

4-2019

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Kathi Inman Berens

Portland State University, kberens@pdx.edu

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Citation Details

Berens, K. (2019). "DH Adjuncts: Social Justice and Care", in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, Lauren F. Klein, University of Minnesota Press.

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DH Adjuncts: Social Justice and Care

KATHI INMAN BERENS

It is not a question of whether or not adjuncts teach digital humanities, but whether adjuncts' DH pedagogy is infrastructurally visible. As digital humanities migrates from R-1s to small liberal arts colleges, regional comprehensive universities, community colleges, and precariously funded local private institutions, it is apt to be taught by adjunct faculty.¹ Adjuncts comprise the majority of the nontenure-track humanities professoriate in the United States: 75.5 percent of humanities faculty are tenure-ineligible. Digital humanities is thus taught and learned by the most vulnerable people in higher education.² A DH ethic of care should explicitly facilitate access and equity for them.

Laura Sanders adjuncted for seven years before jumping to an interim dean position at the community college where she had cobbled together several part-time teaching and grant-writing jobs quarter to quarter. "I believe that DH is a social justice practice," she declares. "DH has the potential to level the playing field by giving underrepresented communities a voice and the opportunity to offer their own narratives. As my students develop digital confidence as well as the ability to interrogate how knowledge itself is constructed, they also develop the tools they need to authorize themselves to be part of larger conversations" (qtd. in Berens and Sanders).

Such liberatory possibilities transpire under conditions of constraint. Because adjuncts cannot rely on students' access to computers, Sanders instructs students to do what she calls "cell phone scholarship." In small groups, students use their phones to look up themes, characters, or other aspects of the readings and then present their findings to the class. In this way, Sanders's students learn to leverage their phones as knowledge tools, re-inflecting this quotidian communication device as a purveyor of materials for knowledge work. In another assignment, Sanders teaches students how to use their phones to tag PDFs in publicly accessible data collections, such as the historical restaurant menus held by the New York Public Library or the nineteenth-century ship logs housed at oldweather.org.

Cell phone pedagogy is one strategy of care, a remedy to what Alex Gil articulates as the “barrier-to-participation” problem in DH: “How can one work with computers in the humanities when one is situated in a place where the hardware is more than a decade old, or where the Internet connection is unreliable, if it exists at all?” Global Outlook DH [GO::DH], a special interest group of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, offers minimal computing as a way “to maximize access, decrease obsolescence, and reduce e-waste.”³ Although focused on the global dimensions of DH work, GO::DH—with its emphasis on local conditions—also provides an important frame for understanding how adjuncts and their students in the United States practice digital humanities under constraint. An “architecture of necessity” grows out of the projects designed and enacted by adjuncts and their students, a practical bricolage of tools and problem solving akin to the process of “poaching” that Michel de Certeau describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (174).⁴ In every class I taught as an adjunct, which I did for three years between full-time jobs, I taught students to “poach”: to identify a problem, find the free tools and the time (students often pool their labor), and make the appropriate intervention.

Guerilla tactics such as poaching are the hallmark of adjunct DH work. As an adjunct, I did not have access to university servers beyond participation in course management systems. At one institution, my email address was not even listed in the university’s faculty directory. Freemium platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Google Maps gave me the servers and platforms to host student work. When my students chose to build a web app optimized for mobile (the app is called DigiToolSC, published in fall 2011), I hosted the app on my own server because my employment status at the university was unstable and the administrators I consulted could not find server space to host the project.

In a position paper I presented at the 2015 Modern Language Association conference, I asserted that it is not enough to make digital tools and tutorials freely available: we need to pay adjuncts for the time it takes for them to learn those digital skills (Berens, “Want to Save the Humanities?”). Financial support for adjunct professional development is becoming increasingly available, but the systemic problem is that very little money is set aside for adjunct salaries. Adjuncts’ experience of having to survive on a clutch of part-time gigs is one of the deleterious effects that stem from the modular, commercial logic of higher education funding priorities, where money can be found to train, but not sustain, faculty. An ethic of care oriented toward adjuncts would begin by resisting such modularity, demanding a stop to hiring practices that cap adjunct faculty labor at just below full-time employment. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, in 2014 the number of involuntarily part-time workers in retail had doubled since 2007.⁵ It is hard to imagine that a similar trend is not happening in higher education, as tenure lines are replaced with fixed-term and adjunct faculty.

Rosemary Feal, the former executive director of the Modern Language Association, speculates that if college rankings were affected by having high ratios of adjunct

to full-time faculty, university accreditors “could change this [adjuncting] game overnight” (qtd. in Segran). That is exactly what English professors Talia Schaffer, Carolyn Betensky, and Seth Kahn advocate in a letter urging *U.S. News and World Reports* (USNWR) to consider adjusting the “faculty resources” section of the America’s Best Colleges rankings to more accurately reflect current academic realities. “Currently you allocate only 5% of this category to part-time vs full-time faculty, while you give 35% to faculty salaries,” they write. “However, those faculty salary numbers do not reflect the majority of college instructors, who are contingent faculty: underpaid temporary workers.”⁶ The letter garnered more than 1,200 signatures, about 75 percent of which were from tenured or tenure-track faculty. Robert Morse, head of the *USNWR ranking team*, met with Schaffer, Betensky and Kahn. The three scholars have formed Tenure for the Common Good, an activist group that aims to “transform” tenure from being associated principally with “the professional achievements and privileges of the individual scholar into one that, in addition,” promotes fair labor conditions for all faculty. The group exhorts “tenured allies” to talk publicly and privately about adjunct labor conditions as a “precondition” to “organized efforts” because “the exploitation of contingent faculty degrades us all.”⁷

Whether it is an ethic of care or a fear of tarnished status that motivates institutional change, advocating for a pendulum swing away from adjuncting and back toward full-time employment would be one way to ensure that the faculty members charged with teaching digital humanities have the financial and interpersonal support to do so.

NOTES

1. Fall 2017, I saw a national job advertisement seeking a “DH adjunct” to teach the core courses of a nascent “Digital Humanities and New Media” major at Molloy College on Long Island, New York.

2. “Facts about Adjuncts” is published by the New Faculty Majority (NFM) Foundation drawing on a 2009 U.S. Department of Education report. The NFM’s Coalition on Academic Workforce collected survey data disclosing that “over 80% of [20,000 survey respondents] reported teaching part-time for more than three years, and over half for more than six years.”

3. Gil and Jentery Sayers’s abstract for a minimal computing workshop, proposed for the Digital Humanities 2016 conference, elaborates key principles. The workshop did not run because it did not attract enough participants.

4. “Architecture of Necessity presents a compelling example of digital curation, but [Ernesto Oroza’s] most important contribution to our conversations about diversity, definition, and scope—and by extension barrier-to-entry—comes from his work as an impromptu ethnographer of Cuba’s DIY culture,” writes Gil in the introduction to his interview with Oroza.

5. “In 2007, about 685,000 of a total of 19.2 million workers in the retail sector were involuntarily employed part time, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By 2014, the number of involuntary part-time retail workers had more than doubled, to 1.4 million, even as the total number of retail workers declined to 18.9 million” (Tabuchi).

6. The letter is viewable but is no longer accepting signatures: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ILg0QaMrhzQLQvfPbOrE4BClsWfw_pLNPAUAB4yVR7w/edit.

7. See the Tenure for a Common Good pinned announcement on their Facebook page.

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