

Crossing Boundaries: Rethinking the Humanities across Disciplines

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Methodology, Curricula and Digital Aspects of Studying Humanities

Abstract

The field of humanities and its over-arching presence in all spheres of life is undisputed. As such, humanities both hold the question and the dynamic answer to the position of digital knowledge and production. On the one hand, the study of humanities shows how students respond to having the study material available digitally and on the other how the technological advancements work to respond to the needs of new generations of teachers and learners. This paper illustrates some prominent ideas in teaching and studying humanities, literature in particular, in the context of digital humanities. In this way, digital humanities can be seen as a two-way street in both establishing and providing information, knowledge and skills.

Key words: *humanities, digital, learners, technology*

This paper examines the role of humanities and digital humanities as a new field in understanding the complexity of the relationship between human development and technological advancement. Knowledge and practice of technological inventions call for developing studies and methodology to better respond to the changes in people’s lives brought about by technology. This paper uses qualitative descriptive and comparative methods to better illustrate its ideas and arguments.

It seems like time and development have always followed a pattern repeating itself every hundred years. What people born in the twentieth century can witness from a twenty-first century perspective was also seen by the nineteenth century people at the doorstep of the twentieth. At the turn of the both centuries people equally found themselves betwixt unyielding amazement and daunting inevitability. One such reflection was noted about Henry Adams, author of twenty volumes of history, biography, politics and fiction, much honored by family, friends and colleagues. Coming from a lineage of prominent public and political figures including presidents, ministers and advisers when seeing the 1900 Paris Exposition, he “stood before the great machines in the hall of dynamos and was seized with a secular insight approximating religious revelation” (259). Now well into his sixties and from a vantage point of the twentieth century “he judged himself a failure, unsuited by heredity, temperament and training for any leading part in the rough-and-tumble world of American politics in the Gilded Age”. (295). The time certainly questioned people’s existing knowledge and understanding. “To souls more optimizing than Adams, the dynamo whispered of a future bright with the hope of progress. Old dreams of

human liberation seemed within a reach of realization” (296). Adams’s generation as well as later twentieth century generations lived long enough to see their worlds transformed, the former into modernity of crowded cities and booming industries and the latter of having their reality gone virtual.

For Adams, as “the anguished figure of transition, the man who had lived in both the old world and the new worlds and had felt the full shock of the radical discontinuity between them, the dynamo foretold a future of uncontrollable technological power, a head long rush towards chaos and the triumph of directionless force over human will. Adams foresaw that the twentieth century would be a global village shadowed by the cloud of technological apocalypse”(296). As many of their contemporaries, Henry James also shared the alarm: “his dismay at the imperiled state of culture and society was exacerbated by his “essential loneliness” as he called it in a letter of the 1900 to his young friend Mortn Fulerton” (301).

This historical perspective helps getting a better idea on the irretrievable changes taking place every second enabled by technological advancements and the respective response of humanity. By outlining some of the aspects of the relationship between technology and humanity and the field of humanities in turn, I maintain that there is a two-way relationship between humanity and technology i.e. humanity is technology and technology is humanity, like culture is communication and communication is culture. Technology functions in a context “interacting with work practices, social cognitions, political cultures and institutional structures” (Orlikowsky: iii 1995). According to Orlikowsky, as a general assumption, technology is not separable and separate from human action: “it is only through human action that technology qua technology can be understood[...]technology becomes technology only when it is used and this use of technology – technology-in-use defines its influence in human affairs” (Orlikowsky: iii 1995). She contends that there is a duality between technology as an artifact with specific features and instructions for use on the one hand and technology-in-use or human response in particular context and circumstances on the other (Orlikowsky: iii 1995). This understanding entails the examination of enactment, structuring and appropriation of facts and poses the question: What is expected from human action when technology is created as an artifact? To answer this question we should consider the fact that technology-in-use is transformative and evolutionary process where the users also become developers. The relationship between technology as artifact and technology-in-use fluctuates depending on time, motivations and changes in human action. As a result the prescribed normative procedures change. This however is in no way a simple and straightforward relationship, but rather a complicated transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement.

This paper will not examine the myriad aspects of technological artifacts and technology-in-use including robots, nanotechnologies, synthetic organism or genetic engineering. Instead, it claims that the only checks and balances in the above relationship can be found in the humanities. Humanities as a scientific field and the cognitive sciences as part of it, function as roughly parallel interpretive agent in the process of enacting technology. The humanities give the answer to why and how technology-in-use transforms human reality. The human action on the internet and social media and artifacts and their action as technology-in-use have yet to be examined. All that has been discovered about human condition has to be once again applied and checked while

examining human action in the virtual world. For example, this type of technology constantly changes and develops, as human action adopts some aspects and features and drops others, transforming and pre-conditioning the invention of yet another artifact. The parallel or two-way-street can be seen in the close research of such developments. For example, various types of media content, such as the memes call for scientific attention to examine and explain the emergence, development and consequences of it. People's privacy and safety on the internet keep on changing and improving its system. One example of the huge break between past and present is the widely popular American sitcom "Two and Half Men". After eight seasons the series completely transformed its concept introducing the digital aspect of people's lives creating a huge gap between the atmosphere, themes and settings of the different seasons while also remaining the same series. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge and examine the attitude of readers to new literary themes that involve digital aspects, such as online frauds and virtual life, while also the new generations of readers read novels from later twentieth century that do not contain the digital aspect of life. This might result into wonder as to why a certain crime in a thriller could not be solved by means of smart phones and technology. The degree of acceptance of different educational programs, videos and applications by teachers and learners is also to be measured. Some programs pick up the attention of users, while others are left barely noticed. This type of immediate research is the safe place for what seems unknown and uncontrollable. Both qualitative and quantitative research on different phenomena prove useful and necessary in checking and balancing emerging transformative technologies and human action and possibly avoiding to repeat the shock that Adams might have felt a century ago. Furthermore, unless people rise above technological changes, they will most certainly face personal, social and professional exclusion. Therefore, it is important to include the segment of learning to use technological artifacts, more so than ever considering the online availability of technological tools and advancements worldwide.

Thus presented the field of humanities is further transformed into digital humanities. Principally digital humanities bring digital tools and methods to the study of the humanities to enable digital knowledge production and distribution. In this respect, digital humanities can also be considered technology-in-use. When it comes to the process of education, looking into humanities in general and digital humanities fosters open-minded methodology with multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives in answering the questions of introducing digital tools as an additional teaching material for both teaching and learning. The methodological approaches allow for close work with teaching methodology, curricula development, organization and digital opportunities.

Combining computational resources with the humanities, the scholarly area of the digital humanities entails systematic use of digital resources and well as analysis of their application (Drucker:2016). Digital humanities is defined as a new collaborative transdisciplinary and computationally engaged research, teaching and publishing. It further establishes the recognition of the digital tools and methods in the study of the humanities (Burdick, Drucker, Lunenfeld, Presner, Schnapp:2016). In this way, the scholarly area of DH opens up a wide range of opportunities for exploration and application of the humanities alongside the digital.

The production of new applications and techniques enables new ways of teaching and research while at the same time allowing for critiquing how these impact the cultural heritage and digital culture (Melissa:2016).

Subjects such as literature, history, psychology or sociology, while being taught in the traditional way by the study of books have been increasingly finding their content online or in digital libraries. In today's world of going online for virtually everything, embracing complete online life and culture, students studying the subjects inevitably go online and pick up information at some point of their studies. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the need for studying online or electronically as a complementary method to the established process of education. In this way, students of all ages will be able to actively access and participate in a direct content delivery. Such possibility directly appeals to the audible, visual and interactive part of the process of learning.

Furthermore, the past years of online teaching and studying undoubtedly confirmed the necessity of adjusting the available virtual space to the purpose of education. It proved that online studying and educational resources are indispensable tools in the educational process. The proposed project strongly builds on these conclusions in bringing digital tools in the studies of the humanities.

That being said, while the relationship between the digital and the humanities is very productive, there seems to be a notable lack of focus on pedagogy. The 2012 edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* claimed that pedagogy was the "neglected 'stepchild' of DH" and included an entire section on teaching the digital humanities. Part of the reason is that grants in the humanities are geared more toward research with quantifiable results rather than teaching innovations, which are harder to measure. In recognition of a need for more scholarship on the area of teaching, the edited volume *Digital Humanities Pedagogy* was published and offered case studies and strategies to address how to teach digital humanities methods in various disciplines. (Klein, Gold:2012).

Specific attention should be placed on preparedness and possible obstacles when getting into contact with the digital. How many users completely or partially understand the software organisation, possibilities it offers, its management and usage. Their software is the technological artefact and their action is the technology-in-use. How this relationship goes will show the structure of use or misuse. The year of 2020 saw the inevitable dependency on online resources for teaching and studying. One of the most prominent ones were Microsoft Teams, Moodle and other specifically curated platforms for that. As a result, the field of digital humanities must be recognised as equal partner in transformative technological advancements in order to structure human invention and human reaction.

To conclude, technology and technology-in-use go hand in hand with their respective research and interpretation. Employing different methodologies and strategies to ease the contact between humans and technological artifacts, humanities could set or at least propose certain boundaries. Only then will humanity avoid the ensuing consequences of the set features and instructions and human action and response to them.