PERSONAL INTERFACE AND FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AT THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD DIGITAL EDITION, OR WHAT JANE MANAGES BEFORE AFTERNOON TEA

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Abstract

Using the editorial collective of students and faculty who collaborate on The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition as a case study, this article considers how the challenges of conducting digital humanities research at Master’s Comprehensive institutions results in positive pedagogical outcomes. The author argues that when faculty involve students in the design and implementation of digital research they engage students in meaningful experiences beyond the classroom that can improve retention rates and help students take ownership over their own learning. Because The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition considers the work of a woman writer from the nineteenth century, the article also addresses how the digital humanities might, under the right conditions, foster women’s interest in pursuing the computer sciences.

On the surface, this is a narrative about how a group of women came together under the auspices of building a digital project as an act of literary and material interpretation. What I hope the story will reveal, however, is threefold: 1) That large, Master’s Comprehensive state universities might find answers for the problems that plague them (including student retention rates and issues regarding academic standards, to name just two) by further supporting faculty/student collaboration; 2) That “building” is “thinking.” Although digital humanities has developed a reputation for privileging research over pedagogy, it is poised, at institutions of this type, to offer students meaningful roles in faculty-led research projects that support a level of student engagement rarely seen in the traditional classroom; 3) That the digital humanities might prove a successful venue for engaging more woman in computer science. According to the National Science Foundation, women were awarded only 18% of the computer sciences degrees in 2010. Much of the research suggests that the field has difficulty attracting and retaining women because curriculum in the computer sciences does not address technology’s ability to have a wider sociocultural impact.1 These sociocultural concerns are central to the digital humanities, which approach the questions of literature, art, and culture using collaborative, innovative digital methodologies. Projects in the digital humanities take many forms from large-scale data mining to minutiae-level text encoding using XML. Practitioners and students of the digital humanities learn a host of technological skills dependent on the nature of the question they are attempting to explore. Learning about the digital humanities is not equivalent to a degree in the computer sciences. However, the digital humanities could offer collaborative explorations of enduring questions that encourage some of our most inspired undergraduate women to integrate technology with their subjects of interest, and pursue further training in Computer Science. However, the institutionalization of the digital humanities as it stands in English studies, in particular, has resulted in a reification of the canon and an emphasis on tool building that, as some critics argue, is constructing a field that excludes women and people of color.

The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition is an ongoing digital project with an editorial collective of four professors, seven undergraduate students, and one graduate student. The project maps transatlantic publication networks via the development of a digital edition of Susan Warner’s sentimental novel The Wide, Wide World. The novel relates the coming-of-age of Ellen Montgomery, an orphan, who is sent to live in the Hudson River Valley with her uncaring aunt. Ellen develops a widening sphere of influence

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when she rides her pony through the countryside, encountering a variety of American subcultures in her travels and struggling to adjust to these distinct communities. The novel first attracted scholarly interest in the 1970s, when it became a primary site for feminist interrogations into nineteenth-century sentimentality. The Wide World Digital Edition challenges assumptions about the gendered and national boundaries of sentimentality through an exploration of the transatlantic reprinting and reception of the novel over a hundred-year period.2

When I started the process of imagining what a digital instantiation of reprinting would entail, I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa. I spent three years in archives researching my dissertation in English literature. This experience would provide the foundation for my theoretical approach to reprinting, and the images I collected at these sites would serve as the raw materials for The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition. In addition to my time in the English Department, I was also a student in the certificate-granting Center for the Book program (which now also offers a master’s degree in book arts).3 At the Center, I studied the history of the book, not just by reading and examining rare materials, but also by making paper, building historical bindings structures, and typesetting broadsides and chapbooks that I then printed on a Vandercook press. Rather than seeing these two aspects of my education as opposing entities, “thinking” and “building” became inseparable concepts for me. Although writing my dissertation was primarily a solitary endeavor,4 in the Center, a group of supportive students worked side-by-side, providing instruction and guidance to one another. The first print shops were, after all, inherently collaborative spaces by design. We were learning through building things together; I doubt that I would have successfully completed graduate school without the Center for the Book, and the experiences I had there changed how I understand scholarly labor and pedagogy.

Since beginning my career at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville in 2008, The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition has morphed into a project that largely mirrors my experiences at the Center. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is a Master’s Comprehensive institution with a population of 14,000 undergraduates located twenty-five miles northeast of St. Louis, Missouri. SIUE didn’t initially recruit me to be a digital humanist; they hired me to be an early Americanist, but I brought what was then The Wide, Wide World Hypermedia Archive with me on three DVDs and pleaded with the University’s IT department to let me install it on a University server. While this project’s ultimate success benefitted from the support of those in my institution who rallied to my cause, I’ve also fought the battles typical to digital humanists at institutions of this size: I’ve argued for the worth of digital projects for my retention and tenure case; I’ve spent years begging, stealing, and waiting around for the tech support I need to advance the project, usually instead learning how to do it on my own; and I’ve worked diligently to convince other faculty at SIUE to take all of it seriously, establishing the Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship Center in 2010 with my colleague Kristine Hildebrandt and the support of the College of Arts and Sciences.5 Those struggles might have been enough to convince me to heed the advice of others and crush all three DVDs under my feet while retreating to my office to finish my book … except for one thing. In 2010, I took on my first SIUE Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities Assistant (URCA) to work on the project. The URCA program (now experiencing its own lack of funding) pairs students and faculty to work on research projects. What started as one student has become a group of seven volunteers—all women, incidentally—who meet weekly to discuss project goals, train one another, and complete the sometimes monotonous labor of building a substantial digital edition.

It is easy for students to become lost in the shuffle at SIUE; the University consistently does well in U.S. World and News Report rankings among its peer institutions, except for the one sticking point of low

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3 More information can be found about the Center for the Book’s programs at http://book.grad.uiowa.edu.
4 In fact, partly due to the dearth of collaborative opportunities in the English Department, fellow graduate students Kate Krueger, Laura Capp, Nicki Buscemi and I started a Skype-based dissertation-writing group that is still active. We shared our experiences via Skype at the 2008 Dickens Universe, in a session titled “Corsets, Computers, and Collaboration: Dissertation Support at a Distance.”
5 To learn more, visit the IRIS Center’s website at http://siueiris.com.
retention rates. This is partly because SIUE is a regional university whose students traditionally do not become fully integrated into campus life. Many of them, like me, come from the poor rural and urban communities that spread out like an intricate Midwestern patchwork quilt of corn fields and defunct rust belt factories. While the University’s administration has been working to develop programs that encourage students to participate in an academic life on campus, most students go home on the weekend, and many are attempting to juggle the commitments of work, school, and family. The University hasn’t always been in a position to encourage or facilitate retention through collaboration between student affairs and academic services—a challenge that, when accomplished, most studies show, results in the best retention rates. The same studies indicate that relationships with faculty members are of the utmost importance for student success.6

Students who have worked on The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition are a case in point of why student/faculty collaborations can make such a difference for student success. Kayla Hays is a recent graduate of SIUE who worked on the project for two years and was also a paid assistant during her last semester. Her experiences as a student address ongoing concerns about connectedness, mentorship, and the value of collaborative work. Kayla says that having one-on-one time with a faculty member has been one of the most rewarding aspects of her work with The Wide, Wide World Editorial Collective. Rather than just seeing me during office hours, Kayla and I worked side-by-side for two years; we solved major problems together (even though she has graduated, she is still coding an e-book for the project and coming to our weekly meetings). Kayla was particularly engaged in this project because, in her own words, she “hadn’t previously thought about literary study in relationship to building things before or about books as material objects.” The collaborative work created an evolution in her thinking about the labor going on behind a work of literature and “the multiple minds and hands that go into any text.” Kayla also talks about how the project has taught her “to take leaps, to learn on my own and with others.” Kayla explains, “I’ve felt, on top of all of that, an immense sense of responsibility; everything I do isn’t going to just affect the work of the other project members now, but [the project] five years from now. There is a great impetus for care too, because I’ve come to understand [the professor’s] vision for the project, and I have my own too. I want to honor that vision.”7 When the Editorial Collective was writing a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant in 2012, Kayla took responsibility for entire portions of the new demo site. Kayla describes herself as painfully uncomfortable when speaking in front of a class of students. However, among this group of women, she became an expert; she led training sessions and quality control initiatives. As Kayla’s experiences demonstrate, the project engages students in forms of academic labor that they likely will not experience in the traditional classroom. As a member of Editorial Collective, Kayla had to put her own ideas into conversation with my own and her classmates. She had to peruse and consolidate information across a large body of texts. She learned how to describe and bibliographically analyze all of the parts of a book and digitally encode those details for a broad public.

Far from understanding knowledge as the property of a singular individual or technology as progressive innovation, her work on this project indicates that knowledge is collective and that technology is cyclical. Ed Folsom’s 2007 “Database as Genre” article in PMLA suggests that the post-modern turn toward the database as the predominant access point of knowledge will create a cultural shift toward this kind of thinking and away from a persistent emphasis on original authorship. The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition’s focus on cultural remix, however, explores a much longer history of the worldview that Folsom identifies. In his response to Folsom, Peter Stallybrass offers his own example of the bee as an Early Modern metaphor of inventorying one’s reading. Quoting Francis Daniel Pastorious,

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6 There have been a multitude of studies on student retention rates over the last twenty years that address student financial insecurities and remedial programs, but the recent trend is to examine the environment and structure of campus life, particularly as regards the relationship between student affairs and academics. Although there are several relevant citations, for the purposes of this article, see Biren A. Naga, et. al. “Undergraduate Student-Faculty Research Partnerships Affect Student Retention,” Inside Higher Education 22, no. 1 (1998): 55-72, Vincent Tinto, “Colleges as Communities: Taking Research on Student Persistence Seriously,” The Review of Higher Education 21, no. 2 (1997): 167-177, and Glenda Crosling, et. al., Improving Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Teaching and Learning (New York: Routledge, 2008).

7 Kayla Hays, in discussion with the author, March 5, 2013.
Stallybrass writes that only after reading, ‘collecting, like Bees, from every flower,’ can the writer ‘hiue their hony on [his] tongue.” Stallybrass uses the bee metaphor, not unlike Folsom’s concept of database, in his classroom to encourage his students to read widely, keep a commonplace book, and consider the history of their own knowledge.

Because I understand book history and the digital humanities as intricately linked disciplines, the bee has since become an enduring, extensible metaphor for my own pedagogy. Honeybees are, after all, collaborative creatures. They work on their own to cover vast distances and bring back their pollen to share with the hive. Personal glory means very little to a bee. My work as a student in the Center for the Book prepared me to understand the labor of the writer as only one locus in a complex matrix of intentions, influences, and materials that result in the text, or, in Pastorious’s metaphor, the honey. In order to encourage students to put their own work as writers and readers in this perspective, I’ve started to integrate collaborative, building-based projects into my curriculum. In a senior assignment course, for instance, I have students work with their peers to build linked physical/digital exhibits at the University’s Lovejoy Library. Facilitating large-scale group projects with students has taught me that they aren’t necessarily used to thinking of their writing either as being the result of outside influences or as influencing others; many of the problems they experience when writing traditional research papers have to do with their inability to think of their work as a part of a community. The fact remains, however, that a class and a project have a finite window of expectations and consequences; after the semester ends, they can easily return to a more singular model of writing and thinking.

In the case of student/faculty collaborations, the work of the collective has higher stakes and more lasting effects. The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition combines the tools of literary interpretation that they are in the process of developing with new organizational and methodological skills of archival file management, encoding, and editing that they are newly learning. Together we hash things out; they train one another (and me). I wish I could say this happened on purpose, that I planned on every misstep we would need to work through so that they could take ownership over the project, but the truth is, without a digital center already on campus, I have been learning right along with them. They are not just students; they are fellow researchers. Because all of our names are attached to the project, we are equally culpable for its outcomes. Even as the project requires students to take ownership over their own learning and other students’ learning, it also requires them to relinquish a degree of control over their work because the project belongs to all of us. When we were recently hammering out the new design for the website, we walked through each page of it together arguing about what we liked and didn’t like and thinking through our shared experiences with the content.

Precisely because of the limitations I have faced in getting a digital project of this size up and running at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, we do everything ourselves and we learn as we go. As a case-in-point, in 2011, as a result of an internal grant, The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition was able to purchase an archival book scanner for the IRIS Center. The Constitution Island Association in West Point, NY, which curates Warner’s home and papers, sent eighty-two editions of the novel to SIUE for us to begin the work of developing our main data set for the project. In preparation, I read blog entries and standard-guides about how to obtain the best archival quality images without harming brittle nineteenth-century books. I was more than a little distraught when the book scanner itself arrived with a five-page booklet of poorly written instructions and very little technical support. The students and I, through trial and error, developed best-practices for using the scanner, quality-controlling our images, renaming files, and developing a system of back-up. We all used the machine weekly and reported back about our successes and failures. As a group, we had to become intimately familiar with our specific materials in order to achieve the best possible scans. Each book had its own needs. Students learned, for example, how to mitigate the tight gutters in the cheapest nineteenth-century books through the usage of a variety of props so that they could get the clearest image without distressing the book’s spine. By the time we

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returned the books, we had developed a rotation of scanning aids that included cloth-covered yoga blocks and hand-sewn spine supports. Despite the indefatigable rules that mandated resolution and file type, through our everyday work of trying to get the best possible scan quality, our motto became “scanning is an art, not a science!” Through these experiences students learned that technology isn’t just about using rules from a handbook; it requires complex problem solving.

The project’s focus on women’s lives, the body, sentiment, and reading communities tends to attract female students. Every semester, I would put out an advertisement to which mostly women would reply. The men who showed some interest wouldn’t sign up after knowing more about the project’s content. What started as a project open to any student, before my eyes, morphed into a women’s encoding enclave and support system, which I now proudly label The Wide, Wide World Editorial Collective. I was sheepish about this at first. I believe in multi-gendered learning environments, and I am certainly aware of the embedded processes of inclusion and exclusion that can accompany the troubled category of “woman.” Despite these initial concerns, I have begun to appreciate what the project offers female students. Many of the women in my classes turn in brilliant writing that shows an engagement with literature and a deep devotion to learning, but during class discussion they remain silent. I always assign participation grades with the argument that learning to speak cogently about reading and writing is a necessary skill for a well-rounded English major, but there is not much I can do to help those students for whom speaking in front of an audience of thirty-six of their peers is terrifying. At the same time, there are female students who are so thrilled to be among writers and thinkers that they are bursting with ideas that the classroom can’t contain. While I don’t mean to suggest that these traits are unique to women, having the support of an all-female collective has helped these particular students express their interests and develop confidence in ways that I did not imagine when I began the project. The smaller group size and the fact that they take over portions of the project themselves means that they can speak with authority to their peers. As I saw this dynamic developing, rather than remaining self-conscious about the group of women that the project attracted, I began handpicking students, drawing on my experiences with them in the English Department’s Early American Literature survey course. Now, when I find students who willingly slog through the Puritans with verve, I know I might have a potential member of The Wide, Wide World Editorial Collective in my class. Working on the edition, as the students will attest, takes patience, courage, creativity, and discipline.

Although the project started out under the auspices of the URCA program, the students now primarily participate as volunteers, donating ten hours of their week to the project plus two Saturdays a semester for Wide, Wide World Camp, during which we train one another on new skills or each work busily on our own portion of the project supported via our consultations with one another. I piece together opportunities to fund their work and offer them course credit because I so value what they do. There are undoubtedly social aspects to the students’ desire to participate. We bring food to Camp Saturdays, and we share dinner together several times a semester. They become close friends with one another in addition to their working relationships. They also develop a mentoring relationship and friendship with me that I presume is unique.

Yes, The Wide, Wide World happens to be a text about the problems, the possibilities, and the risks inherent in forms of female empowerment. It is a text about women’s friendships and a text about taking language and making it one’s own. Through the recovery of fan letters, the works of bookbinders, and the reading habits of prize plate winners, the project itself celebrates the possibility of building communities with a book as the motivating engine. When students recite the text aloud as they correct optical character recognition scans, I am reminded of the ways that the book’s story of evolution and repurposing by myriad publishers, editors, and readers is continuing through our labor. I’ve also come to realize how fitting it is that a group of women has gathered around this particular project. Despite the many criticisms that one might make in regards to the category of “woman” and “women’s studies,” Susan Fraiman argues that these terms can still be useful and transformative for

“academic justice work … that places women, gender, and post-identity studies in a relationship of simultaneity and adjacency rather than seriality…. Women’s Studies remains … a usable tool
in feminist theory’s workshop—above all as a polemical hedge against the tendency for women to recede from view, even within oppositional scholarship.\footnote{10}

It has come to seem to me that the digital humanities and the field of Computer Science are just such sites wherein the identifier “woman” might be a “usable tool.” According to a 2005 census of recent scholarship on gender and computing over an eleven-year period, “a consistent finding is that a masculine culture dominates academic and work environments in computer fields … a feminine approach to science is associated with a more holistic approach to problem solving, one in which scientists are engaged in the social world.”\footnote{11} Feminist theory has a history of studying and fostering collaborative versus competitive modes of research and learning that could be adapted to the digital humanities.\footnote{12}

Yet, as Miriam Posner’s February 29, 2012 blog post “Some Things to Think about Before you Exhort Everyone to Code” reiterates, women who decide to embark on a career in the digital humanities may find themselves in unfamiliar, sometimes hostile, territory. Although Posner is referring to programming rather than text encoding, a January 13, 2013 exchange on the Text Encoding Initiative’s listserv illustrates her point. In response to Sebastian Rahtz’s release of a new set of stylesheets, Martin Mueller proposed that the processes for linking the stylesheets to the TEI encoded text might not “be obvious to a graduate student in English who has heard about TEI and wants to dip her toes into it because she thinks it may be a better way of putting on the Web some 17th century poems she has transcribed from a manuscript.”\footnote{13} Mueller’s post goes on to specify that he isn’t singling out women and that his greater concern is making the instructions and the standards more accessible to a new generation of digital humanists. Mueller’s criticisms were apt; even digital humanities projects like Omeka that market themselves as “out of the box” solutions for aspiring librarian professionals and humanities scholars sometimes mire their documentation with code-speak. In his reply, Sebastian Rahtz cheekily re-deployed Mueller’s hypothetical graduate student and responded with a numbered list indicating the level of training she would need to go through before she would be using the stylesheets, explaining that “neither XSLT per se nor my stylesheets are intended to be seen or read or understood by our Jane Graduate on Day 1… Frankly, if Jane is just ‘putting on the Web some 17th century poems she has transcribed from a manuscript’ she can use WordPress and be home in time for tea.”\footnote{14} Rahtz may have been adding an extra level of satire by extending Mueller’s initial image of the female graduate student, but choosing to label the digital dilettante in this exchange “Jane” was no accident. This is not “Jane” of Dick and Jane; this tea-sipping Jane has nineteenth-century literary predecessors, and one can guess that her particular interest in seventeenth-century poetry is a feminine one. In this historical trajectory, women become the less-informed usurpers very much like nineteenth-century women novelists. Rahtz’s response reads like Hathworne remixed—a damned mob of encoding (rather than scribbling) women.\footnote{15}

While both text encoding and programming have a major learning curve, much of that learning is done on one’s own or in classroom environments where women are conspicuously out of place (I recently audited a Computer Sciences class in which I was one of four women out of forty students). In Posner’s post, she elaborates on the gendered and racial dynamics behind being “exhorted to code.”

It is not about “should.” What women should do has nothing to do with it. The point is, women aren’t. And neither, for that matter, are people of color. And unless you believe (and you don’t, do you?) that some biological explanation prevents us from excelling at programming, then you must see that there is a structural problem.16

That structural problem, as I understand it, was given shape at a poorly attended 2011 panel at the Society for Textual Scholarship on feminism and the digital humanities. Martha Nell Smith, Katherine Harris, Marta Werner, and Jacqueline Wernimont articulated the ways in which the focus on tool creation and large-scale data has begun to edge out recovery projects and even projects like this one that lead to a deeper understanding of a text that feminist scholars, at least, have come to understand as canonical. As Wernimont explains, “As tools become part of accreditation or access, gendered differentials begin to have larger scale impacts, shaping a field, important centers, and grant funding streams in ways that are downright exclusionary. Suddenly the “big tent” becomes (or remains) a far less interesting place than it might be.”17 Wernimont’s call is an important one, especially when national funding agencies are making many of the decisions about which DH projects succeed.

Still, despite these differentials there are also real possibilities at the intersection of Women’s Studies and the Digital Humanities. President Obama calls on us yearly to increase the number of competent students graduating from American universities with STEM degrees because those fields are essential to economic growth and national security. The arts and humanities do not usually get the same notice in the State of the Union Address, but statistics relating the gender disparities in STEM fields suggest that perhaps they should. According to Ben Gose, “The number of computer-science graduates stayed relatively flat from 1985 to 2010, at more than 39,000, while the number of women earning degrees in the field plummeted, from 14,431 to 7,306.”18 Study after study demonstrates that this disparity has nothing to do with ability, and that women would be more likely to pursue Computer Science if the curriculum considered the nuanced social, cultural, and political problems that technology can help us address in new ways.19 Although the digital humanities is not equivalent to a degree in the Computer Sciences, it might provide Jane with the content that inspires her to learn to code and the supportive environment necessary to experiment with its possibilities. Stephen Brier’s recent piece in the new collection Debates in the Digital Humanities indicates that digital humanities has privileged research, with pedagogy serving as an afterthought, but it does not have to continue this way.20

This brings me back, finally, to Master’s Comprehensive universities like SIUE. As I stated previously, encouraging faculty/student collaborations can increase standards and improve retention at these large state schools. At the same time, these environments have something to offer the digital humanities; they have a reputation and an environment that encourages innovative, engaged teaching. These schools are therefore prepared to integrate digital humanities pedagogy into the curriculum both in regards to faculty/student collaboration and in the classroom. When developing the IRIS Center, Kristine

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Hildebrandt and I quickly realized that it is not possible to have a digital research center at a school like SIUE without thinking about how it will support and enhance the student population. For instance, this year, in collaboration with Dennis Bouvier, a colleague in Computer Science, we have been developing a Digital Humanities and Social Sciences Minor that requires two Computer Science courses in addition to technology-related courses in a host of other disciplines and a semester-long internship. Our hope is that the minor will foster a new cohort of students with the technical ability and courageous approach to learning that makes them good partners for faculty projects, but we are also banking on the fact that this minor will give students a cadre of hirable skills to bolster their humanities degrees.

As a faculty member, working with The Wide, Wide World Editorial Collective has taught me as much as it has my students. Their engaging questions regarding the book’s content have led me in directions far beyond the book history lens through which I originally approached it. They have motivated me to add more community-driven opportunities for collaboration to the site’s design. Perhaps, most importantly, they have inspired me through their ability to push beyond the barriers that hinder collaboration, to build upon one another’s work, and to always be bold enough to learn something new. Jane will code, come hell or high tea.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of The Wide, Wide World Editorial Collective for the ways in which they have challenged me to re-think my teaching and my own field of study, including Kelly Walsh, Wendy Wyrostek, Consuella Kelly, Christy Koester, Kayla Hays, Jennifer Roberts, Brianne Foster, Brianne Harris, Kristin Mefford, Jessalyn Ludwig, Jessica Fritsch, Molly Marcum, and Kate Workman. Our collective also includes the work of my colleagues Jill Anderson at SIUE, Jennifer Brady at Harvard University, and Melissa White at Skidmore College.