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How the Humanities Compute in the Classroom

David Zentz for The Chronicle

Students present their projects in Miriam Posner's introductory digital-humanities course at UCLA. "The way we measure data is subjective," she teaches them. "We're talking about the part of reality that we're able to capture and make use of."

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By Marc Parry
Los Angeles

Computer-assisted scholarship in the humanities dates back decades. In the past five years, though, the kinds of work collectively known as the digital humanities have taken on fresh luster. Observers have called this technology-inflected research "the next big thing."

Beyond the headlines and hoopla, digital scholarship has begun to work its way into the academic ecosystem. In the following collection of articles, read more about how the digital humanities play now in the undergraduate classroom,

whether they pay off in tenure and promotion, and what it takes to create a work of digital scholarship that will last.

I man Salehian talks like a techie. Ask about her studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, and she mentions many tools that make the web tick: metadata schemas and content-management systems, CSS coding and GIS mapping.

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David Zentz for The Chronicle

A year ago, Iman Salehian, an English major at UCLA, had never heard of digital humanities. Now she has helped write a coursebook in the field.

Her major? English.

Ms. Salehian is at the vanguard of a different kind of humanities education. If you took any English or philosophy as an undergraduate, you probably recall low-tech seminars about, say, Kant's categorical imperative. Increasingly, though, humanities programs teach students to deconstruct technologies, not just texts. Computational approaches to the humanities, in existence for decades, have matured to the point where research methods once practiced by select scholars can now be taught to undergraduates in a matter of hours.

Colleges see the fresh digital focus as an opportunity to demonstrate the continued importance of the humanities. And students hope that credentialing themselves in this field, known as "digital humanities," will strengthen their job prospects.

"Critical engagement with the digital infrastructure that permeates every aspect of

our lives—that's a pretty important role for the humanities to play," says Johanna Drucker, a veteran digital humanist at UCLA. "The humanities deans are really looking for ways to increase the perceived value of their offerings in their fields and to save their departments by increasing enrollments and getting resources."

The trend is tricky to quantify because the digital humanities are often an element of a course rather than a distinct discipline, and colleges sometimes refer to them by other terms, such as "digital liberal arts." But you see evidence of their growth in the new digital-humanities minors created over the past three years at research institutions like UCLA and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, where students flock to courses titled "DH101: Introduction to Digital Humanities" (UCLA) and "Being Human in the Digital Age" (Nebraska).

Interest has grown at smaller liberal-arts institutions as well. When Rebecca Frost Davis surveyed that sector in 2012-13 for the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education, she found that 23 of the 32 responding institutions offered courses that covered aspects of digital humanities. Four had full-fledged DH classes, including Bucknell University and Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Those kids still do close readings of the classics. But they also move beyond traditional assignments like writing a paper about an Emily Dickinson poem that has already been dissected by generations of undergraduates. "It gives students a chance to do new research, to do something that they or other people haven't done before," says Brian Croxall, a digital-humanities strategist and English lecturer at Emory University.

Mr. Croxall's students used Google Earth to map the geographic trajectories of Virginia Woolf's characters. At UCLA, undergraduates helped create gamelike visualizations of ancient Rome. At Nebraska, students staged "history harvests" to digitally archive the artifacts and stories of ordinary people.

One English class used Google Earth to map the trajectories of Virginia Woolf's characters.

Digital-humanities classes scramble old patterns of humanities pedagogy. Instead of writing papers alone in the hush of library carrels, students collaborate on group projects in the bustle of labs. Instead of burrowing down in

one discipline, they gain exposure to a variety of them. And instead of writing papers for lone professors, they often publish their work online for the world.

But these programs also generate debates and complications. Many undergrads know nothing about digital humanities; they yawn at the field's arcane issues, like how to evaluate digital work in tenure decisions; and many plan to pursue careers outside academe. Do they even need a DH program? Should it be a major? A minor? A new department? How broadly do you define digital humanities?

Expanding these programs also presents problems. Unlike another hot technology innovation, the massive open online course, or MOOC, project-oriented digital-humanities classes don't easily lend themselves to mass broadcast. And faculty members qualified to teach them aren't easily found. New-media programs abound, Ms. Drucker notes, but the digital-humanities community remains small. "It's the difference between the restaurant critic and the cook in the kitchen," she says. "Can you make it, or can you only assess it?"

Students, while enthusiastic about digital humanities, also greet the new programs with questions.

"They're acting like savvy consumers, trying to figure out: Is this a worthwhile investment of my time?" says Miriam Posner, who teaches a DH101 course, modeled on one developed by Ms. Drucker, and who also coordinates UCLA's digital-humanities program. "Is there going to be a payoff for me later? And is it interesting to me: Does it help me see something new about the world?"

On a Wednesday afternoon in October, Ms. Posner paces a computer lab, trying to help her DH101 students see something new about data.

"Does anyone feel brave enough to offer a definition of data?" she asks.

These are early days in a process of defamiliarization. For undergraduates, technology platforms can seem as natural as the LA sunshine outside. If Ms. Posner succeeds, they'll never see them that way again. Students will be able to analyze digital objects—the values embedded in them, the ways they exert power—with the sophistication that a cultural historian might apply to analyzing a movie.

After a pause, one student ventures a definition of data.

"Bits of information," he says.

"That's pretty good," Ms. Posner says. She explains that "data" comes from the Latin for "to give," "which sometimes makes it seem as though data is a given, something that we're naturally deriving from reality."

It isn't. Ms. Posner drives home that point with a slide show of methods humans have devised to carve up the world. The decimal system, which divided the day into 100 equal hours in classical China. The herring barrel, once an important unit of measurement in Scotland and England. The census, in which racial categories struggle to capture the diversity of identities that Americans use to label themselves.

"The way we measure data is subjective," Ms. Posner says. "We're not talking about reality. We're talking about the part of reality that we're able to capture and make use of."

Then the class takes a crucial step: It moves from talking to building.

Ms. Posner thinks students must make technology to understand it. In today's data lesson, they don't make anything complicated. She poses a hypothetical problem: An uncle has died, bequeathing students his animal talent agency. Its card catalog must be converted into a database of animals, talents, owners, and so on. How would students organize it?

Over the semester, students progress well beyond goofy spreadsheets about violin-playing pugs. They get familiar with Voyant, web-based text-analysis software that combs digital books to spot patterns that can be hard for humans to grasp, like tracing the words "love" and "sex" across a volume of poetry. They work on mapping and 3D modeling. They study HTML, a web language, and Omeka, a content-management system that hosts online exhibits.

Eventually they build a scholarly resource that categorizes, visualizes, and interprets data about a topic, like physical fitness or Quentin Tarantino.

Ms. Posner, 34, encountered nothing of that nature during her own not-so-distant undergraduate days.

At Reed College, where she studied history, she assumed that she would have no facility with computers: "I thought that I was a humanities person, and if you

were a humanities person, you couldn't be a technical person."

Then, partway through a Yale graduate program in film studies and American studies, she took a job that involved working with the online collection of the Museum of the Moving Image, in New York City. She was fascinated by the ways you could connect objects, contextualize them, and present them in three-dimensional space. Googling around, she discovered digital humanities.

Ms. Posner developed her digital chops through an instructional-technology job at Yale and a regimen of technical exercises that she performed each morning before banging away at her dissertation. She kept those activities secret from her advisers, figuring they would frown. By the time she finished at Yale, she had learned enough to go on the digital-humanities market.

But the kind of teaching she does now upsets the traditional model in which she was trained. The collaborative projects flatten hierarchies and force her to reveal that the professor, seen as an all-knowing sage, can sometimes be clueless. For example, working with students on a project, Ms. Posner and the team ran into problems with PHP, a scripting language for building websites. She couldn't resolve them.

"I said, 'OK, I'm going to show you how a real developer fixes this problem,'" she says, chuckling. "And I Googled it, with them watching, on a big computer. I hate having to do that. But, on the other hand, it was really healthy for the students to see."

Some of the most notable things happen once students complete DH101, applying the digital-humanities mind-set to the rest of their education.

On a patio outside UCLA's Charles E. Young Research Library, Ms. Salehian uses her MacBook to show me what that means in practice.

Ms. Salehian, 20, is a petite junior with an outsize work ethic. She has two passions, writing and design. For homework, she pivots between reading a 14th-century Arthurian legend and studying geographic information technologies. Digital humanities bring those worlds together.

"When I took this DH101 course, I saw doors opening," says Ms. Salehian, a digital-humanities minor.

In one course, on "literary Los Angeles," she attacked the reputation of Venice, Calif.'s Abbot Kinney Boulevard, which GQ magazine had called "the coolest block in America" because of its variety of hip shopping experiences. Instead of simply writing her argument, she mapped it. Her project combined two sets of data—reputational comments about Abbot Kinney on Yelp and her own survey of its building styles—in an interactive map that highlighted the "superficial" diversity of the strip's architecture and businesses.

For another class, on social-media analytics, Ms. Salehian challenged Mark Zuckerberg's claim that Facebook would collapse people's work and social selves into one identity. She built a website that categorized and visualized the emotional tones of posts on Facebook and Tumblr. Rather than collapsing identities, her data showed, social media create a bevy of new personalities for each person.

A year ago, Ms. Salehian had never heard of digital humanities. Now she's written a DH coursebook—literally. In October, UCLA attracted national attention by publishing a free online version of the curriculum for its DH101 course, which included a series of her software tutorials.

So where will all this lead? Ms. Salehian isn't exactly sure yet.

UCLA undergraduates gravitate to digital humanities hoping the skills will appeal to employers, Ms. Posner says. They could work for cultural-heritage institutions, or for technology companies in the expanding class of jobs that bridge software development and customer relations. That might mean serving as a Google "evangelist" who teaches people about products, or taking bug reports from users and turning those into development tasks for coders.

"A lot of people are afraid that when they graduate with a liberal-arts degree, what do you do?" says Matt Long, 21, a classics major and DH minor who hopes to work in technology. "With the digital humanities, you're learning so much about people, how they interact with digital systems. It gives you a whole different set of skill sets."

UCLA's digital-humanities minor is in its third year, with about 35 students, so it's too early to judge the program's success. Of the four people who graduated last year, one pursued further studies in human-computer interaction, one in physical therapy, and one in law, Ms. Posner says. The fourth works for a company that hosts electronic dance festivals.

Even as students embrace the field, Todd Presner, chair of UCLA's digital-humanities program, cautions against viewing DH as the answer to a "problem" confronting the humanities.

"I'm one of those people that hate the idea of, Oh, the humanities are in crisis," says Mr. Presner, a professor of Germanic languages and comparative literature. "Oh, we're so irrelevant. Oh, we're so useless, blah, blah, blah. And now technology is going to save us. I don't think that at all. I think, if anything, the humanities can save the technologies."

The humanities, he says, can "humanize" digital media by helping users understand what technology can and can't do, by posing ethical questions, by providing social and historical perspective, by illuminating cross-cultural differences.
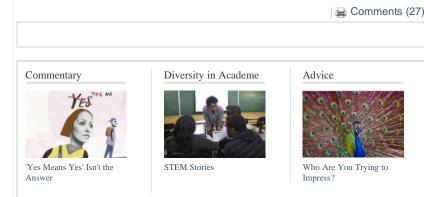
These are "core values" of the humanities, Mr. Presner says. "They need to be core values of the digital, too."

Resources for Teaching Digital Humanities

University of California at Los Angeles's "Intro to Digital Humanities" online coursebook

City University of New York's digital-humanities resource guide

Zotero collection of syllabi and curriculum-planning documents

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