked in holistically. In addition to the curricular rewards, however, the digital approach is providing other benefits in terms of sharing ideas and materials: faculty with limited travel budgets can still participate in various scholarly events; collaboration can happen more easily, despite time and distance, which also leads to greater inclusion, whether that means guest speakers, students, and others who can supplement the work of the larger group.

Midway through the grant, the COVID-19 pandemic erupted. While we initially were unsure about how this cross-institutional partnership would be affected, we were gratified to see that the digital skills the faculty had been acquiring actually helped mitigate the disruption to their classes. Of course, participants were already thinking about their teaching in terms of the digital, and we had established a virtual component for both the large and small meetings in order to accommodate scheduling and commuting challenges. Much of our communication was done by email, chat or Zoom, especially during the winter. As a result, the shift to all-remote or HyFlex teaching was not nearly as disruptive as it might have been for many of the instructors involved in the project.

One of our grant participants, Greg Iannarella, a writing instructor, noted that students quickly got more comfortable navigating digital spaces. He uses digital sandboxes and projects in his classes, which he believes help with a major higher education problem: convincing students that their education is relevant to their future professional lives. Another writing instructor, Rachael Warmington, observed that because many digital tools are free and open access, they are accessible to everyone, regardless of income. This kind of availability also eased the shift to remote or HyFlex instruction, especially with students who no longer had access to their institutions and those resources. Susan Nolan, a psychology professor, was excited by the ways digital approaches to teaching actually helped bring people together. One way she saw this was by using peer review of student work. This enabled students, even though they were not together in the classroom, to see one another's work and get feedback from one another.

Besides being unexpectedly prepared for the sudden changes in course modality brought about by the pandemic, the larger aim of our project – to ensure that humanities graduates gain digital presentation and analysis skills – became even more important in the current environment in which work and education have become almost entirely digital. Susan Hangen, Dean of the School of Humanities and Global Studies at Ramapo College, pointed out that it is now more important than ever to show how humanities majors are connected to career skills, since recent events may prompt further public movement away from the humanities and towards education that is more narrowly vocational. The project, occurring when it did, also led those involved to recognize the broader impact such a model might have: Hangen observed that while “all institutions are facing financial crises as a result of COVID, our project is a great example of sharing resources across institutions.” And, as Susan Nolan noted, “digital tools can facilitate cooperative work across regions of the world.” These were things we certainly knew in theory pre-pandemic, but they have now become a day-to-day reality.

It is quite obvious to all concerned that higher education will never be the same. While it was already in the process of morphing into something else prior to the pandemic, the grant from BT2P positioned those of us involved in the project to take advantage of a pivotal moment and to help our faculty colleagues do so as well. Some of the participants have given demonstrations and workshops at their home institutions to show how digital tools and skills can be integrated into the curriculum. We anticipate that the shifts we have seen will continue and even intensify now that so many faculty members have been exposed to the possibilities of the digital. This does not mean everyone will or should teach remotely or in hybrid form, but what we found is that even the most traditional course can benefit from the kind of work enabled by our BT2P

grant. We've seen new and exciting forms of course assignments emerge—podcasting, virtual galleries, and large-scale annotation projects—and we've seen faculty who were nervous at the start of the project become much more comfortable using not only the tools they set out to learn but additional ones as well. While teaching digitally is slowly but surely becoming more common, we believe the pandemic accelerated change and forced instructors to adopt tools and techniques they might have waited years to try. But now that they've done so, they—and we—are excited to see what new understandings and DH practices will continue to emerge.