
Building Space for DH Communities

Matthew K. Gold

mgold@gc.cuny.edu

The Graduate Center, CUNY, United States of America

Scot French

scot.french@ucf.edu

University of Central Florida, United States of America

Lisa Spiro

lspiro@rice.edu

Rice University, United States of America

Micki Kaufman

mickikaufman@gmail.com

The Graduate Center, CUNY, United States of America

Erin Glass

erglass@ucsd.edu

UC San Diego, United States of America

Jessica Pressman

San Diego State University, United States of America

Lisa Rhody

lrhody@gc.cuny.edu

The Graduate Center, CUNY, United States of America

Description of Session Topic

How can DH regional communities best be cultivated and sustained? This panel explores US-based digital humanities collectives that foster active communities of practice. Regional consortia are a growing phenomenon in US digital humanities, offering opportunities for loosely organized groups of DHers to share workshops, events, datasets, conferences, and news with one another. Such arrangements have the benefits of addressing institutional barriers to DH work and enabling sharing that can help address, at least in a small way, funding and infrastructural inequities that can make it hard for newcomers to begin DH work. According to John Theibault, regional consortia “can be distinguished from, on the one hand, state and national digital humanities groups that organize conferences and edit

journals and require paid membership, as well as digital humanities centers located in a single institution or formally constituted groups with explicit criteria for admission, and, on the other hand, not visibly organized interactions in active digital humanities regions, even if those interactions are frequent in practice” (2016). Theibault identified 11 self-organized regional consortia not affiliated with a larger organization such as EADH, mostly in the US. Such consortia can serve an important need in connecting researchers from a range of institutions and building community more expansive than a campus and more localized than a national or international scholarly organization. As Rebecca Frost Davis and Bryan Alexander have pointed out, “large-scale multi-institutional projects aimed at building resources and pooling expertise . . . [can be] constructed to match the needs of both small liberal arts colleges and large research institutions.” The building out of regional consortia, then, can help broaden the impact and audience for digital humanities work while simultaneously addressing infrastructural needs and allowing institutions to share complementary strengths.

This panel will consider how a range of regional DH groups have organized their communities, many of them through the free WordPress-based platform Commons In A Box, to build active and lasting communities of DH practice. Presentations will cover the contours and plans of specific regional communities as well as the guidance such examples may offer to academic communities just beginning to organize themselves. Attention will be paid to shared commonalities across regional organizations as well as distinctive areas of focus. Included in the panel will be a discussion of software tools that communities can use to build regional DH organizations, with a particular focus on the Commons In A Box software used by many of the groups represented on the panel. The panel will also delve into the challenges of organizing and sustaining a regional consortium, including rewarding the volunteer labor that such organizations depend upon, raising awareness of the consortium, and developing an appropriate governance model.

Though this panel focuses on US-based regional organizations, it is hoped that the panel will stir conversations on an international level about shared models of community sustenance and infrastructure. Out of this exchange, the panel hopes to build an informal network of regional DH consortia that can

serve as the basis for the ongoing development of DH communities.

CBOX Development and NYCDH

Matthew K. Gold

This presentation will discuss the design, implementation, and future plans for Commons In A Box (CBOX), with a particular focus on how it is being used in the NYCDH community to foster community among New York City DH researchers and practitioners. In NYCDH, a CBOX site has been used to create groups around discrete topics such as “Digital Art History,” “Librarians In DH,” and the “Digital Antiquity Working Group.” Each of these groups were started by members of the site and are used, along with larger public groups such as “Announcements,” to foster connections across a range of NYC institutions. In recent years, the site has facilitated the planning and implementation of an annual conference that includes a week of workshops on DH subjects offered across the NYC area by a range of institutions, and an annual prize for the best graduate student DH project. The site includes a shared calendar that is populated by members and member institutions, so that it provides a quick sense of DH events in the region.

Commons In A Box is a free software project supported by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and maintained by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Commons In A Box has two elements: a plugin manager and a default theme. The plugin manager enforces version dependencies between a collection of WordPress plugins, ensuring that all such plugins work seamlessly and without conflict—a technical innovation for the WordPress plugin ecosystem. For the end-user, the experience of installing Commons In A Box is extremely smooth; upon activating CBOX, the plugin manager automatically performs what would otherwise be dozens of manual steps, including plugin installation, activation, and configuration. The CBOX theme, which is based on the design of the CUNY Academic Commons, can also be installed; when activated, it creates a Commons space that features image sliders, community elements such as lists of members and recently updated blogs in the sidebar, and group-related functionality such as “reply-by-email” group forum functionality that has been crucial to community building on the CUNY Academic Commons. The result, and the key technical innovation of the CBOX project, is the transformation of a complicated set-up and customization procedure into an easy, streamlined installation process. CBOX is

currently used by a number of organizations, including the Modern Language Association, NYCDH, Texas DH, Virginia DH, and Florida DH, to build Commons spaces for DH communities.

Under the aegis of an NEH Implementation Grant, Commons In A Box - OpenLab is a new version of CBOX dedicated specifically to teaching and learning, called CBOX-OL. In this presentation, we will describe how integrating a suite of teaching-centered digital tools for content sharing and annotation into the core code of CBOX and bundling it with a core set of DH pedagogical tools ensuring that CBOX-OL communities meet accessibility standards. We will also partner with OER initiatives at partner institutions to create ways of sharing open-access humanities content within and across Commons environments that promote and reinforce sound citation practices. Finally, we have secured a commitment from Reclaim Hosting, a popular hosting service for educational institutions and digital humanities projects, to integrate CBOX-OL into its suite of easily installable software packages. Included in the new version of CBOX will be a set of teaching-related plugins as well as a suite of DH-related WordPress tools in the areas of scholarly communication, such as Braille, which translates English text into Braille; Anthologize, which enables bloggers to create eBooks from their posts; DiRT Tools, which helps community members identify the tools from the DiRT Directory they use; and PressForward, which can be used by teachers to collect content, and then to assign the selection, evaluation, and re-publication of that content with an introduction as an activity to encourage students to connect their classroom discussion with ongoing contemporary debates. All of these plugins will benefit the digital humanities via their potential to enable open learning and exchange, emphasizing scholarship as an open, process-based activity, rather than a closed, solitary one.

Commons spaces don’t build themselves; rather, they are cultivated and energized by participation and leadership from members. Technical development lays the foundation on which such work can happen, but the growth, evolution, and sustainability of such platforms require vision, commitment, and resourcefulness from members of the communities where they launch. This presentation will close with a consideration of the ongoing personal, institutional, individual, consortial, and infrastructural support needed to foster and maintain flourishing communities of active practitioners.

The CUNY Academic Commons

Micki Kaufman and Lisa Rhody

The CUNY Academic Commons is an academic network built at the City University of New York (CUNY) by and for faculty, graduate students, administrators, staff, postdocs, and alumni across the 24-campus system. The site serves to foster community and promote scholarship across our twenty-four campuses. With over 7,293 members and well into its seventh year, the Commons continues to evolve as a vibrant space where members connect, create, collaborate, and explore.

As the site has grown and matured, user outreach has become an increasing focus. In addition to webinars and one-to-one engagement with users and administrators of Commons groups, the team has most recently established Commons Faculty Fellowships to assist faculty in setting up Commons sites and customizing the platform to provide the right teaching tool for class needs. In conjunction with CUNY campus Teaching and Learning Centers, these outreach efforts are helping to promote the benefits of the Commons as a teaching tool across the 24 campuses.

A significant focus of the Commons development has been on personalization of the user experience. With the addition of attractive, customizable public profiles, members can now create beautiful online portfolios for their work. The high-impact header section provides an elegant profile synopsis and collapses as one scrolls down the page. Social media icons and website links help connect user profiles to a range of services on the web. Our sophisticated profile builder makes it easy to create an online CV using free-form and specialized widgets designed to highlight positions, education, publications, and interests, and the new RSS feed widget helps members include excerpts of recent posts. Likewise, the addition of Quick Links gives user profiles, blogs and groups customizable shortened links, easy to remember and ideal for business cards and CVs. Using the cuny.is/ URL shortener helps Commons users to personalize their site and to more effectively communicate their relationship to CUNY.

The Commons allows users to create and join as many groups and websites as they want. This allows users to administrate departments, teach classes, discuss and share resources on a selected topic, and connect with people sharing common interests on the Commons. Features of the Commons include the ability to have groups be public, private, or hidden and can include a host of functions including discussion

forums, file storage and document collaboration, and rich email integration that allows a more email-driven, 'listserv-like' interaction with the Commons. Sites created by Commons users take many forms including personal blogs, research projects, department, class, event or conference sites, journals, reviews and news commentaries, and photo blogs, and are configurable using hundreds of themes and plugins for a wide range of visual presentations. Users also have free access to the Commons community's WordPress Help group to get help building their sites and managing accessibility.

The Commons also now includes Social Paper, a networked writing environment that enables students to compose and share all forms of their written work across classes, disciplines, semesters, and publics. Likewise, students can browse and comment on the papers of their peers. Unlike many learning management systems or course blogs, Social Paper gives students full control over the sharing settings of each individual piece of writing. Students may choose to share a paper with a professor, a class, a writing group, the public at large, or alternately, keep it private as part of their personal, in-progress, reflective writing portfolio. Additionally, while composing, students can post comments on their writing with questions mentioning other users in order to solicit peer feedback or interest. By giving students a centralized space to manage the totality of their writing, students can easily change privacy settings as they mature as writers and thinkers, develop audiences for their growing body of work, and reflectively build off prior writing.

As the Commons continues to grow, and as its development team continues to release updated versions of Commons In A Box, the site will endeavor to continue serving the needs of faculty, students, administrators and alumni across the 24 CUNY campuses -- and in the process exemplifying how an academic social network can be sustained across a university system with multiple campuses.

Texas Digital Humanities Consortium

Lisa Spiro

Even as digital humanists at Texas colleges and universities are creating significant digital humanities projects, we face common challenges, such as finding collaborators, learning new skills and developing educational programs. In the fall of 2013, Lisa Spiro (Rice), Cameron Buckner (University of Houston), and Laura Mandell (Texas A&M) discussed establishing a statewide digital humanities consortium to connect

digital humanists across the state and foster collaborations. The University of Houston hosted the first Texas Digital Humanities Consortium (TxDHC) conference, co-sponsored by Rice and Texas A&M, in April of 2014. At the conference, we held an open business meeting to plan the TxDHC, which attracted 19 participants from colleges and universities across the state. We discussed common needs, including to support faculty, graduate, and undergraduate training in DH; to build community so that members are aware of projects, opportunities and potential collaborators across the state; and to gain access to infrastructure (such as Omeka) for projects (Spiro 2014). To meet these needs, we planned to develop a website, hold an annual peer-reviewed conference, and provide informal opportunities to interact, such as by publicizing visiting speakers at our home institutions. We also explored creating internship opportunities for graduate students and advocating for DH. Rather than establishing formal structures, we decided to operate as a “coalition of the willing,” with decision-making by consensus. To gather additional input, TxDHC used an online survey, which had 14 respondents between April and September of 2014. Respondents ranked the following as the leading “high” priorities: foster networking (92.9%); identify researchers in Texas with common interests (71.4%); and facilitate collaborative research (64.3%).

Informed by the input received from the meeting and survey, Spiro set up a founding steering committee (SC) for TxDHC, inviting representatives from Texas universities and colleges to serve. Current SC members include Spiro (chair), Jennifer Hecker (University of Texas), Laura Mandell, Rafia Mirza (UT-Arlington), Laurel Stvan (UT-Arlington), Toniesha Taylor (Prairie View A&M), Andrew Torget (University of North Texas), and Dillon Wackerman (SMU); representatives from Southwestern University and University of Houston have also served on the committee. The Steering Committee meets via video conferencing several times each year to discuss the ongoing development of consortium and events such as conferences and webinars; we also communicate fairly regularly through email. Our mission is to “promote digital research in the humanities disciplines and facilitate interaction amongst researchers working in the digital humanities both within the state, nationally, and internationally” by connecting people, facilitating training and knowledge sharing, and raising the visibility of DH work. Membership in TxDHC is open to anyone who sets up a profile on the organization’s website. Currently there are 58 “active”

members and 116 members signed up for announcements.

This presentation will explore TxDHC’s history, initiatives, challenges and future plans. TxDHC’s core activities focus on building community across the state, including through:

- **Our website.** Texas A&M’s Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture (thanks particularly to the work of former staff member Matthew Christy) installed and hosts the TxDHC’s website (<http://www.txdhc.org/>), using Commons in a Box to encourage collaboration. The website includes member profiles, groups focused on topics such as Training and Metadata Standards, and a calendar. We have also implemented the DiRT Tools plugin to identify tools used by TxDHC members (<http://www.txdhc.org/tool/>).
- **State-wide conferences.** TxDHC has sponsored two multi-day conferences: its inaugural conference at the University of Houston in 2014 and its second conference at UT Arlington in 2015. While these conferences boasted strong programs, recruiting Texas institutions to host the event has proven challenging, especially since TxDHC lacks resources beyond endorsing the conference, publicizing it, and enlisting steering committee members to assist with it. In 2016, TxDHC shifted to a strategy of partnering with other Texas digital humanities/ digital library conferences to hold post-conference events, avoiding duplication of efforts, making it more convenient for people to attend both events, and taking advantage of cross-publicity. Recently we organized a one-day hybrid unconference/mini-conference following the Texas Conference on Digital Libraries in Austin and a THATCamp following Digital Frontiers in Houston. The mini-conference combined the best of THATCamps and more formal conferences by giving speakers fifteen to twenty minutes to set the context, then devoting the rest of the hour to discussion. While attendance at THATCamp Digital Frontiers was fairly small, the event connected participants from Rice, the University of Houston, UT Arlington, UT Austin, and local museums and explored topics such as creating an introduction to DH course and reviving DH projects.
- **Webinars:** TxDHC runs occasional web-based workshops on topics such as OpenRefine, DPLA,

and using tools like Omeka or Hypothes.is in the classroom. To encourage interaction and build community, we employ a video conferencing platform so that participants can see each other's faces, and we try to set aside time at the end of each event for information sharing.

TxDHC faces several challenges:

- **Raising awareness of its existence.** At the recent Digital Frontiers conference, it became clear that many attendees didn't know about TxDHC. The organization is primarily publicized through its events, website, word of mouth, and Twitter, but more outreach to DH groups across the state is needed.
- **Accomplishing its vision with few resources.** Lacking a budget or staff, TxDHC depends on the time and commitment of its hard-working volunteers, particularly its steering committee members. Of course, these volunteers face competing demands on their time, so consortium work is fit in as it can be.
- **Keeping the website updated and encouraging people to make full use of it.** Ideally, members of TxDHC would add events to the calendar and participate more actively in online groups, but those hopes haven't yet materialized. Focused outreach may increase participation.
- **Developing a governance model.** Initially we operated without clearly defined roles, which allowed for flexibility but also meant that members didn't necessarily get recognized for their contributions and weren't tied to particular responsibilities. Moreover, we would like to develop a more coherent and transparent method for bringing new members onto the steering committee and rolling senior members off. In December of 2015, members of the steering committee came together for a day-long retreat at Rice University, where we discussed the need to spread out the work and ensure that all are recognized for their contributions and sketched out more defined roles. We are working on bylaws to formalize the organization's operations and are in the process of implementing plans made at the retreat. At the same time, many SC members are sympathetic to the lightweight organizational approach taken by NYCDH, which several Steering Committee members learned about

during a recent presentation by Alex Gil and Kimon Keramidas at Digital Frontiers 2016. Focusing on partnerships and fostering communication across Texas DH organizations seems like a sound strategy for a small, all-volunteer organization like TxDHC.

- **Dealing with geographical distance:** Since Texas is the second largest state in the US, it can be difficult to connect people across such a significant distance. To cope with this distance, we have organized state-wide events and online gatherings, but we also hope to encourage members to use the website to promote events and activities within a particular city or region within Texas.

By working together, regional consortia can learn from each other, explore developing common infrastructure (as we have already benefited from CUNY's work on Commons in a Box), and facilitate broader collaborations around research and teaching.

Florida Digital Humanities Consortium

Scot French

My presentation will explore the opportunities and challenges involved in creating a geographically extended, self-governing regional consortium (FLDH/Florida Digital Humanities Consortium) that depends, for its intellectual labor and technology support infrastructure, on academic institutional sponsorship while promoting free, open access to academic networks and DH resources.

Founded at THATCamp Florida 2014, FLDH's mission "is to provide a platform for studying and discussing digital tools, methods, and pedagogies as well as for educating teachers, faculty, and the public about the multiple, interdisciplinary ways humanities research and computing impact our world. It meets annually to identify issues of interest and to set goals for future collaboration and digital humanities research." At present the group has 12 institutional members, ranging from large research institutions to small liberal arts colleges: University of Florida (Gainesville), University of Central Florida (Orlando), Florida State University (Tallahassee), University of South Florida (Tampa), University of Miami, Florida International University (Miami), Rollins College (Winter Park), New College of Florida (Sarasota), Florida Southern College (Lakeland), Eckerd College (St. Petersburg), and the Florida Humanities Council. Inspired by NYCDH and the CUNY Academic Commons, group organizers adopted the Commons In

a Box (CBOX) academic commons social networking platform as a virtual space in which to foster community and share resources.

An internal grant from the University of Central Florida funded an organizational meeting in Orlando at which representatives of participating schools and the Florida Humanities Council established an Executive Council with two representatives from each institution. A five-member elected Steering Committee drafted a mission statement and set of by-laws, established short- and long-term goals, and began planning for two major initiatives: Hosting HASTAC17 in Orlando (scheduled for November 2017) and submitting a proposal to host a southeast regional pre-conference workshop on visualization tools through the National Endowment for the Humanities' Institutes for Advanced Topics in the Humanities. Working on these initiatives has placed new demands on FLDH's leadership structure, and prompted a shift from volunteer initiative to a more active chair and working group/subcommittee organizational framework.

To date, all of our discussions about how best to build and organize our statewide/regional consortium have been internal to the group. We seek to expand the conversation to representatives of similar groups, particularly those using the CBOX platform developed by Matthew K. Gold and his project team at CUNY. Out of this exchange we hope to build an informal network of regional DH consortia for purposes of information sharing that can be expanded and formalized as needed.

This paper/presentation will raise issues of general interest to the DH community and of particular concern to members of the FLDH Executive Council (which I chair) and Steering Committee (on which I serve as a founding member).

- **Leadership/Self-Governance Structures.** What sorts of leadership/self-governance structures do regional DH consortia employ to ensure broad-based institutional representation, inclusion of diverse views, and transparency in setting group agendas and policies?
- **Academic Commons Activity.** What strategies or best practices might regional consortia adopt to build community and generate sustained activity on CBOX or other academic commons platforms? How can participating institutions most effectively contribute to the development of CBOX or similar platforms, with an eye

toward enhanced functionality and customization?

- **Staffing/Program Support.** Is it feasible for participating institutions to "share" staff in support of mutually beneficial program and projects? What roles might digital humanities center staff, graduate research assistants, or postdoctoral research/teaching fellows play in fostering a regionwide DH community and providing training for interested faculty and students? Is state, national, international, or foundation funding available in support of such regional collaborations?
- **Service/"Invisible Work."** To what extent, if at all, is the volunteer work of consortia officers (such as FLDH Executive Council/Steering Committee members) recognized as valued service within their respective institutions? Could regional consortia have a role in documenting and validating the contributions of active members seeking promotion and tenure or other paths to career advancement?
- **Geographic Distance/Virtual vs. Face-to-Face Meetings.** Are webinars and Google Hangouts an adequate substitute for face-to-face meetings and workshops? How might regional consortia spanning large geographic areas (such as Florida and Texas) create more funded opportunities for travel to consortia-sponsored conferences/meetings? What options are available both within and across member institutions for fundraising in support of travel?

As chair of the FLDH Executive Council and a member of the Steering Committee I will conduct an informal member survey to solicit other potential topics for discussion during this session. Ideas generated by this panel will be shared with the Executive Council and serve as the basis for discussion and action at an FLDH organizational meeting during the Orlando HASTAC conference in November 2017.

SD|DH: Building and Strengthening DH Teaching and Learning through a Regional Network

Erin Glass and Jessica Pressman

How can DH regional networks work to spread resources to underserved student populations, foster digital literacy and confidence in educators without DH institutional support, and strengthen local, humanistic forms of social advocacy? This presentation will focus on the development and future

plans of the San Diego Digital Humanities (SD|DH) regional network, a collective comprised of faculty (and some staff and graduate students) from seven different local higher education institutions ranging from a R1 university to community colleges. While San Diego is not prominently known for humanities research—let alone DH—we recognize that its location on the border of Mexico, and the diverse student body of its institutions, make it an exceptionally rich site for socially-engaged, participatory forms of DH activity. By pooling resources, expertise, experience, perspectives, and moral support, SD|DH embraces the power of diversity as our chief value.

SD|DH has been working together for the last three years to share experiences and resources, plan events, apply for funding, and seek collegial support for our endeavors. We work from different institutional situations and relationships to digital humanities: a campus pursuing a grass-roots and ground-up approach to digital humanities research and teaching but lacking funding for institutional infrastructure, a campus administration wanting to implement digital humanities from a top-down structure, and a campus successfully implementing digital humanities projects within a specific department but lacking the leadership to build out from there. We have been successful in different ways at different campuses, but we now have a full-blown DH initiative at SDSU and an emerging program at USD, and we continue to use our individual campus efforts to bolster the region

Our first goal in forming SD|DH was to assess the barriers to implementing DH across a wide spectrum of institutions and diverse student populations, and develop work-around strategies for implementing DH by drawing upon the resources of multiple institutions within a single region. From the start, these efforts have been voluntary, but we were able to expand our efforts and visibility with the generous support of a National Endowment for the Humanities Level I Digital Start Up Grant for our project “Building and Strengthening Digital Humanities through a Regional Network.” This grant supported a series of workshops that focused on distributing DH to institutions and student populations usually left out of DH. It also helped encourage educators to explore new DH techniques for teaching within the safety net of a supportive community. Educators engaged in a wide range of DH methods such as text analysis and game design as well as DH-inspired techniques to creative re-imagine uses of everyday software and tools for pedagogical purposes. We met several times

throughout the year to discuss challenges and successes, share expertise, and brainstorm new possible projects.

In this presentation, we will discuss our methods for developing and facilitating these workshops and pedagogical engagements as well as some of the relevant issues concerning coordination, labor, administrative support, technical resources, and transportation. We will also share lessons learned throughout our experience thus far and suggest protocols that could potentially be re-used and re-purposed by other institutions. Finally, we will argue for the need to collectively and creatively communicate the value of multi-institutional collaboration to administrators in order to increase administrators’ receptivity to these efforts going forward.

In addition to discussing projects already carried out, we would like to share our plans for moving forward. As part of deepening and expanding our community’s ties, SD|DH is working towards launching a multi-institutional digital commons powered by Commons in a Box (CBOX) hosted at UCSD. While some SD|DH campuses could ostensibly run and host their own CBOX we have decided to experiment with creating a single commons for our community so that all participating SD|DH institutions can take advantage of the many affordances of CBOX. We are planning to use this Commons in multiple ways. First, we will use it to facilitate communications for the SD|DH group as a list serv, events calendar, member directory, and showcase of SD|DH projects. However, we will also invite all students, faculty, and staff of SD|DH institutions to use the Commons for networking across institutions, building websites related to research and teaching (for any discipline), and creating interest groups that cut across disciplines and institutions. Finally, we also hope to implement Social Paper, a collaborative writing tool developed at The CUNY Graduate Center for CBOX through the generous support of a NEH Digital Start Up Grant. We are currently discussing the possibility of designing multi-institutional synchronous courses that will engage students in thinking through the role of collaboration in their respective disciplines by collaborating with students outside of their institutions through Social Paper.

Bibliography

Alexander, B. and Frost Davis, R. (2012) "Should Liberal Arts Campuses Do Digital Humanities? Process and

Products in the Small College World." *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, Ed. Matthew K. Gold. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Spiro, L. (2014) "Creating the Texas Digital Humanities Consortium." *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*. April 23, 2014. <https://digitalscholarship.wordpress.com/2014/04/23/creating-the-texas-digital-humanities-consortium/>.

Theibault, J. (2016) "Regional Digital Humanities Consortia: An Emerging Formalization of Informal Network Ties? [Poster]." In *Digital Humanities 2016: Conference Abstracts*, 902-3. Kraków: Jagiellonian University & Pedagogical University. <http://dh2016.adho.org/abstracts/176>.