Alison Booth, University of Virginia

MLA Session 404:

Evaluating Digital Scholarship Today: Problems And Solutions

Saturday, 6 January 2024

(Revised January 1, 2024)

"Just Not That into You:

New Evaluation Guidelines Seeking Older Disciplines"

Abstract (updated January 2024)

A quarter century of proposed standards for evaluating digital scholarship indicates an ongoing problem in crediting this work in prevailing disciplinary terms. Such standards documents recur not only because of changing technology but also because of gatekeepers' recalcitrance. The discipline-oriented humanities standards have never encompassed the actual range of digital research practices, while colleagues within the fields remain wary of aspects of these practices resembling the social or natural sciences, including co-authorship and grant funding of lab-like inter-institutional initiatives with no clear end date or imprint.

They're just not that into you/us. The standards for evaluation, while helpful to candidates, go largely unheard when addressed to specific humanities disciplines such as MLA or AHA. Daniel O'Donnell emphasizes that digital humanities is a cluster of methods, a paradiscipline. We recommend ingraining the paradiscipline's methods in the curriculum as departments adapt not only to decreasing tenure-track career paths but also to reconceived research across disciplines, such as environmental humanities, place-making cultural studies, and design justice.

If the general resistance persists, have the guidelines for evaluating digital scholarship been effective, and have they changed? The presentation shares some observations about a corpus of guidelines since 2000, noting a sameness over decades, as well as a few newer developments: increasing institutional resources and recognition for public humanities and collaborative interdisciplinarity; stress on the matters of access/ibility and universal design; sustainability and planning the lifespan of a digital project. What to do with "legacy" projects at the end? With observations about the University of Virginia's history of digital humanities and MLA's new drafted guidelines, the paper will recommend supporting faculty and student collaboration that reduces the mystification and marginalization of digital scholarship and perhaps reduces the need for special guidelines.

Collaboration: Alison Booth, Jeremy Boggs, Spencer Grayson, Lucas Martinez, Brandon Walsh

The following links are related to a brief collaboration at the University of Virginia with graduate students and Scholars' Lab and IATH staff in the Library's DH Center. Our interchanges and co-working took place largely on Zoom and Slack. Spencer and Lucas were paid research assistants who worked on document metadata in a spreadsheet, explored patterns in the changing guidelines, and added to the Zotero folders. We chose to work with the open-access software of digital scholarship in the humanities: Zotero, Voyant Tools, and GitHub. In 2024, we will draft and establish new University of Virginia guidelines. "Evaluating Digital Scholarship" is nearly the oldest and certainly the shortest text in our corpus. The UVA text is sometimes cross-referenced by academic websites, many of which refer to the guidelines of professional organizations.

Zotero Library: Guidelines for Evaluating DH Scholarship

The QR code leads to a group library in Zotero named "Guidelines for Evaluating DH Scholarship (GEDS)." (Direct link to GEDS) The library includes a folder of the text of thirteen professional guidelines, 2000-2023. Other folders gather sources discussing guidelines for evaluating scholarship for promotion and tenure, or more broadly the implications or best practices of digital scholarship. We can invite new members to this group library upon request: booth@virginia.edu.

Voyant Tools Corpus

The corpus of texts of thirteen GEDS is available in Voyant here. The texts of the guidelines can be analyzed and compared, adjusting the settings on various tools (word frequencies, collocations, distributions, etc.) and data visualizations.

The Voyant platform for text analysis was created by Stéfan Sinclair, Geoffrey Rockwell, and project contributors and programmers including Andrew MacDonald, Cecily Raynor, and others.

GitHub Repository GEDS Texts

The corpus is shared on GitHub, where it is accessible for other uses besides Voyant Tools.