Outsiders, All: Connecting the Pasts and Futures of Digital Humanities and Composition

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This sentence you are now reading was, of course, written on a computer. Myriad technologies influenced the process of writing that sentence, and still more worked to let you read it. Considering how much writing today is done on/with/by/for computers, studying how technology and writing interact should warrant significant academic attention. Such attention would allow us to better understand how modern composition works and help our students better understand how to put it to good use. Writing on/with/by/for computers does indeed garner academic attention, but which discipline rightly claims that kind of writing as its central concern? The answer here is not the Digital Humanities, despite the nominal fidelity. Even though the belletristic arts are under the purview of the humanist tradition, the Digital Humanities are, in practice, far removed from the concerns of composition.[1]

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1   For the purposes of this discussion, the various names used to identify subtly different approaches to the discipline of writing studies — "rhetoric and composition," "first-year composition," "first-year writing," etc. focus

Instead, the study of how technology influences the creation of text is housed in a subfield of composition known simply as "computers and writing." This subfield has struggled since its inception in the 1980s to gain traction within composition studies, to say nothing of the academy at large. Many computers & writing scholars, with Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawischer perhaps the most prominent and vociferous, repeatedly encourage composition researchers and teachers to consider the benefits, implications, and dangers inherent in using computers in the writing process and in the writing classroom. Yet they issue their warnings in publications of and for scholars who identify within computers & writing. Conversations about the influence of technology are less common in more mainstream publications designed for composition studies at large.

So why Digital Humanities is not home to scholarship about writing on/with/by/for computers? Today, Digital Humanities studies extant texts — the product, not the process — while the creation of writing is the subject of distinct disciplines with a fraught relationship to DH. Examining how composition and computers and writing took shape reveals the historical precedent that led to the separation of those fields from the Digital Humanities. This overview of composition's pedagogical history will show that rhetoric and composition as a field struggled to define and distinguish its identity before the Digital Humanities went through a similar process, defining its own membership. As Kim and Stommel discuss in their introduction to this volume, the Digital Humanities formed around outcasts, giving a professional home to scholars whose research and teaching stood apart from traditional forms. But as the Digital Humanities has taken shape, built a community, and solidified as a field in its own right, composition studies grew increasingly separate from traditional humanities departments, creating a rift that

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attention on semantic debates internal to the discipline that, while valid and worth consideration, do not directly relate to the discussion at hand. I will use the term "composition" or "composition studies" as a generalized term intended to encompass all those listed above.

is now counterproductive and difficult to bridge. The separation between the digital humanities and composition is both a historical artifact and a temporary state of affairs contrary to the aims of the modern academy. Today's scholarship (and, for that matter, intellectual labor) is increasingly interdisciplinary. Collaboration facilitates insights at the intersections of various fields, and complex phenomena or systems need the perspective of sophisticated analytical frameworks. For instance, biology, chemistry, or psychology alone are each insufficient to explain the inner workings of the brain, but neurophysiology, a combination of the three fields, begins to answer some of today's questions about human behavior. When it comes to the complexity of writing in various situations, composition and the Digital Humanities need to buttress one another by combining forces, strengthening the diversity of DH and the reputation of rhet/comp. The natural point of connection already exists but is not commonly recognized as the needed bridge: the computers & writing field.

Rhetoric & Composition as an outcast field

Despite my claim above that separating DH from rhet/comp is contrary to the modern academy, the academy's nature is itself responsible for rhetoric and composition's less-than-desirable position. Specifically, the needs of the academy situate rhet/comp in the service of other disciplines, with writing classes (particularly at the undergraduate level) frequently working to meet the demands of courses in other fields, rather than as a field of study in its own right.

In what Randall Collins calls "the university revolution," distinct disciplines splintered and re-formed in academia throughout the 18th century.[2] In this educational restructuring, writing

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2   See Randall Collins, "The Transformation of Philosophy," in *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity: Conceptual Change in Context, 1750–1850,* eds. Johan Heilbron, Lars Magnusson, and Björn Wittrock, 141–62 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998).

did not enjoy equal standing, being seen as a tool used by other more legitimate fields. Maureen Daly Goggin details the creation of writing as a discipline in her thorough historical volume *Authoring A Discipline: Scholarly Journals and the Post-World War II Emergence of Rhetoric and Composition*.[3] According to Goggin, the 19th century solidified the service position of rhet/comp because, while other disciplines worked to *build* students' knowledge, "writing served as a demonstration of knowledge" (emphasis added).[4] By serving as a tool to be used by other disciplines, rhet/comp held merely support status. And because rhet/comp wasn't viewed as its own field of study, a hierarchy developed within English departments. Goggin explains that "at the top, scholarship and research were privileged as the real work; at the bottom, practice and pedagogy resided, divorced materially and politically from the real work at the top."[5] Composition became common in both senses of the word: It was everywhere, and it was non-distinctive. The tool used by all disciplines on campus became the grunt work of English, rather than a project worthy of resources and theory.

So long as writing is viewed as a tool, rather than a subject of study, it cannot take hold as a scholarly pursuit, essentially getting the short end of the academic stick. John Dewey comments on the preference for the intellectual over the practical, which he traces back to the ancient Greek "preference for studies which obviously demarcated the aristocratic class from the lower classes."[6] Because rhet/comp addresses a skill useful in every discipline, it often loses its ability to be differentiated. Its ubiquitous usefulness becomes its own liability, tarnishing its luster by virtue of being commonplace. That I distinguished

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3   Maureen Daly Goggin, *Authoring A Discipline: Scholarly Journals and the Post-World War II Emergence of Rhetoric and Composition* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000).

4   Ibid., 8.

5   Ibid., 28.

6   John Dewey, "Intellectual and Practical Studies," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924,* vol. 9: 1916, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, introd. Sidney Hook (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 275.

reputation has beleaguered rhetoric and composition virtually since its inception. As Peter Vandenberg observes, "writing instructors languished in the lower strata of the college system as disseminators of 'practical' knowledge rather than creators of theory."[7] Rhet/comp scholars settled in a position of being outcasts, and the field held a position of being beneath the need for rigorous academic attention.

As disciplinary boundaries further solidified and fields grew more insular, composition suffered due to its nature as "dynamic, multidimensional, and contingent, making it open to fragmentation."[8] At the highest order, the division between arts and sciences subverted the position of composition. Literary studies takes a reasoned approach to the analysis and explication of texts, its scholars making and supporting arguments *about* art, rather than *as* art. Composition, then, lacking an established methodological foundation, appeared to itself be an art, bereft of rigor, taking the work of other fields as the content of writing. This art/science divide reinforces the notion of composition as tool.

Composition even lost its traditional home within English departments in the first-ever issue of *PMLA*. Theodore W. Hunt wrote to bolster the standing of those departments, lamenting that "no department of college work has so suffered as the English at the hands of novices."[9] However, he aired his concerns at the expense of composition, which earned barely a mention. The exclusion of composition from the MLA was complete in 1903, when the pedagogical section — which often dealt with rhetoric — was removed. By 1910, papers about composition pedagogy "disappeared entirely" from the conferences and literature of English studies.[10] The justification of English depart-

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7   Peter Vandenberg, "The Politics of Knowledge Dissemination: Academic Journals in Composition," (PhD diss., Texas Christian University, 1993), 55. Cited by Goggin, *Authoring a Discipline,* 15.

8   Goggin, Authoring a Discipline, 12–13.

9   Th. W. Hunt, "The Place of English in the College Curriculum," *PMLA* 1 (1884–5): 118–32, at 119.

10 Goggin, *Authoring a Discipline,* 21.

ments put the scholarship of writing and literature officially at odds, with literature gaining prestige and composition being further relegated to a service role. The history and development of composition has been replete with marginalization.

Digital Humanities as turf war

Despite its origins in rhetoric, English as a field transitioned to revere literary studies as its torch-bearer. As computers entered education — particularly multimedia technologies offering significant increases in storage capacity — distributing whole libraries of texts on single optical discs became popular. Search, analytics, and other linguistic technologies improved, and scholars could analyze trends across an entire corpus. Speed and storage made these new forms of analysis possible. Newer location-based technologies like GPS tagging, hyper-accurate mapping systems, and high-resolution imaging systems broaden the scope and scale of data tagging and mining by adding additional layers of information and additional opportunities for visualization of results. Technological developments changed not what was studied, but how it was studied, and that change created a tension. Traditional literary studies preserve the importance of close reading, text explication, and the cultural commentaries/insights that follow. By contrast, computational analysis of texts uncovers trends in authors' or societies' language use. The source material is the same, but the tools and conclusions are different.

The Digital Humanities have grown out of technological developments offering new ways to examine, dissect, and combine the materials of humanities scholarship. Each new tool requires a nontrivial amount of technical knowledge and skill, so the separation between the traditional and the digital continues to grow. As a result, DH scholars maintain a technical competence that sets them apart from traditional humanities scholars, and the separation grows more noticeable as the tools develop. Matthew Kirschenbaum, himself a strong advocate of Digital Humanities, says that the field "has accumulated a robust

professional apparatus that is probably more rooted in English than any other departmental home."[11] These forces tying DH to English departments are stronger — with more historical precedent — than those permitting DH to exist as a separate field in its own right. As much as tools contribute to a scholar's identity, the affordances of DH serve to split literary studies in two. But the origins of DH problematize such a simple separation.

The tension between a traditional connection with English studies on one hand and the modern separation on account of technological tool use on the other echoes a division in higher education that Laurence Veysey says began in the early 19th century.[12] According to Veysey, universities held one of three ideals for the goals of education: research, liberal culture, or utility. Literary studies in the belletristic tradition are well-suited to the liberal-culture ideal, helping to open students to the issues and perspectives that inform and enrich human life.[13] But the technological focus of DH and the analyses abstracted from direct human interpretation of a limited number of documents mean this work is better suited to research-driven endeavors.

Viewing the relations of DH and literary studies in terms of research and liberal-culture ideals may help explain an identity or public-relations problem faced by DH: On one hand, many scholars proclaim the open, accepting, "big tent" notion of DH working for anyone wishing to apply technical tools to humanistic interests. On the other hand, the cutting-edge projects that garner attention for DH require specialized knowledge, powerful tools, and massive datasets, each the specialized purview of large research institutions and outside the reach of more resource-limited players in the academy. David Golumbia notes a concerning dynamic among DH scholars regarding how the

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11 Matthew Kirschenbaum, "What is Digital Humanities and What's It Doing in English Departments?" in *Debates in the Digital Humanities,* ed. Matthew K. Gold, 3–11 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 3, http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/part/2.

12 See Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

13 Ibid.

field is defined: "one unthreatening, expansive definition when outsiders look in, another, exclusionary, imposed by a small but powerful and influential subset of DHers, forcefully advocated behind the scenes."[14] The identity of DH exists as a tug-of-war between English and other programs, between humanities and computer science, and between an open and an exclusive self-image. As a result, labeling a scholar or a project as being part of DH applies an automatic degree of separation, and as a result, marginalization.

Computers & Writing as struggling subfield

Just as English programs encountered disruption with the arrival of digital technologies, so too did composition suffer a split in identity and purpose. Computers & writing[15] came about as some scholars, most notably Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, began questioning how technology reforms — rather than merely influences — writing and writing instruction. As computer use has become more common for the creation, publication, and consumption of texts, the computers & writing subfield has gained momentum and recognition within composition studies. Indeed, Karl Stolley, in his 2013 Computers & Writing conference keynote, called for the Conference on College Composition and Communication (the major annual writing-studies conference) to become a subconference of Computers & Writing, reversing the current scenario where the "Computer Connection" holds

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14 David Golumbia, "'Digital Humanities': Two Definitions," *uncomputing* (blog), 20 January 2013, http://www.uncomputing.org/?p=203&cpage=1.

15 Much like the earlier footnote about "composition studies," the term "computers & writing" warrants discussion, as it is but one of several possible names for the subfield under discussion. "Computers and composition" is another. The former phrase is also the name of the major conference of the subfield, whereas the latter phrase is also the name of the major journal of the subfield. I use the word "writing" here to nominally distinguish between the subfield and the broader parent field.

marginal status within the greater CCCC event and the Computers & Writing conference remains relatively unknown.[16]

Scholarship about computers and writing started with the sort of enthusiasm that is now uncomfortably familiar to readers who witnessed the burst of the "dot-com bubble" in the early 2000s: Many articles proclaimed the benefits and advances possible through the incorporation of technology. Authors served as advocates for incorporating the digital into the classroom, and the focus and methodology of traditional composition research faded to the background. Eventually, as Clay Spinuzzi points out, "the optimism wears off" in the late 1990s.[17] At this point, social concerns of equity and access move to the forefront, and a discussion begins about the benefits and assumptions implicit in computer-aided instruction in composition courses. That discussion continues to this day, and for good reason: Technology continues to advance, infiltrate social norms, and change expectations in the classroom. With each change, renewed critical analysis is required to ensure awareness of the complexities of digital composition instruction.

Throughout its history, computers & writing has existed as this somewhat-marginalized, somewhat-progressive entity that is attached to, yet separate from, composition studies as a whole. In its thirty-year history, computers & writing has seen shifting emphases in teaching and scholarship, yet it maintains a precarious and difficult-to-define relationship with composition studies overall. Such challenging definitions effectively form a connection among the various offshoot fields discussed so far. Recognizing those connections and employing them to develop support and mutual benefit could bring the recognition that each field has struggled to maintain over their brief histories.

16 Karl Stolley, "In Search of Troublesome Digital Writing: A Meditation on Difficulty" (Keynote Speech, Computers and Writing Conference, 2013).

17 Clay Spinuzzi, "Computers and writing: History, theory, philosophy," *Spinuzzi* (blog), 13 July 2007, http://spinuzzi.blogspot.com/2007/07/computers-and-writing-history-theory.html.

The divergent alignment

> The dangers of being an array of divergent practices, rather than a unified field comes when your work is scattered.[18]

Nystrand, et al. argue that composition really took hold in the 1970s, as a response to the larger social literacy crisis.[19] Many historical views of composition, including that of Goggin heavily cited above, generally consider the late 1880s as the starting point, failing to separate composition the course from composition the discipline. Composition classes have existed for well over a century in one form or another, but it has not been until recently that composition has existed as what Nystrand, et al. call "an interdisciplinary writing research community as well as a pedagogical forum."[20] That community and forum now exist within a larger context of scholarship that examines — and is inscribed by — technology. This technological moment necessitates a reconsideration of academic disciplines.

The distinct developmental histories of the Digital Humanities and Computers & Writing mean that the two fields are considered together or related only as an exception. Yet the fields are most certainly not at cross-purposes. Scholars who typically position their work in Computers & Writing occasionally — when professionally profitable — assert a position in the Digital Humanities, as well. This positioning leads to some identity politics among those in Computers & Writing. In her contribution to the 2011 "Are You a Digital Humanist?" Town Hall session at the Computers & Writing conference, Cheryl E. Ball succinctly stated that financial incentives lead her to publicly adopt the title: "When I'm talking to the NEH, I'm a digital human-

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18 Virginia Kuhn, "Are You a Digital Humanist?" (Town Hall Session, Computers and Writing Conference, 2011).

19 Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt, "Where Did Composition Studies Come From? An Intellectual History," *Written Communication* (July 1993): 267–333, at 267–68.

20 Ibid., 314.

ist. When I'm talking to y'all, I'm me."[21] For Ball, the DH title is one of opportunity, rather than identity. The Digital Humanities currently affords caché with hiring and funding committees. As Doug Eyman said in his contribution to that same 2011 Town Hall session, "It's not just this label you put on anybody who can make a website. But that's what's getting money now."[22] But the absence of a clear public understanding of what constitutes the Digital Humanities allows for its adoption by those who do not generally consider themselves members of the field — scholars who might be considered disciplinary imposters.

But who defines the discipline and determines who is a member and who, an imposter? Ball shared her observations of how academics on the job market draw the proverbial line in the sand: "Everyone has read *Remediation* and can quote from it in their job talk, and apparently that's what makes you a digital humanist."[23] Though the oversimplification served to make her point, defining a field by its source texts is common practice among those attempting to segregate the Digital Humanities from computers & writing — a point that Alex Reid took up in his blog post, "Digital Humanities Tactics":

> I don't want to make an argument about what English departments "should" look like. I don't want to make an argument about what DH should look like. It's just a misperception of who is in the room.[24]

As a movement toward remedying the divide, Doug Walls suggests that we use "digital trade routes" to connect DH with rhet-

21 Cheryl E. Ball, "Are You a Digital Humanist?" (Town Hall Session, Computers and Writing Conference, 2011).

22 Doug Eyman, "Are You a Digital Humanist?" (Town Hall Session, Computers and Writing Conference, 2011).

23 Ball, "Are You a Digital Humanist?"

24 Alex Reid, "Digital Humanities Tactics," *digital digs: an archaeology of the future* (blog), 17 June 2011, http://alex-reid.net/2011/06/digital-humanities-tactics.html.

oric so they can benefit from one another's work.²⁵ While I support his idealism and agree that open communication between the fields is necessary, his suggestion does not go far enough to ensure future growth in both fields. We need to loosen the grip of current definitions and embrace the role of these offshoot, marginalized subfields. The Digital Humanities and Computers & Writing need to abandon the pretense of separation or animosity and combine efforts to improve mutual standings within the academy.

Mutually assured disruption

The technology-focused subfield of computers and writing is familiar with ostracism, developing over a series of evictions spanning several decades. After being disowned by English departments when composition programs formed and fighting for recognition as computers gained prominence in the act of composition, computers and writing knows how to exist independently. But as the field moves toward greater inclusion into the rhetoric and composition academic space, we need to think about a larger, more universally beneficial goal: re-integrating writing and literature studies. This call for integration is nothing new, as Peter Elbow argued for it in a 1993 issue of *Rhetoric Review*:

> The dominance of reading at all levels of education reinforces the problematic banking metaphor of learning: the assumption that students are vessels to be filled. But when we give equal emphasis to writing, we are more likely to assume the contrasting metaphor: learning is the making of meaning.

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25 Doug Walls, "In/Between Programs: Forging a Curriculum between Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities," in *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities,* eds. Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson, 210–23 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 213–15.

[…] When we stop privileging reading over writing, we stop privileging passivity over activity.[26]

The current calls for inclusion and acceptance between c&w and DH are merely a new iteration of Elbow's argument infused with the digital. Indeed, this discussion may have been encouraged by the gradual success c&w has seen in moving into rhet/comp programs. But simply playing nice is insufficient. c&w and DH have too much to gain from one another; they can no longer afford to work as separate entities. Reading and writing — literature and composition — must be seen as complementary components of good thinking.

Connecting reading and writing as acts seems simple. Connecting literature and composition as teachable content *should* be simple, but their histories diverge too much. Writing studies came into being when traditional English departments jettisoned a concern for pedagogy so they could specialize in literary analysis. Today's departments cannot afford to ignore pedagogy in light of our changing educational landscape. While MOOCs, learning academies, and other edtech solutions work to eliminate the personal support teachers provide their students, the corporations building these resources — rather than the local institutions/communities — get to dictate pedagogy. Without scholarly attention to pedagogy, academics will lose their ability to make informed decisions about how their field is represented in the classroom.

At the same time, the continual focus on the pedagogies of composition have confined writing studies to placement as a second-tier academic interest. By more directly, regularly, and publicly aligning with the Digital Humanities, Computers & Writing would benefit from name recognition (and funding) that comes with the currently popular field. While it would move from a subfield of rhet/comp to a subfield of DH, by preserving its ties with the rhet/comp community, c&w would be

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26 Peter Elbow, "The War between Reading and Writing — And How to End It," *Rhetoric Review* 12, no. 1 (1993): 5–24, at 16.

supported by the rhetorical tradition of comp and the academic tradition of the humanities.

While it may sound at first like a corporate merger, this blending would be neither forced, disingenuous, nor imbalanced. The connections between c&w and dh are critical — if not essential — for the continued development of both fields. We have the opportunity to strengthen the reputation of c&w and the teaching of dh, allowing those of us in each subfield to benefit from the strengths of the other. For those in what can now be called traditional dh studies, working with c&w scholars can highlight pedagogical concerns that too often go unaddressed in dh conferences or general discussion. For those in c&w, working with dh scholars can highlight historical connections with traditional scholarship and bring greater awareness from public institutions and funding agencies.

We need to disrupt the Digital Humanities by incorporating computers & writing into the "big tent" categorization. Cheryl E. Ball struggled to incorporate the two in her professional identity, debating whether she fits in as a digital humanist. Her solution is expressed through an integration of disciplines in what she calls an "editorial pedagogy."[27] Those who study c&w should not question whether they are digital humanists. We have a deep interest in humanistic concerns of education, advocacy, and social conditions. Yet we clearly work in the digital realm of technology and media interactions. We cannot and must not avoid that label. The division between c&w and dh is a false separation created by our two fields' respective histories, not their current conditions. c&w scholars have the opportunity — the necessity — to disrupt the dh establishment by taking on the identity as their own, changing and expanding both fields as they do so. dh itself must disrupt c&w by connecting it with the coding, analytic resources, and large project management experience common in dh circles, adding breadth to the reach

27 Cheryl E. Ball, "Editorial Pedagogy, pt. 1: A Professional Philosophy," *Hybrid Pedagogy,* 5 November 2012, http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/editorial-pedagogy-pt-1-a-professional-philosophy/.

of C&W research and collaboration. It is time for DH and C&W to work together to raise hell.

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