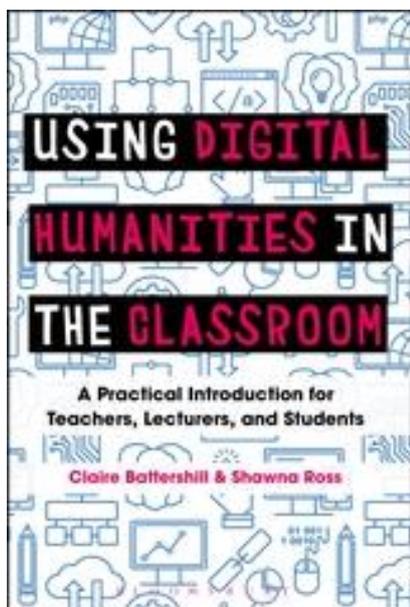




## Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom. A Practical Introduction for Teachers, Lecturers, and students

Claire Battershill and Shawna Ross

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Review by Paola Vettorel\*

This volume represents a valuable and useful introduction to how Digital Humanities (DH henceforth) can be practically implemented in didactic practices in the humanities. The twelve Chapters delve into the different and complementary aspects of DH in the classroom – especially in higher education – for different disciplines, and are integrated by a Web Companion<sup>1</sup> () which offers a differentiated range of further tools, materials and above all resources of several kinds that can also be adapted for different and specific contexts.

The introductory Chapter, besides providing an overview of the book sections, introduces DH, that for the authors “represent a community of scholars and teachers interested in using or studying technology” (3), emphasizing that the volume is intended “to help anyone who would like to increase, rethink, or complicate the ways they incorporate technology in the classroom” (2).

Chapter 1 *Overcoming Resistance* outlines a series of key strategies that can be useful to overcome teachers/lecturers’, as well as students’, barriers and fears of failure in using DH, highlighting that experimentation, together with openness, collaboration and diversity, are core values in a DH approach to classroom didactics. Furthermore, the focus on “the process of building a tool or creating a resource as much

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<sup>1</sup> [www.teachdh.com](http://www.teachdh.com) Last Visited November 2, 2018



as (if not more than) the eventual outcome or product” (14) is essential, in that it emphasizes how incorporating DH in classroom practices is about discovering novel and innovative perspectives for all participants. Not last, a DH approach can foster the development of digital literacy, that has become an important element in most jobs.

Chapter 2 introduces *Finding, Evaluating and Creating Digital Resources* by discussing reasons and ways through which they should be used in class, and/or created by teachers and be part of didactic practices with students. As usual, a rich array of examples and resources is included, and then complemented in the Web Companion website. The chapter closes with an essential but important section on copyright rules that can be further explored in the suggested readings.

Chapter 3, *Ensuring Accessibility*, contains suggestions on how to prepare materials and lectures that are inclusive in terms of learning difficulties, but also of learning styles. The ‘Universal Design’ model, based upon the principles of equitable, flexible and ‘simple and intuitive’ use, is illustrated, and several examples of how to incorporate speech-to-text, multimedia/multisensory tools and recording devices are included. Ways to promote interactivity and provide accessible resources in the DH classroom are also illustrated, together with recommendations as to privacy and safety matters.

In Chapter 4 various factors and options in *Designing Syllabi* that include DH are examined. Possible course websites from which to choose are described in their main characteristics, with some specifics for online syllabi and other digital resources to be used. The possibility of including an introductory course on DH is then discussed in its pros and cons. Ways of introducing DH on a cline, from ‘light’ to ‘medium’ and ‘heavy’ use in courses, is also looked into as to the different aspects of a course, that should then be adapted to the institution and syllabus ‘local thinking’. Finally, suggestions on how to adapt course information, (explicit) learning objectives and course policies within a DH approach are set forward.

With Chapter 5 – *Designing Classroom Activities* – we get into the core of how to prepare and apply DH in class. This chapter is closely linked with the following two, as well as to the resources and suggestions in the Web Companion, particularly concerning the activities that are proposed. Lasting from ten minutes to half an hour or a even week, these activities can be carried out individually, in pairs/small groups, or as a whole class, and can be applied to different disciplines. The authors stress that “creative exploration” (80) ought to characterize the implementation of DH-related tasks in class, where digital techniques should be used “in order to explore new approaches, to ask new questions, and to try out new tools” (80) during the learning process. As importantly, it is argued, activity prompts should be short and clear – not least visually – to encourage students to focus on the task.

In Chapter 6, *Managing Classroom Activities*, advice to implement and manage DH-related activities presented in the previous chapter is offered. The importance of making use of “open-access, affordable and widely available digital resources” (97) is once again highlighted, together with the possibility of including students’ suggestions on technological tools and ways to exploit them cooperatively, both for teachers and learners. As to equipment, besides what is available in usual higher education classrooms, students can be asked to carry out DH activities on their smartphones and laptops, in the computer lab, or using labs and facilities that may be present in the university library – which increasingly happens as part of digital literacy programmes; at times, Departments may also have laptops/tablets or other equipment that can be used during lessons. As to problems that can occur, particularly technology-related ones, several possible solutions are set forward, among which having alternative activities and ways of dealing with the planned topic at hand, possibly involving students, too (see also resources in the Web Companion).

Chapter 7 explores issues related to *Creating Digital Assignments*, and a broad range of assignment types are provided. At first the authors give some general principles and recommendations for creating digital assignments, such as encouraging process and skills development, limiting the tools and platforms in an assignment to one in order to encourage students to ‘keep focus’, creating “a fine balance between openness and structure” (115), also in terms of simplicity. Furthermore, writing clear, sequential and exhaustive assignment sheets is stressed as fundamental, together with checking all details in the assignment in advance, and linking it to a class activity that has already been carried out (see also Web companion for examples on this point). Several common types of digital assignments are illustrated in detail, together with suggestions on tools and platforms that would be most appropriate.

Chapter 8, *Evaluating Student Work*, concludes the more practical section on implementing DH in the classroom. The authors point out that evaluation in digital environments can be complex, and therefore



requires clear criteria, integrating disciplinary knowledge and technology skills within the project-oriented and collaborative nature of DH. To this purpose, the creation and use of evaluation checklists or rubrics that can guide the evaluation process is suggested. Rubrics can be analytic when each criterion is scored, or holistic with specification of criteria but overall scoring (see the examples provided for rubrics and assignment sheets, also in the Web Companion). In both types of rubrics the five main aspects of evaluation – i.e. “the evaluation criteria, the grading scheme, the qualities of work that meets the criteria, and the roles of error and effort in evaluation” (135) - should be taken into account, not least to guide students in the assignment and for their expectations in the evaluation phase. Competencies described in can-do terms can be of help for students to “articulate their skills” concerning technical, academic and other competencies (136, referring to Rockwell and Sinclair 2012). Several ways to involve students in the evaluation process are also suggested, not least to prevent and cope with possible failure. One final important point that is made is that the concepts of iterative learning, process-oriented evaluation and multiliteracies should also be part of evaluation in the DH classroom.

Chapter 9 deals with *Teaching Graduate Students* and focuses on how to give advice and support to promote a DH approach in courses, as well as in short assignments and projects that require a deeper level of enquiry; a useful and detailed list of milestones with advice both for (PhD) students and supervisors is provided. Advantages of promoting a DH approach in terms of resources and discipline-specific and technological skills are then explored, not least with connection to the job market.

Chapter 10, *Finding Internal Support Communities* and Chapter 11, *Finding External Support Communities* are closely connected, particularly in highlighting aspects of possible connections and interdisciplinarity in the digital humanities. Besides ways of fostering cooperation with colleagues within and beyond one’s own discipline and faculty, both at a formal and an informal level, Chapter 10 points to other important resources for networking in DH research and practices, such as libraries (e.g. digital archives) and library staff (e.g. DH specialists), Informational Technology (IT) services and specialists (see also the Web Companion and the ‘Further reading’ section on this). Aspects of ethical team cooperation are also stressed, and possibilities for ad-hoc funding explored.

The other side of the coin, or cooperation with external support communities, is illustrated in Chapter 11, that offers suggestions on how to create connections with larger communities of DH researchers and practitioners, both for lecturers and students. A table summarizes the pros and cons of a range of social media platforms, and special attention is devoted to Twitter, since in the DH community it is considered “the king of social media” (182) to share research and teaching experiences, while Facebook used for more informal communication. Ways to interact on Twitter are described in detail, also for newcomers, and further suggestions are available in the Web Companion. Exploring DH organizations and associations, for which a useful list is given, is another important way of keeping up to date with the field. Attending events that are DH-related is also an important point, whether conferences, workshops and summer schools, such as the extensive Digital Humanities Summer Institute at the University of Victoria (Canada), or the Oxford Digital Humanities Summer School (UK). The Web Companion for this chapter contains a comprehensive list of the major international conferences and workshops, as well as grant-funding organizations, in the field of DH.

The last Chapter, *Connecting to Your Research* provides an overview on the possibilities to connect DH-related experiences in the classroom with research at different levels. First of all, technological resources that are explored in and for teaching can also be means to implement research work from a more practical point of view; several tools with their main features are illustrated in a useful table and in the Web Companion. Then, practice-based and practice-led research in the digital humanities can of course be explored for publications, and a useful list of pedagogy-related DH journal can be found in the Web Companion. In addition, DH tools can also broaden the scope of research by applying them to our ‘usual’ research areas, and collaborating with students on projects that may also lead to formal publications or presentations, either collaboratively or individually.

The book represents an important reading for any teacher, lecturer, researcher and student interested in and wanting to include the Digital Humanities in their classroom practices and/or research. Although the settings the authors refer to are mainly located in Northern American contexts, the greatest majority of suggestions are certainly worth investigating and applicable to other contexts, too, Europe included.

Two elements are particularly valuable in this volume: first, the strong emphasis on course assignments and students’ experimentation with activities as the lessons unfolds, also in connection to the project-based



characteristics of DH-related pedagogy. Equally valuable is the fact that for each chapter further reading suggestions are provided, as well as the rich set of activities, tools and resources that are further explored and complemented in the Web Companion. The latter in particular contains a wealth of resources and tools that can be adopted, and adapted, to fruitfully explore the rich and stimulating field of DH in the classroom.

### **Works cited**

Rockwell, Geoffrey and Stéfan Sinclair. "Acculturation in the Digital Humanities Community." *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles and Politics*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012. 176-211.