

“A New Boundary Object:
Digital Humanities Between Two-Year and Four-Year English Programs”

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Almost everyone can go to college, but the institutions that are most accessible (community colleges) provide the smallest boost to a student’s life chances, whereas the ones that offer the surest entrée into the best jobs (major research universities) are highly selective. This extreme mixture of equality and inequality, of accessibility and stratification, is a striking and fascinating characteristic of American education.ⁱ

Collaboration between two- and four-year English departments will mean unsettling longstanding routines and assumptions about the value and role of community colleges in the American higher educational infrastructure. Structural power and institutional dependencies will complicate quick adoption of anything new.ⁱⁱ For one thing, two-year colleges have been seen as absorbing the “run-off” of underprepared students from four-year schools, helping maintain the democratic value of access in principle while maintaining exclusivity in practice.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, the apparent irrelevance of two-year faculty to pushing the frontiers of knowledge in the field challenges genuine reciprocal engagement. Louis Menand once wrote in these pages that

“doctoral education is where the system reproduces itself” (10). In the same essay, however, he notes that a “field can have an impact on a student through just one course” (11). In community colleges, we assume that that one student can impact the community. So when we acknowledge that English as a discipline can play a role in communities beyond the English major, we begin to see how *all* English programs—from community colleges to universities—have a stake in knowledge transmission and the long-term health of the discipline. This fuller picture of disciplinary diffusion can help us to identify and commit to institutional changes that support improved equity and continuity across two- and four-year English programs.

Fortunately, recent events in the field of English provide an opening and opportunity for widespread institutional change that might strengthen two- and four-year English department relations. First, the so-called “crisis in the humanities” has unsettled the field’s inertia enough to create a spirit of willingness to try new things: major associations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the Two-Year College Association (TYCA), and funders such as the Mellon Foundation, have looked to develop community college/four-year college partnerships that could benefit both institutions and their students.^{iv} Second, the emergence of digital humanities methods has reoriented the field in important ways, infusing a new relevance to external audiences while offering a critical-cultural lens with which to analyze and understand the information age. Unfortunately, if we peruse community college course catalogs and websites we will see that this reorientation has yet to reach two-year colleges. These circumstances—crisis and a consequent willingness to try something new, a recognition of the value of community colleges to the health of the discipline, and uneven institutional adoption of a key movement in the discipline— together present an opportunity for a new and sustained intellectual exchange between two-year

and four-year institutions. Engagement of this kind—especially one which is supported by a clear commitment to sustained support by the profession at large--could result in a discipline that emerges from the current “crisis” less stratified, more equitable and open, and perhaps even more pedagogically innovative and robust.

How might the uneven development of digital humanities provide for more meaningful collaboration among two- and four-year institutions? The frame of communities of practice provides a place to start. First, communities of practice help us to better understand the professional circumstance of community college teachers following graduate training, and second, they can aid the profession in identifying a mechanism for a new and sustained exchange of ideas. A community of practice, sociologists Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star tell us, is “a set of relations among people who do things together” (294). Three characteristics of communities of practice are relevant here: first, members share a domain of shared interest; second, members “value their collective competence and learn from each other”; and third, members of communities of practice develop “shared repertoires . . . [through] time and sustained interaction” (Wenger-Trayner 1). The first time a student enters any English classroom, they are granted what Lave and Wenger termed “legitimate peripheral participation” in the disciplinary community of practice. Graduate training provides an agreed-upon infrastructure within which to develop familiarity and mastery of the forms, objects, and methods of inquiry in the field. As Susan Leigh Star puts it, disciplinary members of communities of practice develop not through agreement but rather through “a commitment to engage in disagreements” (11). In graduate school, sustained exposure to and engagement with these disagreements lead students from the periphery to the center of mature practice. A job at a baccalaureate- or graduate-degree-granting institution then continues the process of knowledge transmission where new “legitimate

peripheral” members—i.e., students—enter the community of practice.

While graduates who land jobs at four-year schools—and especially R1 universities—may experience continuity with the communities of practice they knew in graduate school, faculty who arrive on two-year campuses find themselves in a second, related but distinct, community of practice. As Darin Jensen and Christie Toth suggest, “teaching in these contexts presents distinctive pedagogical and professional demands” (571). Faculty who work in two-year colleges are engaged in a situated practice that involves *both* the disciplinary content, methods, and values of English *and* a focus on developing collective competence in the community college’s unique, open-access arena with its diverse goals. The establishment of professional associations such as the Two-Year College Association (TYCA) and the Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) illustrates how communities of practice in these English programs diverge in important ways from the one that these same members knew in graduate school. Community college English faculty—and often their department chairs and deans in turn—retain the “shared repertoires” from graduate training in their field. But they are simultaneously focused in their approach on “teaching culturally, linguistically, socioeconomically, and academically diverse students” (Dillahunt et al., 6). Over time, community college faculty develop *new* repertoires that involve what sociologists Bowker and Star call, in a different context, “artful integration of local constraints” (292).

This “artful integration of local constraints” brings us to digital humanities, and to the opportunity offered by the impact of the digital age on relations among two- and four-year English departments. When I first started to study digital humanities, I looked around for community college colleagues to learn from but couldn’t find them. What I did find was a generous scholarly community at small liberal-arts colleges and universities who shared their

work freely— online via blog posts about ideas still in development, and through Tweets and free software applications. My solution to the absence of a digital humanities community of practice among two-year colleagues was to reach out to this community of practice at four-year institutions, and I was not disappointed. Inspired by the work I saw and the active and collaborative spirit I witnessed online, I wrote and administered two NEH Office of Digital Humanities grants intended to initiate a digital humanities community of practice among two-year colleagues. I invited two- and four-year scholars whose work I had learned about online to lead the work: first, in 2013 at an all-day workshop at CCHA, and second, at a weeklong NEH summer institute in 2015. More than three dozen community college faculty and six four-year college and university scholars explored how community colleges might develop digital projects for CC classrooms.^v

These events were by all reports highly successful and energizing. The experience convinced me of the value of intellectual exchange between two-year and four-year scholars at a time when the field was reinventing itself. But unfortunately, these were, in the words of Katherine D. Harris, “bloom and fade” institutes, with little permanent impact. The community college faculty returned to the exigencies of their teaching workloads and the four-year scholars continued with their scholarly pursuits. Clearly, the institutional problem of uneven development among two- and four-year colleges needed an institutional, not an individual, solution.

What this experience did teach me is that digital humanities curriculum provides a rich context for energizing relationships between two- and four-year English departments. And the curriculum itself provides an existing cross-institutional mechanism for building these relationships. Curriculum is an instance of what sociologists Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star term a “boundary object” (287). Boundary objects are “those objects that both inhabit

several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them” (Bowker and Star 16). Able to “travel across borders and maintain some sort of constant identity,” boundary objects “can be tailored to meet the needs of one community” and “have common identities across settings.” They are “weakly structured in common use, imposing stronger structures in the individual tailored use” (Bowker and Star 16). All institutions of higher education are familiar with boundary objects at their institutions, although they might not refer to them in this way: articulation agreements and course equivalencies that allow students to transfer credits from one institution to another could not occur without them. As boundary object, the curriculum is a most suitable institutional site for developing stronger two-year and four-year relations.

Of course, the English curriculum has always allowed for bureaucratic relations of compliance between community colleges and four-year colleges, but these often suffer from functional inertia, burdened as they are by legislative mandates and especially the accountability movement that characterizes neoliberal incursions into higher education. Statewide coordinating commissions provide the infrastructure for mandated articulation and compliance, but rarely has this interinstitutional engagement translated into true disciplinary engagement. Survey courses, and their portable embodiment in the anthology, are the epitome of a boundary object that supports inter-institutional functioning, but its placeholder status as a static rehearsal of the “already known” does little to energize two- and four-year college engagement.

But for all of its moribund status in past practice, the curriculum as boundary object of the discipline in development holds promise for energizing institutional relationships. Boundary objects mediate between the two communities of practice discussed earlier--for the purposes of our discussion, both the mastery of disciplinary content and methods of English characterizing

graduate training, and mastery of expertise in situated practice--“artful integration”—as characterizing community college contexts. Knowledge transmission through curricular boundary objects takes developing and then artfully integrating content by active translation, accommodation, gestalt-switching, and creating workarounds to manage divergent viewpoints (Bowker and Star, 292). All pedagogy involves these moves. But at community colleges communities of practice are inextricable and often invisible; the expert and successful transmission of college-level disciplinary knowledge to diverse students in the same classroom is the essence of two-year college work. This signature of community college professional life is an expanded and intensified pedagogical repertoire that supports artful integration of disciplinary material for students with multiple motivational, preparational, socioeconomic status, and cultural profiles.

In its character and value as both disciplinary knowledge and also site of translation and negotiation, the boundary object of curriculum allows us to see how dissemination of digital humanities can provide a conduit for improved relations among two- and four-year institutions. Given the uneven development of digital humanities at community colleges, community college faculty must not only integrate the emerging field into their own knowledge base but they must also distill and artfully integrate digital humanities *for* community college students who bring limited digital fluencies and internet access to their educational experience. This exigence provides the opportunity for engagement with four-year English programs in a common aim of normalizing the discipline across institutions.

At this point, one might argue that digital humanities is not the first instance of deep change in the discipline and there is nothing unique about integrating digital humanities into the community college curriculum, certainly not unique enough to catalyze and sustain institutional

change. After all, community college faculty have changed their curriculum to keep up with the field in the past: feminism, critical race theory, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and models of linguistic diversity within the English discipline have all impacted the curriculum in profound ways. But these changes have lent themselves to integration through portable and contained textual boundary objects such as anthologies, and faculty could teach this material in classrooms and in isolation. As Matthew G. Kirshenbaum observed a decade ago, however, digital humanities unsettles this solitary model of scholarship and requires collaboration in much of its best innovations. This is why digital humanities offers both the potential for sustained institutional engagement across and between two- and four-year institutions and also has presented such a challenge institutionally to open-access, under-resourced institutions. Individually, community college faculty have already engaged in collaborations with four-year college partners—whether through grants and initiatives or by professional development and work at institutes and conferences. What is called for here, however, is an institutional shift that would provide for both a sustained engagement across institutional communities of practice at two- and four-year programs and a long-term investment in the arrangement that would signal its future stability and importance.

What might such engagement look like? It would look as varied as are the networks of colleges and universities in states across the U.S. themselves. Groups might gather to identify cultural assets and priorities of each community, and such conversations would prompt the kinds of questions that digital humanities methods support answering. For example: Should we digitize all of our community's cultural assets? What communities are affected by digitization of assets? What kinds of questions can data analytics answer for our communities? Who gets left out of the conversation in digital environments? These are all collaborative conversations that benefit from

community—and community college—involvement and would be answered differently by research scholars acting alone. Projects undertaken within communities, too, would be collaborative, and could extend the public humanities to community college student audiences whose long-term commitment to their home communities could help ensure the salience and relevance of the work to the health of the community.

One product of sustained conversation among two- and four-year colleges might be an articulation of digital humanities threshold concepts written collaboratively by scholars across the higher education spectrum. A model of this kind of work is Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's edited collection, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts and Writing Studies*. For that text, more than twenty Writing Studies scholars articulated key understandings of major concepts in that field of English. The classroom edition of the text--written as a kind of “artful integration” of the scholarly text, and directed at the beginner--is itself a boundary object between scholarly and student audiences.

As a community of practice across disciplines, digital humanities is still evolving, and thus porous enough to allow for new members from community colleges. It is also tested enough across multiple institutional settings to provide a stable context for sustained engagement between two- and four-year English programs. It will not be enough to simply state that digital humanities should move its way into the curriculum of two-year institutions. Unlike portable boundary objects such as anthologies and other stand-alone texts, the most relevant digital humanities methods, projects, and artifacts live as curricular boundary objects in multiple places, and take sustained engagement of multiple parties at multiple levels.

Partnerships among two- and four-year institutions will improve the health of the discipline, supporting disciplinary reproduction beyond the English major and English profession

and into communities. But this engagement won't happen in a vacuum. A truly collaborative arrangement needs to be theorized and supported by professional associations across communities of practice—e.g., the ADA, MLA, CCCC, TYCA, CCHA, and eventually the Association for Computers in the Humanities and the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations. Royston Greenwood suggests that professional associations are key for the work of institutional change, enabling as they do “the formation and reproduction of shared meanings and understandings” (61). Professional associations set the agenda for disciplinary and institutional development and communicate consensus on the direction of the discipline to funders and legislative bodies. When professional associations signal their long-term commitment to genuine collaboration across two-year and four-year English programs—as the ADE has done here in this volume, for instance-- they will help to ensure the recovery and expansion of the discipline of English as it's being taught at community colleges.

In their reflections on the future of graduate preparation for two-year college teaching, Darin Jensen and Christie Toth emphasize that “English studies has an enormous stake in two-year colleges” (578). They continue:

Two-year colleges have long been an important pathway to four-year institutions, particularly for students from underrepresented groups. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that “28 percent of bachelors degree earners started at a community college and 47 percent took at least one course at a community college” (Mullin 4). This role is poised to grow as the cost of attending universities increases, dual and concurrent enrollment programs run by two-year colleges expand, and municipal and state “promise” programs make community colleges tuition-free for many students. In the near future, the majority of US undergraduates may well be taking all of their

introductory composition and lower-division language and literature courses at two-year colleges, and deciding on their post-transfer majors accordingly (579).

To respond to this reality, what is called for is a new boundary infrastructure, energized by a common commitment to social justice through education. This will take a long-term investment by both two-year and four-year colleges in developing digital assets, collaborating on projects and articulating competencies that improve equity at community colleges while supporting continuity and growth at four-year colleges. Robert Samuels warns that “as our society becomes more unequal, all levels of education also become more stratified” (2). If we are to avoid the worst effects of this stratification in our own discipline, we need to recognize that *all* students play a role in transmitting English knowledge. Digital humanities has changed the field and it is here to stay even as it rapidly evolves with and through technology. When we leave community colleges behind, we neglect a key component of the higher educational infrastructure at this time of disciplinary change. We then risk relegating digital humanities to a rarified realm of specialists. Instead, through two- and four-year college collaboration and through community engagement, we can expand the field to the arena of its most compelling relevance: as a method for understanding our present global predicament with technology and as a way to imagine technology’s role in sustaining or compromising human and planetary life.

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ⁱ David F. Labaree qtd in Brint, *Two Cheers for Higher Education* 125.

ⁱⁱ For a history of this relationship see Brint and Karobel *Diverted Dreams* and Brint, *Two Cheers for Education*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although my focus is on community colleges, it's clear that the stratification of higher education extends beyond two-year schools. Steven Brint argues that "regional public universities play the role of sieve today for many flagship state universities" (*Two Cheers for Education* 127).

^{iv} See, for example, the Mellon Foundations Community College-Research University Partnership grants, <https://mellon.org/programs/higher-education-and-scholarship-humanities/research-universities-and-institutes/community-college-research-university-partnerships/>; The University of Washington's *Reimagining the PhD and Reaching New Publics* <https://simpsoncenter.org/programs/public-scholarship/reimagining-humanities-phd-and-reaching-new-publics>, the MLA's Committee on Community Colleges.

^v This group of scholars included Rebecca Frost Davis, Marta Effinger Crishlow, Matthew K. Gold, Dean Rehberger, Roopika Rissam, Jesse Stommel. Community college digital humanities experts included Jake Agatucci, Sandy Brown Jensen, Ian Coronado, Terri Whitney and Charles T. Evans.