

EMBEDDED PEDAGOGIES

DIGITAL HUMANITIES TEACHING AND
THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF CHANGE

BRANDON WALSH



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Brandon Walsh, *Embedded Pedagogies: Digital Humanities Teaching and the Infrastructure of Change*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0544>

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Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0544#resources>

Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0544>

Digital Humanities Series vol. 7: ISSN Print: 2054-2410 | ISSN Digital: 2054-2429

Paperback: 978-1-80511-966-1

Hardback: 978-1-80511-967-8

PDF: 978-1-80511-968-5

HTML: 978-1-80511-970-8

EPUB: 978-1-80511-969-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0544

Cover image by Philippe Bout (2018), <https://unsplash.com/photos/person-reading-in-empty-lecture-hall-93W0xn4961g>. Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

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Author Bio

Brandon Walsh is Head of Student Programs in the Scholars' Lab, a digital humanities and experimental research center in the University of Virginia libraries. He has published numerous pieces that build toward the ideas in this book concerning how digital humanities pedagogy can reflect and enact infrastructural change in higher education. With over two decades of teaching experience in a variety of environments, he currently oversees the fellowship programs in the Scholars' Lab. In this context, he teaches and works directly with dozens of students each year on a range of professional development, design, and digital humanities activities. His chapter in *Digital Futures of Graduate Study in the Humanities* entitled "The Futures of Digital Humanities Pedagogy in Times of Crisis" argues for the urgent need for educators to direct their work towards the social and political crises of the present. In addition, Walsh values working in public in order to spark conversation and share process-oriented work as evidenced by his published pieces and editorial work with *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, *Programming Historian*, and the #DLFteach *Digital Library Pedagogy Cookbook*. He blogs regularly at walshbr.com.

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible through the guidance and patience of many other thinkers.

My Scholars' Lab family provided encouragement and care throughout the drafting process. In particular, my colleagues, Drew MacQueen and Arin Bennett, answered questions and surfaced screenshots of student projects that we had not examined closely in years. Laura Miller, Ronda Grizzle, Jeremy Boggs, and Shane Lin each, in their own way, influenced the arguments in this text. Alison Booth and Lisa Blackmore offered lessons on how to publish for a public audience while maintaining one's intellectual commitments. Amanda Wyatt Visconti gave endless support and wisdom as a mentor, colleague, and friend. Past mentors will find their wisdom all over this text, even if they no longer work in the Scholars' Lab on a day-to-day basis—Bethany Nowviskie, Wayne Graham, Eric Rochester, and Purdom Lindblad most of all.

My broader network of colleagues provided inspiration and energy throughout the writing process. In particular, Cecelia Parks and Ben Doherty taught me much about how to bring an activist spirit to the work we do as librarians. Katina Rogers provided excellent mentorship during a course on book proposals that first gave structure to this work. Grayson Morley has been a constant inspiration and accountability partner as we each worked on our own writing projects. Quinn Daedal and Jennifer Isasi provided invaluable feedback on an early draft of the manuscript. I also thank Mackenzie Brooks, Pamela R. Lach, Elizabeth Grumbach, and Danica Savonick for the pedagogical inspiration they provide. Matthew Kirschenbaum generously shared the syllabus for his graduate course on "Reading AI" with me, and these texts proved valuable as I revised this manuscript. John Knox shared helpful resources on slow academia that aided Chapter 3. My student collaborators, past and present, continue to mentor me every day. Conversations with

Seanna Viechweg, Winnie Pérez Martínez, Amna Tarar, and Oriane Guiziou-Lamour shaped much of what is contained in these pages.

A substantial portion of Chapter 2 appeared in *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* as “The Pedagogy of Digital Humanities Budgets.” I am grateful to Mackenzie Brooks, Amanda Wyatt Visconti, and Elizabeth Fox for reading that work over before its publication, as their contributions helped shape the content of the subsequent chapter. Michelle Dalmau and Spencer Stewart also provided extraordinarily helpful feedback during the review process. And I am very thankful to Amanda Wyatt Visconti, Laura Miller, Sarah Wells, Winnie Pérez Martínez, and Oriane Guiziou-Lamour for their feedback on the exercise discussed within the chapter. Patrick DeDauw also provided helpful commentary on how this material related to his own employment at *JITP*.

First, last, and always I thank my family: Elizabeth, Benjamin, and Ava. They are endless sources of inspiration, kindness, and light.

1. Knowable

Embedded Pedagogies

One hot summer day on the cusp of a new semester at the University of Virginia (UVA), I found myself eagerly looking forward to my first teaching experience as graduate instructor for an undergraduate literature survey. My passion for the material was matched only by my mounting anxiety, so I took a few moments to scout out the classrooms in the building I would be teaching in for the coming term. The spaces I found were relics of an older era, before smart boards, inclusive design, or dynamic classrooms. I found rows of old, wooden desks, which, with horror, I realized were fastened to the ground with a series of bolts that prevented them from moving. The chairs, I knew, produced an almost visceral response among the students who sat in them. The seats were physically uncomfortable, designed for normative bodies, and unyielding to whatever adjustments the user might need for their work. I too had once sat in these very chairs during my undergraduate days at the same institution, a time when I lacked the pedagogical context for what I experienced. But I remembered well the nagging discomfort they caused. With an almost inexorable effect, the sense of being trapped led students to vandalize the furniture, and each chair was scrawled with ink, carvings, and etchings, decades of student graffiti. The chaotic, jubilant writings on each desk felt like an explicit act of rebellion against the physical space of the room and the desks themselves. Where the chairs spoke of quiet restraint, their surfaces told a different story, narrating favorite bands, quotations, weekend adventures, and more. Freedom. Flexibility. Movement. Waiting to get out of the chair.

A fresh-faced PhD student about to teach undergraduates for the first time, I viewed these rows of desks from a perspective that was

new to me—the front of the room. They might make sense for one kind of classroom, but I was puzzled as to how I would fit this furniture to my needs for literary discussion. After all, they enforced a specific relationship between teacher and student by means of what Jesse Stommel has referred to as the “rhetoric of the room,” “the ways the shape of the room affects the learning we do inside of it” (2018). The bolted chairs demanded the instructor take center stage at the front of the room, whether they wished to or not. While I had observed teachers carrying out group work in those spaces, the physically restricted desks required students to turn sideways in their chairs in order to see one another. The room quite literally fought back against the pedagogy of the teacher and tried to enforce its own. Lecture, not discussion. Hierarchy, not democracy. As if aware of the tense dynamic between the instructor and the spaces given to them for teaching and learning, the students found themselves drawn back to carving their own frustrations into the furniture itself.

Still pondering these desks, I made my way over to the Scholars’ Lab, a center for digital research in the University Library where I had recently begun the first in a series of digital humanities (DH) fellowships that would lead to my present-day position as digital library professional. As was often the case, I plugged away on a group project with my fellowship cohort while sharing space with the librarians who taught us. I remember well the kinds of staff conversations we would overhear as we worked: endlessly supportive student mentoring, careful guidance in DH project design, and the best instruction I had ever observed in my time as an educator. After one such meeting, as I expressed my frustrations with my role as a graduate instructor, one of these mentors floored me with their response: “I imagine that would be frustrating, but I do not really teach.” This librarian was one of the best teachers I had ever had; I regularly saw them shaping not just student research projects, but also providing expert guidance in how to shape a life doing this work.

How could someone so engaged in the act of teaching be so convinced that their work did not count? What was teaching, if not this? And who gets to make such determinations?

The university is made of many bolted desks, some literal and some metaphorical, that regulate bodies, attitudes, and relationships

among its teachers and learners. As I will argue in this book, the bolted desk shares a crucial connection to my mentor in denial about their own teacherly identity. Our institutions carve out pedagogical relationships using spaces, policies, and actions while at the same time often rendering these dynamics invisible. As Stommel's rhetoric of the room shows, spaces exert unexpected wills of their own, often over and above those of their inhabitants. But we can take his formulation one step further. Rooms do not exist in isolation: the campus buildings at UVA contained many such spaces with bolted desks. Even though the UVA architect might not have thought of themselves as a teacher, their decisions actively shaped the experiences and pedagogies of those who do. Institutions of higher education are comprised of thousands of small decisions like these, innumerable small acts of pedagogy that affect teachers and learners, shaping who we are allowed to be and who counts themselves as part of our number.

###

This is a book about teachers, the labor they take on, and the structures that prevent them from doing that work well. Our institutions often define teaching as something that happens in specific spaces, at appointed times, and by particular people. In higher education, positions are often described with a common shorthand: "I teach a 2-2" or "I carry a 4-4." The formulation describes both a calendar distribution as well as the supposed burden of teaching. Once your courses are done—your course load carried—you can get back to work. And the implicit encouragement at many institutions is to spend less time on teaching and more time on your tenure file. The classroom is a space to be escaped. And when we describe some positions and institutions as teaching-intensive, however true the designation might be, we create boundaries. We suggest that some spaces are for teaching and some not.

Staff positions often distribute identification with the craft of teaching in a similar way. A Teaching and Learning Librarian might explicitly focus on classroom instruction. An Undergraduate Success Librarian might specialize in undergraduate outreach. Some roles might work with patrons directly to answer questions, while others might think of themselves more as back of house and removed from the community.

As with faculty positions and their associated teaching responsibilities, the ways we distribute staff labor can suggest separation between those who teach and those who do not. Aliqae Geraci has noted that the ways we quantify work done by librarians often leave them out of conversations about teaching entirely: “federal data collection efforts characterize librarians as separate from teachers, regardless of years of documented instruction sessions” (2016, 188). These statistical choices have real consequences for the ways that instructional librarians think of themselves: “Arguably more impactful to stress levels is an underlying belief and attitude in institutions that teaching librarians are not ‘real teachers’ despite the undisputed fact of their teaching” (Geraci 2016, 189). Metrics, titles, and job responsibilities might suggest artificial distinctions between teachers and non-teachers that do not exist in effect. Some are in the classroom, while others might never set foot in it.

But we all teach.

It is understandable that someone without explicit classroom responsibilities might see themselves as disconnected from the act of teaching. But we do ourselves and our students a disservice when we fail to recognize the teaching that takes place across the institution by instructors in a range of different job titles. This book specifically speaks from the point of view of the teaching librarian, in part, because library positions entail a range of types of interactions. In some cases, librarians might design for-credit courses as part of the curriculum. But so much of the work of librarianship takes place in other spaces: reference consultations, collaborations with faculty members, one-on-one mentoring, workshops, one-off instructional sessions, and more. To be a librarian is to dance along the cracks of the institution, engaged in a thousand small teaching acts. Because of this, library perspectives are helpful for illuminating the cross-cutting impact of pedagogical decisions.

In the same way that teaching occurs throughout the university, staff positions like those in the library are useful case studies for discussing the pedagogies of institutions because they are regularly called upon to engage in the infrastructure of the university. Even if their job titles do not contain the word “administrator,” staff positions often make policy decisions that affect others. DH library positions, in particular, expose the ways in which teaching is an intersection of pedagogy and

policy. Throughout this book, I use the term “teaching administrator” to refer to individuals inhabiting such complicated roles in places of higher education. The term refers to those faculty and staff who inhabit administrative roles within their respective institution but also provide instruction in some capacity. I use the term “administrator” quite liberally here: it refers not only to directors or managers but more broadly to anyone engaged in the inner workings of university infrastructure and making policy decisions for it. Teaching, too, is construed broadly. Teaching takes place throughout the university, in its official and unofficial classroom spaces, in all manner of forms. I most often work with graduate students seeking doctorates in humanities fields, and I write from this context most consistently and unless otherwise noted. But I hope the lessons contained within this book will be far reaching: the kinds of students we instruct are just as varied as the scenes of teaching themselves. The teaching administrator might direct a center, and also teach an undergraduate course periodically. They might be a Geographic Information System Specialist who also runs regular workshops for faculty and students alike. Or they might be a developer engaged in paired programming with a graduate student developing a project. Teaching administrators, no matter their specific job title, regularly find themselves implicated in and exerting force upon the various policies and norms that work on the institution and, in so doing, upon their embedded pedagogies.

More specifically, this is a book about all those principles, practices, and structures that form a kind of pedagogy in the institution around them. When a local government reduces its budget, forcing secondary educators to dip into their own bank accounts to pay for classroom supplies, that is an observable act that impacts pedagogy. The material conditions of the classroom are changed based on administrative choices that are distant from it. When the chairs in a public classroom are welded to the floor so as to prevent them from being moved from neatly arranged rows, that is a kind of pedagogy. The decision to bolt chairs to the ground may never have been made with actual instruction in mind, but it nonetheless affects the possibilities for learning in that space. The university encourages the idea that teaching takes place in the classroom, and this mode of thinking is a function of policy, power, and politics. When conversations are not explicitly about teachers and

students, a kind of pedagogy is still being enacted. After all, an absence can still be noted and remarked upon. Why are we not talking about teaching? What does it say about what we value instead? That is itself a pedagogy.

This is a book about administrative choices like these, about the ways in which they help or harm the teachers in their midst. About all the myriad ways in which the work of education is routinely damaged by forces outside the classroom. This book argues that these institutional norms, policies, and structures act as embedded pedagogies that are operationalized for or against teachers and learners. Most often, as in the case of budget cuts or prescriptive classroom spaces, these institutional pedagogies put teachers on the back foot, forced to teach in ways they might not otherwise in part out of a survival instinct. The first step to finding our way to the teaching we want to see in our work is to recognize the obstacles facing that labor, the pedagogies running counter to our own. And it can be especially difficult to notice the things affecting our teaching when they happen far outside the classroom, carried out by those who do not consider themselves educators. By recasting institutional activities and actors in pedagogical terms, I hope to empower teachers to find their own path to enduring administrative difficulties even as they work to change them. These embedded pedagogies can be especially challenging to work against because the pressures they exert are often invisible to the teachers and learners in their midst. The first tactical decision we can make to counter them is to render them known.

Universities invest vast resources in making themselves known to their students, their communities, and their publics, from marketing to branding, communications to legislative testimony. This knowability, however, is limited by design, as elite universities necessarily want themselves to be known in specific ways and by particular people. Institutions frequently obscure their actual administration in ways that distance teachers from their core functions. This web of practices and pressures shapes our ability to teach and learn in countless ways, forming the network of embedded institutional pedagogies. By rendering these opaque practices transparent, we can empower educators to intervene in the forces affecting their ability to do the work of teaching.

In a certain way, this book also reflects my attempt to chart a

pathway to survival in the face of the embedded pedagogies of my own institution. During a period of administrative upheaval at my place of work, blogging became a way for me to vent and reflect about the challenges I found for supporting student work. The audience I found for this writing seemed to be largely people in positions like mine: mid-career DH administrators who had a hand in research, teaching, and administration. Positions like these are sometimes called “alt-ac” for the ways in which they offer a landing for graduate students outside of the traditional faculty path. Alt-ac staff often refer to themselves as “scholar practitioners,” a phrase that further serves to illuminate the fact that we often see administrative praxis itself as a subject for research and critique in its own right. The term “teaching administrator” is a similar riff, both a description of a hybridized identity and an attempt to instrumentalize it.

In moments of despair, I sometimes referred to this manuscript as “the book I am writing about bullshit and how to deal with it.” Invariably, others would respond with their own, similar frustrations at their own institutions. Embedded pedagogies carry power, in part, because they refuse to be seen for what they are. Writing this text is a first attempt at making legible the relationship between administrative policy and teaching in a way that makes it visible. To describe what I see so others can notice it as well. To know and be known. To use the unique position of the teaching administrator to push back on the limited knowability of the institution and render legible its embedded pedagogies.

####

Every institution has embedded pedagogies, tacit structures, policies, and norms that govern the possibilities for teaching and learning. The curriculum is only one place in which teaching happens in higher education. Every interaction is also a form of teaching, whether it pertains to a syllabus, a budget, or the use of campus space. In other words, the classroom is inseparable from the infrastructure that supports its work. The teacher struggling to find resources for her students, for example, cannot help but have her work affected by the threat of budget cuts. As sociologist Jessica Calarco and others have argued, students are often subject to a hidden curriculum of expectations and practices that

reinforce social inequalities.¹ I build on this work by offering a theory of the embedded pedagogies of institutions, those interrelated sets of strictures that pressure instructors to adopt particular pedagogies regardless of their own personal inclination. The book argues that, while these embedded pedagogies could feasibly support effective teaching, they most often inhibit justice-oriented approaches to education.

Educators are under threat, facing institutional instability, scarcity, and political attacks on their work. This book offers guidance for instructors struggling with how to teach effectively in such uncertain and hostile environments, whether that teaching takes place in the classroom or elsewhere. With DH pedagogy at institutions of higher education based in the United States of America as a frame and focus, I argue for an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to build more just and equitable institutions while also offering strategies to endure the negative ways these structures influence our work. This book offers a theory and practice of DH pedagogy by speaking from the position of a practitioner tasked with both teaching and administering in the context of a public university in crisis. Teaching administrators are uniquely positioned to lay bare the pedagogical implications of infrastructural decisions at the same time that they implement a classroom practice that intervenes in their local institution. However, since many of these positions are institutionally unique, term-limited, or one-off, this unique vantage point has not often been formally explored. By focusing specifically on this intersection of teaching and administration, I hope this book offers as much in the way of day-to-day approaches to the DH classroom as it does a far-reaching vision for how our pedagogies can help to bring about a university that is more stable, sustainable, and just.

The institutional structures that impact teaching are especially salient for those instructors who work outside departmental silos. For staff who work across departments, the warp and weft of the institutional pedagogy are particularly noticeable because we so regularly come into contact with patrons from across the university. DH pedagogy serves as a useful object of study in this regard, as so much DH teaching takes place in the cracks of the university. As a librarian, I have taught credit-bearing courses as well as one-off workshops, consulted on a graduate

1 See *A Field Guide to Graduate School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum* (Calarco 2020).

certificate in DH as well as mentored students individually. Teaching in these spaces, I argue, reveals the pedagogies operationalized by our institutions for and against our work as teachers. Furthermore, because of its intensely collaborative and cross-disciplinary work, DH teaching frequently forces encounters—and friction—with the university in ways that more narrowly discipline-specific instruction might not. Any instructor is subject to policy. But the librarian providing instruction in digital technology is especially aware of its impact and the ways it can be hostile to learning.

In meeting the limited knowability of the university, we meet the first of the four characteristics that will give this book its structure:

- Knowable
- Neutral
- Intellectual
- Future-oriented

These characteristics form the basis of the stories that institutions of higher education typically tell about themselves and who they want to be. They form the basis of the neoliberal university and its mode of describing itself. In each case, these values exert power over the kinds of teaching and learning possible in their spaces, often in ways that instructors would not willingly ascribe to. The body of the book centers on the narratives that universities use to frame themselves as bastions of neutrality and intellectualism. In each chapter, I critique the ways in which these values impose themselves as pedagogical forces on DH teachers and offer a pair of action-oriented responses, first as an administrator thinking pedagogically and then as a teacher thinking administratively. The result is one part theory, one part lesson plan. One part discussion, one part assignment template. As educators faced with frustrating circumstances, it can be easy to feel disempowered, as though the institution is too large to change, and then to turn inwards, narrowly focusing on the day's lesson plan in order to carry on. I argue, instead, for a renewed view of higher education institutions in familiar terms for teachers. By demystifying and breaking them down as pedagogical systems, teachers can find opportunities for change and create the conditions for our learning communities to thrive.

The book concludes by meditating on the contested futures at the center of university life. Universities often claim to look towards the future while enshrining hyper-conservative institutional values that favor the past and refuse change. As such, I conclude by questioning the futures towards which universities are working. Who do these futures belong to? Our communities? Or a substratum of donors, politicians, and pundits? We cannot afford to treat the classroom as closed off, separate from the broader administrative context that shapes its spaces. By seeing teaching as an extension of policy—and policy, in turn, as a set of pedagogical interventions—educators can co-create a more hopeful future with their communities. Taken together, the book offers a roadmap for DH educators aiming to push their teaching and their institutions towards more just futures for teachers and learners. By rendering visible the pedagogical structures at the core of the university, I hope to empower educators to develop the tools to change them, in and out of the classroom.

This work sits at the intersection of a range of fields, most notably DH, pedagogy, and critical university studies. These three fields often operate at a higher, meta-level that encompasses other, more specific disciplinary work. DH might encompass research and teaching in specific disciplines. Pedagogy might focus on discussions of how to teach specific kinds of materials. And critical university studies can take on everything from the financial aid system to the history of education. In bringing together all three areas, I hope to find new ground and draw together conversations often treated as disparate. I hope to enable new people to see the teacherly value of their administrative work and for teachers to see their work as newly enmeshed in an administrative project of working towards a better university.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project is one of its strengths, but I would be remiss if I did not note its limitations. Bringing together a diverse range of topics inevitably limits one's ability to delve deeply into any field-specific conversation. I limit my discussion to college education in the United States of America. I incorporate broader histories and trends only as relevant and do not spend an inordinate amount of time on a broader history of higher education.² While some of the following

2 Readers interested in broader studies of the university might start with *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century* (Bastedo et al. 2023).

chapters do offer ideas for specific classroom activities and exercises, others opt instead to closely read exemplary projects.³ And, while DH is the context of my discussion, the book does not focus on how to teach digital methods as such.⁴ Instead of deep focus on any of these individual areas, I ask readers to consider what the three can bring in conversation with one another and what the practice of teaching DH can offer to the texture of the institutions around us.

Each phase of the book follows the same structure so as to give some signposts to the vast intellectual terrain I aim to cover. Each chapter discusses a specific characteristic of the embedded pedagogies our institutions leverage against teachers and learners: universities claim to be knowable, neutral, intellectual, and future-oriented. Each of these chapters, in turn, is divided into three parts. The first section in each chapter introduces the theoretical framing of the embedded pedagogy discussed and offers a countervailing approach to teaching and learning that we might leverage. In the second part of each chapter, I discuss ways to apply our newly developed oppositional pedagogy from the standpoint of the DH administrator. In the final section of each chapter, I flip the question and examine the ways our pedagogical approaches can effect change in the university through radical teaching. While this tripartite structure of theory, administrative practice, and teaching carries readers through the entire book, the intellectual throughlines concern the push and pull between teaching and the structures that support it. By triangulating DH teachers and learners, in particular, along these lines, I hope to illuminate the ways they can create institutional change.

For a first foray into the ways in which the teaching administrator may intervene in their own institution, we can meet the university's limited knowability with a pedagogy of transparency. The first experiences many members of the university community have within and around their institutions are heavily manufactured. Whether through mailers to prospective students, new faculty orientations, or ongoing marketing and communication campaigns, universities have a vested interest in

3 Readers searching for an intentionally practical introduction to pedagogy should start with *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (Fink 2013).

4 Readers looking for such guides should start and with *What We Teach When We Teach DH* (Croxall and Jakacki 2023) and *Using Digital Humanities in the Classroom* (Battershill and Ross 2017).

the careful articulation of themselves as particular kinds of institutions with specific values, processes, and audiences. Despite these broad campaigns to appear known in the public eye, I argue that this knowability is limited by design. Universities deliberately obscure their workings from their community members, a fact that can hide the ways in which institutional policies and choices structure the possibilities for learning available to teachers and students. From an administrative standpoint, I first examine budgets as pedagogical technologies that can offer students a vehicle by which they can better understand the infrastructure of their university. Second, from a classroom perspective, I examine DH student projects that challenge the narratives universities share with the public and that attempt to make known their difficult histories. By questioning the received knowability of our institutions in our teaching we can illuminate their effects on our work. By recognizing administrative decisions as pedagogical ones, we can recast them on grounds in which teachers might intervene.

The Pedagogy of Digital Humanities Budgets⁵

Institutions of higher education are spaces of enormous financial uncertainty for many in their communities. Sara Goldrick-Rab's work with #realcollege, for example, has brought attention to the number of college students struggling with food and housing insecurity (2017). The situation is often no better for graduate students who, even if their programs offer tuition remission and stipends, are frequently forced to live in poverty. To take one example, B. Mano's piece on their particular circumstances at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology sheds light on how specific institutional policies can intersect with national labor and immigration law to produce especially dire situations for students and make it impossible for the author to survive on their graduate student stipend (2019). Despite these ever-present financial stresses, students (and even faculty) are often disconnected from the decisions that go

5 An earlier version of this section was published as a blog post entitled "Your Budget is a Question of Pedagogy and Equity" (Walsh 2020) and then as "The Pedagogy of Digital Humanities Budgets" in issue 25 of *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* (Walsh 2024). That article was originally published under a CC BY-NA-SA license. The revision and expansion presented here is licensed under a CC BY-NC license, consistent with the rest of the book.

into their wages, stipends, and salaries. University finances are typically complicated systems, and the financial processes at the university level involve so many linking chains that those putting together budgets can feel disconnected from students, even as they make decisions that affect their lives. Budgetary decisions often mark the first pedagogical move that affects teachers and learners, as administrators decide what can be funded, who has access to resources, and what kinds of teaching can manifest.

Even as it remains hidden from view, the budget is one of the most foundational tools that can enable or obstruct educational processes at institutions of learning. Financial pressures can compound the personal obstacles affecting any teacher, quickly magnifying difficult circumstances and leading to greater inequities while teaching. And while students are no doubt aware of the importance of personal financial stability, the impact of unstable funding streams on student programs may be more obscured to them. For example, stable, hard budgets are often a luxury for practitioners of DH, a field in which people and organizations have successfully lobbied a range of private and governmental organizations for substantial grants to support their work. Grant funding can provide valuable experience to students and resources for paying them for their labor, and at some institutions, these avenues might be the only ones available for funding teaching and learning. Grant funding comes with the disadvantage, of course, that it will eventually end. The associated instability can change the culture of the work undertaken. As Bethany Nowviskie has written, hard funding has the virtue of offering “fundamental stability [that] keeps us (individually and as a group) from feeling risk-averse, on the one hand, and—on the other—from worriedly chasing ‘the next big thing,’ with no time to think it through” (2012a). While soft money can provide useful supplemental resources for employing students, the associated instability can cause long-term issues for students and staff. As noted by the authors of the “Postdoctoral Laborers’ Bill of Rights” (Alpert-Abrams et al. 2019), a term-limited grant-funded position can leave a student worker forced to spend a significant portion of their time planning and searching for what comes next when that position ends. In short, stable programs lead to better support for students, a fact that might be hidden from their learning experience.

Supporting students requires time and energy from staff, no matter how experienced and skilled the students themselves might be. Thoughtful and considerate planning that includes student support as part of the regular workload for staff ensures that teaching and pedagogy will not become afterthoughts. Good teaching follows from well-supported and energized staff who are empowered to decide if they have the bandwidth to take on new students. Good learning follows from students who can make informed decisions about their lives and have the time and space to commit to learning. In each case, teachers and learners need greater financial literacy in order to reshape how budgets affect their control over their education. The discussion that follows offers the DH budget as the pedagogical tool best suited for building this capacity.

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Budgetary decisions are perhaps the clearest example of how mundane administrative details, seemingly disconnected from the work of the classroom, have profound ramifications for teachers and learners. Sean Michael Morris refers to a pedagogical habitus, “embodied practice, often uninspected or subterranean to a person’s own thinking about themselves,” that forms the “genetic makeup” of an instructor’s teaching (2018). In this line of thought, pedagogy is not just a practice. It is more properly thought of as a general attitude towards the work of teaching. Put simply, your pedagogy is reflected in every action you take that could potentially affect students and your relationship towards all such actions. No administrative decision is too small to affect students in some way, and financial choices can have especially dire consequences for the lives of the students around us. Furthermore, the economic circumstances our student activities create or participate in directly affect the kinds of people able to participate in our programs and the work they can do. Those unknown and inscrutable financial processes, despite happening in spaces outside the classroom, nevertheless directly shape and structure the possibilities instructors have to design teaching and learning experiences for their students.

Opportunities in DH, in particular, often directly intersect with and take their shape from funding: fellowships, research assistantships, short-

term grants, and more. The DH group at Washington and Lee University, for example, used a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to encourage teachers to develop and integrate DH projects in the classroom (n.d.). These funds meant new course projects and new opportunities for students to develop their skills. The presence or absence of financial support like this for teaching and learning can directly dictate whether or not those experiences exist at all, particularly for those who want to keep such opportunities equitable and inclusive.⁶ Given how often finances—internal to the university or external from other sources—affect our work, DH instructors are uniquely positioned to intervene in the impact they have on our ability to educate. DH practitioners have a particular responsibility to recognize the pedagogical implications of our financial models, the possibilities as well as the limitations that they create for our communities. Doing so is one potential way to counter the field's oft-critiqued association with the neoliberal university.⁷ By exploring the relationship between teaching and finance, DH instructors can help to push back upon the opacity of the university, better acquaint students with the economic circumstances of their labor, and develop a more just vision for the university. By treating budgets as always in-process, capable of being critiqued and redesigned, we can draw students further into conversations about how to plan and implement DH projects effectively and ethically. I use DH teaching as an entry point and case study given my own particular context, but the lessons are likely to be useful for a range of disciplines and institutions. While students in the humanities might be especially unfamiliar with the ways funding pressures affect their education, conversations about budget literacy, transparency, and participation can prove useful to students across the university. The mere fact that a student knows their position is funded by a National Science Foundation grant, for example, is no indication that they understand what this connection means.

In the section that follows, I discuss a case study in how to treat the budgeting process as a pedagogical one with DH students. The first

6 For more discussion of the relationship between ethical student programming and financial support, see "A Student Collaborator's Bill of Rights" (Di Pressi et al. 2015) and "Postdoctoral Laborers' Bill of Rights" (Alpert-Abrams et al. 2019).

7 See "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities" (Allington et al. 2016).

phase of the activity takes the form of a community financial audit, led in conjunction with students, to discuss the affordances and limitations a particular financial document creates for teaching and learning. In the second, I propose extending these discussions by facilitating an exercise where students receive the power to shape the financial decisions that affect their education. The final phase asks the students to reflect on what they have learned and on the transformative impact such conversations can have on their own education. Throughout, I hope to offer both enough context to carry out these activities in your own institution as well as an argument for why you might do so.

The materials here draw heavily on the practice of participatory budgeting, “a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget” (Participatory Budgeting Project 2023). With roots in Brazil, the process has been successfully adapted in a range of contemporary use cases—from local government to public schools—where administrators aim to bring a greater level of community involvement to the budgeting process.⁸ While true participatory budgeting typically requires many months and a strong degree of administrative buy-in as participants redesign a portion of an institution’s financial commitments, this article proposes working at a smaller scale. The particular activity I describe below was conceived as part of a one-off teaching event in the Scholars’ Lab, a library-based center for work in experimental digital scholarship, but it could be adapted for inclusion in a credit-bearing course as part of the formal curriculum. By practicing democratic transparency about financial processes and incorporating participatory budgeting, students in our communities can gain new insight into and new control over the workings of the university that affect them. By critiquing the university’s own limited knowability as part of our teaching practice, our pedagogies can help to make our institutions more legible. The budget is a technology that can make such transformations possible and render this rich history of democratic civic engagement a part of our digital pedagogy.

8 The Participatory Budget Project (2023) offers a wealth of further resources on the practice of participatory budgeting and how to implement such activities in your own context.

###

As a first approach to critiquing the pedagogical implications of our DH funding structures, I propose a sequence of interrelated exercises that ask students to audit and reconstruct a DH budget. Miriam Posner asserts good project design can be taught by helping students to “reverse engineer digital projects” in her classic exercise entitled “How did they make that?” (2014). Her teaching activity asserts a kind of archaeological excavation of the underlying design in a digital project by looking at its final product. In her original blog post, Posner lists three key components for breaking down projects with students in this way: what it is, what you would need to know to get started, and where you can go to learn these skills. We can adapt this technique for our purposes by leading students in a financial audit of a DH artifact with a narrower, more specific riff on Posner’s activity. In essence, we share a financial document and ask our students “how did they fund that” with a pair of guiding questions. First, where are teaching and learning in this budget? Second, how are teaching and learning impacted by the assumptions and practices of the budget?

Budgets are, of course, very complicated documents that touch on a range of areas of expertise. They can quickly become overwhelming for students viewing them for the first time. This fact can also make them feel challenging for teachers to fit into the constraints of the classroom. Framing our activity with guiding questions about teaching and learning is, thus, both a pedagogical choice as well as a practical one. While the discussion will undoubtedly include a range of financial concepts and lessons, focusing the discussion as much as possible can help prepare teachers and students to carry out the activity successfully. Below I describe other practical decisions to further deal with classroom constraints as you integrate budgets into your teaching praxis.

Preparing: Setting the Scene for Budget Literacy

Since many students may have received no prior training in developing budgets, they may find it difficult to go straight to the second-order discussion required to analyze them. Budgetary concepts relevant to administrators and grant projects like cost-sharing, indirect costs, or subcontracting are likely to be entirely new to students, and, while

these topics could feel obscure at first glance, they are essential to understanding how DH funding arrangements take shape. As such, it is necessary to first share some resources to aid them in reading financial documents related to humanities research. Jennifer Guiliano and Simon Appleford's discussion of the "Principles of Budget Design" (2013) is a helpful primer in general, but you may also find it useful to share guidance from other funding agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Digital Humanities⁹ or the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Some universities make their direct and indirect cost policies publicly available, and comparing these documents may help students understand complicated financial concepts that might appear unfamiliar.¹⁰ Your own institution might also make publicly available the wage and stipend policies governing student hiring, documents that students are not likely to have read before, even if they directly impact their lives. Scale the pre-readings to the level of the financial document your students will be auditing. NEH budget guidelines are likely to be too abstract if the students will be discussing funding documents based on a local project. In any case, pre-reading to this effect, whatever its shape, will be helpful in developing the appropriate literacy for students to understand the documents in front of them.

With a shared foundation for the activity, students are ready to begin critiquing a DH artifact. Financial objects that might be selected for discussion at this stage can take many forms and could include DH center budgets, project breakdowns, or grant proposals. Not every instructor will have ready access to or be able to share such local institutional information, and doing so might feel especially vulnerable. But this level of transparency is worth pursuing if it is at all possible, particularly since discussing financial elements that directly impact

9 The NEH Office of Digital Humanities is a persistent figure in this book, a fact complicated by the ongoing efforts by the second Trump administration to eliminate the division. Lawsuits are ongoing to prevent these attempts, most notably by the Modern Languages Association, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the American Historical Association (American Historical Association 2025). Despite the elimination of the division's infrastructure, a substantial amount of its web presence still exists for now. For these reasons, I will continue to refer to the Office of Digital Humanities as an extant—though crippled—part of our federal infrastructure even as I attempt to trace these changes.

10 Harvard University (2024) and the University of Chicago (n.d.) both make such policies available, to name a few.

students' own experiences will add urgency to the conversation. In the absence of a local artifact, instructors can find ample examples from the NEH Office of Digital Humanities (n.d.), the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (n.d.-b.), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (n.d.) of funded projects that might provide useful financial documents to consider.¹¹ In each case, the document will likely guide the kinds of conversations that arise from discussion; the grant proposal for a research project will result in very different issues than the allocations from the operational budget for a center.

Pre-reading on DH budgets will prove useful regardless, and students' familiarity with the range of shapes these documents can take will help to make for a successful activity. When implementing the activity in the Scholars' Lab, however, I initially struggled with how to work the many complicated layers of these documents into an exercise. Even a single budget felt too long and too complex to expect students to discuss in one sitting. I found success by taking a real-world DH budget and creating a carefully scoped version of it for use in the activity. Using the Scholars' Lab budget as a framework, I offered the students a fictional scenario:

The Scholars' Lab is heading to California! We will be establishing *Scholars' Lab West*, a branch of the Lab that still engages in a smaller subset of our core activities in a new state: hosting events, offering faculty fellowships, and providing advanced technology for use in research. Looking back on our first year, though, we realize that we have under-examined how we serve our most important constituency: students. We need your help. In what follows, we ask you to look at our budget, consider how students are reflected in our financial plans, and then help us to plan to do better next year.

Rather than sharing the real Scholars' Lab budget in its entirety, I offered a smaller, fictionalized version of our financial materials, carefully constructed so as to seed certain questions, avoid others, and to be capable of fitting into the ninety-minute framework I had for the activity.

11 It should be noted that, especially since the second election of Donald Trump, digital records related to federal funding have become notoriously brittle and subject to deletion. Throughout this book, I point to archived deposits of federal documents in the Internet Archive as a way to recognize their historical importance to the field while also guarding against the likelihood that they might be entirely lost in the future.

We spent roughly one third of our time together auditing the document, one third redesigning it, and the last third reflecting on the activity as a whole. In the remainder of this essay, I share the kinds of reflections that are likely to emerge as a part of each phase of the conversation so that instructors are equipped to guide the discussion in pedagogically useful directions.

Phase I: How Did They Fund That?

Decisions about infrastructure, at their best, reflect what our organizations care about. A useful first question we can ask of the budget, then, is whether the document cares about students such that student support rises to the level of a legible line item. Not all funding lines are equivalent, and students are likely to have strong feelings about the degree of compensation in the budget if it exists at all. Resources like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's living wage calculator can serve as useful baselines for discussion, as students can calculate the degree to which they would be able to survive on the financial terms of the document in question (Glasmeier 2024). Beyond the direct experience of a specific dollar amount, though, particular types of student employment might also entail eligibility for union membership, access to healthcare, tuition remission, impact on student loans, and other benefits. Many of these impacts can be locally specific and not legible in a grant document, and students will need readings on the institutional context for more information. At UVA, for example, we are subject to a range of policies that impact what we can offer students (Office of the Executive Vice President n.d.). Federal, state, and local regulations can also serve as useful tools for discussing pressures on wage lines. Researching these hidden policies can help illuminate the unseen impact that administrative decisions have on the student experience. In short, interrogating the questions behind particular financial lines can help develop conversations with students about what we ask of them, how we reward this work, and whether we can do better together.

The absence of a student budget line can be telling. In Elissa Frankle's talk, "Pay Your F-ing Interns," she describes how unpaid internships reinforce whiteness and homogenous, privileged communities for museum workers (2016). Frankle goes on: "We may say that we value

diversity, that of course we want to treat our workers well, but do our core documents and budgets reflect that fact?"¹² Even in the absence of something as formal as an internship or an hourly position, a DH project might expect a great deal of unpaid student time. While it may feel difficult to moderate discussions of a financial document towards questions of its gaps and absences, we can lean on student experiences as a guide. Many of them are likely able to speak to times they have been asked for volunteer time in the past. Asking students to drive visiting speakers to events, for example, might appear negligible for the amount of effort it requires. But this small task still takes a student's time, hours that they could be applying to their own work, to another paid position, or to personal needs. If the document's activities seem to imply or expect this type of labor without compensating it, the materials devalue the work of the students while at the same time building it into the project.

Students need to be able to plan their finances, and having them discuss the stability—or lack thereof—in a budget can also prove useful. While any student would agree that timely payments are important, discussions of payment mechanisms are likely to be new for students. I often find that students have received no real information about the systems by which their finances get processed. To be fair, university budgeting processes are confusing, and information about payment processing might seem like a means to an end and less crucial to students' day-to-day lives. Providing knowledge about these systems helps students to critique them, though, and it can also help students plan their own lives more capably, especially if the object under discussion is one from their own community. I have found it helpful to make sure students are aware of a range of different components related to how their payments are processed:

- payroll calendars;
- tax implications;
- payment processing timelines; and
- points at which errors might be detected and corrected.

12 For a more detailed description of the prevalence of unpaid internships in archives and libraries as well as the range of potential responses, see Karly Wildenhaus's "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries" (2019).

These elements are likely to be invisible to non-staff, even as they are helpful for how students plan their own time and finances. While they are unlikely to show up in a budget or grant proposal, discussing their impact on teaching and learning can help to demystify the pressures on program administrators. Examining those elements that are pain points can prove particularly useful. At our institution, it is especially difficult to track when something goes wrong in a payment that we have issued. With many links in the administrative chain before the money actually gets disbursed to students, there are many places where an error could be introduced. As payments take time to process, I rely on constant communication and transparency to reduce the burden on students already living in states of financial precarity. Making these habits legible to students can help show how the invisible labor of administration structures their lives, and discussing their absence from the budgetary planning process can also help to expose other things we might be doing better.

Phase 2: Participatory Budgeting

With a firmer grasp on the pedagogical implications of DH funding, we can follow up with the next phase of our activity, which specifically asks students themselves to take power over and renegotiate the relationship between financial support and the field. DH courses commonly culminate in the development of a fictional project proposal and with good reason; a fictional project gives the students the opportunity to receive feedback on future work while recognizing the limitations of the semester.¹³ However, these approaches tend to treat funding as an afterthought: form the research project first, and the budget justification—if it is required at all—to support it last, and this in just a few short sentences. As we have learned, though, budgets speak on their own. They can form assignments and the basis for discussion in their own right. I propose expanding budgetary critique into action. In this phase, we draw upon participatory budgeting practices and ask students to redesign the DH artifact they examined in our first discussion.

As developed in the tradition of Paulo Freire, participatory budgeting implemented in an educational context specifically engages with

13 For representative examples, see Schifani and Thomas (2016) and Cordell (2020).

questions of pedagogy. Bartlett and Schugurensky describe the practice of engaging students in the design and distribution of educational funding as typically involving five phases:

1. students propose ideas to improve the school community;
2. students transform these ideas into viable proposals;
3. students campaign for and present proposals to fellow students;
4. students vote for top proposals; and
5. winning projects are funded (2021, 61).

For Freire, this approach was a way of upending the pedagogical hierarchy at the same time that it educated students about their institutions: “Freire outlines leaving behind banking education, paternalism, elitism, and top-down decision-making and nurturing the emergence of a new ethos and innovative practices guided by a shared vision” (Bartlett and Schugurensky 2021, 57). In the end goal, as well as the process, educational participatory budgeting redefines how students and the institutions that support them engage with one another. We go beyond merely asking the students to think critically about the financial makeup of their workplaces; we invite them to help re-envision their future. Participatory budgeting commonly takes place over many months, though, so the goals are likely to be quite different when incorporating the approach into the DH classroom. An authentic approach to the practice will move through every phase, culminating in the actual implementation of student funding proposals. When attempting to incorporate the practice as part of a one-off activity, as I did, we only worked through the first phrase described by Bartlett and Schugurensky. I asked the students to take the total amount of funding offered by the budget and propose ideas for how to use it. We worked speculatively, discussing and critiquing proposals to use the funding to meet the same goals but with a more equitable and inclusive approach to working with students.

By asking the students to design a new vision for the DH object in question, we engage in Freire’s rich tradition of flattening power hierarchies in the classroom and encouraging education as an act of civic development and transformation. We ask our students to interrogate the

object's associated infrastructure, critique it, and then redesign it with their own student experience in mind. We adapt Freire's process for our own purposes by asking students to propose an alternative funding proposal in place of the financial document they are examining given the results of their auditing discussion:

- how does the new budget reflect the ideological goals of the project?
- what is gained from asking them—students—for direct input?
- how can we center teaching and learning in this redesigned project?

This exercise in DH participatory budgeting doubles down on our preliminary pedagogical critique by asking students specifically to aim for new values, to center teaching and learning in the project under discussion within the financial plan itself. The activity is likely to be illuminating for administrators as well as students, another reason why the activities described in this essay will be demonstrably enhanced by using real financial materials drawn from your own student communities. To engage your students directly in conversations like those above is to treat them as peers, as collaborators in the learning process in all of its messiness. To the casual observer, the administrative process might seem removed from teaching or overly specific. But all of these decisions have material effects on the day-to-day lives of your student collaborators. At my own lab, we determined that changing our payment calendar would offer students more flexibility to deal with delays, but only after an individual student discussed their own hardships with us. We would not have developed the idea had we not talked with the student directly about their needs. In another instance, one of our yearlong DH fellows reported difficulty balancing the many components that made up our financial offer. The fellow was expected to complete their dissertation and digital project, but their package was rounded out with teaching obligations which provided health insurance, tuition remission, and fees. Based on these budgetary critiques, we made the difficult decision to restructure our financial model such that this program now accepts only a single fellow who receives a more attractive—and livable—financial award with no teaching obligations. Even when purely speculative, participatory budgeting conversations

can be empowering for students and transformative for staff, leading to better and more equitable financial practices.

Phase 3: Analysis

Having audited and redesigned a financial document together, it is worthwhile to step back and invite students to reflect on what they learned and what the process meant for them. It can also be useful to share what you learned as an instructor. Any administrative process can be enhanced by student input, but financial activities especially benefit from their voices because of the distance that administrators typically have from the financial pressures of student life. From a position of relative financial stability, it can be easy for staff members to forget the sort of financial precarity that a number of our students live under. And it is impossible for any one person to have personal experience that tracks with every possible student experience in the world. In short, giving students direct control over financial conversations can be a means of helping staff see students as not one broad monolithic community but, instead, as a diverse community with many cross-cutting pressures, needs, and ideas. In order to take a broad, intersectional approach to teaching and administration, students themselves must actually speak, in and out of our documents. They are experts on their own situations, and talking with your students about their needs can help to inform your decisions. In this way, a participatory budgeting activity educates students about how the university works at the same time that it helps them to shape it to better match the real-world experiences of your community.

Teaching activities like these can be a path for students to learn more about their own labor and the role that they can have in shaping their surrounding institutions. A transparent budgeting and dispersal process is a more ethical one. By assessing the budget as a critical part of the technology stack, we encourage our students to think about the impact that infrastructural decisions have on the full range of DH work. The process can help to render opaque institutions more legible and, thus, subject to intervention. By discussing how financial decisions carry pedagogical implications for both teachers and students alike, we can co-create educational spaces based on solidarity and trust.

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Activities like these, especially when paired with local financial documents that impact students' lives directly, offer participants the chance to incorporate their understanding of DH design with infrastructure. As Sean Michael Morris and Chris Friend have noted (2020), "The words *experience* and *expert* both come from the Latin word *experiri* meaning 'to try.' If we want our students to become experts, we have an obligation to give them the opportunity to try things, without the real danger that otherwise exists outside a classroom environment." The virtue of running a participatory budgeting exercise as a speculative teaching activity is that, while the process maintains a connection to the real world, we can shape a scenario in which students can debate and design their ideal student-centered version of the budget without the pressures of having to implement it.

As Celina Su has demonstrated in the context of marginalized communities in New York City, though, participatory budgeting can gesture at inclusion while falling short of the radical inclusivity that the activity promises (2017). Through an over-reliance on technical, insider information, a deferral to those proposals that seem "feasible," and the cultural capital afforded to experts, the participatory budgeting process can easily prioritize certain voices over others. In this way, the process might appear to be radically inclusive while actually and insidiously reinforcing typical power hierarchies. A hypothetical resource allocation activity might appear democratic while actually merely pretending to offer opportunities to hear student voices. Carrying out a full participatory budgeting process that actually implements student recommendations could all too easily shove aside learner needs by favoring those ideas that feel doable. By re-imagining DH work on students' own terms, we can co-create a space that puts them at the center of our practice. But the inclusive parameters of these activities require work to bear fruit. Even if the conversation is only speculative, we have to be prepared to listen when our students teach us, and students need to know that we take their suggestions seriously.

Every DH teaching situation is unique and subject to different pressures, and it can be challenging to balance conversations about equitable finances against the realities of trying to do this work. Many institutions with DH initiatives simply do not have any budget or

funding at all. In positions like these, it might feel difficult to imagine how you could structure financial circumstances for your students in a more equitable manner when you are still trying to find any kind of firm budgetary structure. Activities like those described above can help students and instructors to co-create the terms of more equitable spaces for teaching and learning. In the current climate of higher education, when many are faced with hiring freezes, across-the-board budget cuts, the prospect of layoffs, and withdrawn job offers, this conversation might seem small. But discussion can lead to decisions that, however minor in scope, can matter in big ways for your students and help us care for our vulnerable community members during chaotic times. At the very least, by helping students and teachers to see teaching and learning as work—as labor—we can begin to advocate for better conditions for all. Talking with students directly about how finances impact them can help determine how our practices might be redesigned to center their voices. The budget can be a critical part of the pedagogical stack that makes such a future possible.

Pedagogies of Transparency

Speculative budgeting activities offer just one way to illuminate the political economy of the university, a window into a generalized commitment to transparency that can inform our DH teaching practices more generally. Since 2017, I have run a fellowship program out of the UVA Library's Scholars' Lab called the Praxis Program, a yearlong project-based introduction to DH for graduate students. While the staff develop a framework for the year that best matches what we see as the needs for professional development in the interdisciplinary field of DH, the students adapt this curriculum based on their own interests with a variety of collaborative and individual projects. The activities undertaken by the students are broad and varied, as described by the program's curriculum page:

- a group charter, a statement of values and practices we will adhere to as a community;
- a personalized plan for self-study throughout the year meant to take advantage of the resources in the lab;

- an individual teaching plan for a digital humanities workshop based around the students' interests;
- a digital humanities teaching statement;
- a speculative personal project proposal for what comes next for an individual, to be workshopped by the group;
- activities meant to exercise technical and design thinking as they relate to humanities problems;
- spring hackathon as a group;
- final presentation to a local audience;
- two blog posts; and
- at times, large-scale and named group projects (Scholars' Lab 2024c).

These activities are quite loosely defined: students can take them in whatever direction feels most urgent and important to them, and the outcomes usually reflect their own individual and collective research interests. While the program has changed shape numerous times of the years, it has always been an attempt to craft a framework for students to fill with their own ideas. In this mode, we adopt our colleague and Praxis staff member Jeremy Boggs' carrier bag theory of DH: "Whether we realize it or not, much Digital Humanities work involves making and sharing these containers of things that are, and can be used, to tell stories" (2018). That is, rather than hand our students something premade, we weave a bag together for them, a pouch in which they can deposit their own experiences, hopes, and dreams. In arranging these elements, we hope that students discover new stories about themselves.

The process by which we offer students the freedom to design their own professional development experiences is a complicated bit of alchemy. At times, we offer distinct prompts that set parameters, as in our unit on digital pedagogy that asks students to design a pencil and paper exercise related to their own research. In other cases, we ask students to discuss their shared interests, to develop a theory for what they share as a group that the staff will then take and shape into a collective activity for them. Across the board, these pedagogical moves frame the program as fundamentally an exercise in student self-

governance, an attempt to give over, as much as we can, control of the program to the students. We shape a container and ask our students to fill it together.

When given the space to do so, students frequently drive the curriculum in a single direction. More than anything else, students have used these moments of intellectual freedom to critique, explore, and render transparent the workings of the university to the public. Students are hungry to understand—and push back on—the nature of their institutions. They recognize, at some intuitive level, that the highly manufactured imagery handed to them during prospective student weekends only tells part of the institutional story. As discussed in the previous section, budgetary discussions can offer one angle of approach for intervening in the embedded pedagogies of the university. While budgets offer a means by which to critique and reshape the limited knowability of the neoliberal university, they might feel too administrative in focus, a challenge for teachers to include in teaching that takes place on the curriculum. Educators can bring the same sense of administrative critique into the classroom by designing digital projects that deliberately work to demystify the university. Transparency can be both a pedagogical end as well as a research subject in its own right.

In what follows, I discuss two collaborative student projects from the Scholars' Lab as case studies in developing a practice of DH pedagogy that pursues transparency. The first is *UVA Reveal*, an augmented reality project that offers counter-narratives overlaid on university markers that tell more institutionally acceptable stories. The second, *Land and Legacy*, examines UVA's real estate purchases in the last fifty years in order to directly confront our University President's strategic goals to be "great and good" in relation to the surrounding community. In each case, I argue that rendering this institutional knowledge legible for teachers and students is the first step in making it more just. By meeting opaque institutions with a pedagogy that aims at transparency about its workings, we can re-empower educators who might otherwise feel at the mercy of bureaucracy. Each of these projects was conceived, designed, and developed by students. A pedagogy that centers transparency is one that foregrounds learners themselves.

###

In August 2017, white supremacists marched through downtown Charlottesville, Virginia injuring dozens and murdering one young activist. The Unite the Right Rally famously led to President Trump's comment that there were "very fine people on both sides" and, eventually, to Joe Biden launching his presidential campaign video by invoking Charlottesville. Much of the discourse surrounding the events in the coming months and years focused on Trump's comments and the administrative failures that led to the Rally taking place. Police and the university had ample warning that the events would turn violent, but they utterly failed to act on this information to protect their community members.

Much of the public memory of the event overlooks the fact that the weekend's events did not begin on the Downtown Mall that Saturday. Locals know that the violence began the night before when the white supremacists first gathered on UVA's campus and marched with tiki torches while chanting "Jews will not replace us." They encircled a group of counter-protestors consisting of students, staff, and community members around a statue of Thomas Jefferson, the university's founder. When discussing the events with me, friends and family outside the city frequently expressed shock that white supremacists had come to town. Locals knew, of course, that they had been here all along. Two lead figures for the event were Richard Spencer, an alt-right celebrity and UVA alumnus, and Jason Kessler, a white supremacist and Charlottesville native.

When the Praxis cohort set to work in the fall of 2017, it was with the cloud of these community events darkening the conversations. The year also happened to be my first as Head of Graduate Programs in the Scholars' Lab. I originally pitched a project for the group based around the makerspace, an area of the lab that had been under-utilized by the Praxis students in previous years. It quickly became clear, however, that the students' real interest was in reckoning with the conflicting feelings they had about the university, its identity, and its complicity in the aftermath of these acts of racial violence. In the interests of honoring the flexibility of our pedagogical framework, we emptied our carrier bag and offered the students the freedom to start again, to fill it with whatever stories they felt most moved to tell. The result of this work was *UVA Reveal*, a project that works to illuminate aspects of the university that it

would otherwise prefer to keep hidden. As described by the students who worked on the project, *UVA Reveal* is an attempt by graduate students to better understand the institutional histories of their university:

The 2017–2018 Praxis cohort has moved the material history of UVA out of Special Collections and onto Grounds. Using Augmented Reality applications, our project, titled *UVA Reveal*, Augmenting the University [sic], challenges the surface of our perceptions of objects and places. *UVA Reveal* thus explores otherwise hidden stories, histories, and questions surrounding objects and spaces at UVA. In doing so, we hope to prompt users to re-examine everyday environs and critically reflect on the structure, culture, mission, and history of the university. (2018)

Designed as an augmented reality app that a user can download to their phone, *UVA Reveal* works on specific UVA campus locations to provide supplementary materials and commentary from the archives that trouble the public institutional narratives about place. All spaces carry with them their own contested histories, and *UVA Reveal* attempts to give voice to what might otherwise be ignored or silenced. Where the institution might opt for a manufactured view of itself, the app is an attempt by students to reclaim their own knowledge of the campus by layering context onto it.

UVA Reveal invites students to see and notice the difficult institutional histories all around them. By forcing them to pay attention, the app asks students to consider the ways in which university narratives are always contested and subject to tense systems of power. For example, one location *UVA Reveal* augments is “The Student’s Progress,” a prominent mural by local artist Lincoln Perry in the lobby of UVA’s Old Cabell Hall that depicts a student’s journey through university life.¹⁴ The panels follow a red-headed child through her time at the university first as a youth, then a young woman and student, and then later in life as an alumna with her own child back for a visit. Along the way, the painting illustrates her love of music and her encounters with students and community members. The painting also depicts scenes of debauchery including a mostly naked

14 For images of the mural, see “Perry’s Progress” (2013). More context and images of *UVA Reveal* in use can be found on the project’s website at reveal.scholarslab.org (2018). While *UVA Reveal* no longer functions as a usable app due to changes in the underlying software architecture on mobile devices, the website documenting the project and its intervention remains intact.

woman fleeing over the balcony of a faculty member as his wife climbs the stairs. The moment can be easy to miss, given the mural's scale and location—the painting encompasses twenty-two panels on all sides of the length of the busy lobby in UVA's music building. Once you notice it, though, the entire painting takes on a different valence. In the wake of an infamous *Rolling Stone* article describing instances of gang rape on UVA's campus, faculty members have been particularly vocal about calling for its removal as a symbol of rape culture.¹⁵

Augmented reality applications work by assigning certain images as triggers for particular kinds of interactivity. When the user's camera detects a selected image, a modified version of it will appear on the screen. In the case of the Perry mural, the Praxis students chose two approaches. First, when viewed through the *UVA Reveal* interface, the app draws out elements of women's experience, literally making them emerge from the mural as digital pop-outs overlaid on the original. By distorting the user's field of view in this way, the app questions the original artist's own tendency to submerge gendered violence and experiences in the larger artwork. Second, alongside the app's attempts to foreground gendered violence and the presence of women, *UVA Reveal* connects the target images to contextual information drawn from the university's archives, in this case, layering in a poem by Gregory Orr and Raphael's *The School of Athens*. Doing so is an attempt by the students to understand the contested nature of the aesthetic experience of university campuses, which can at once be spaces of rich history, deep aesthetic beauty, and horrific violence. Perry's mural is the subject of only one augmented location in *UVA Reveal*, which also works to complicate a range of spaces around campus: the Rotunda, a confederate cemetery, an African-American cemetery, and more. Many of these locations contain complex historical narratives, and the student project encourages visitors to slow down, take stock, and see with new eyes.

UVA Reveal's About page describes an impulse to clarify and to understand as key to the project's origin. The students started from a broad desire to explore public-facing digital scholarship but also “wanted to understand the connection between UVA's history, Charlottesville, and access to education, broadly conceived” (n.d.). By providing contextual

15 For more on this history, see Provence 2016 and Gordon 2014.

information that illuminates the university's troubled relationships with race and gender, in particular, *UVA Reveal* offers users the chance to see again the university as it is. It also represented a new means by which the students could seize control over the institutional narrative. In this way, the project tapped into larger conversations about how technology can act at the intersections of—and exert influence over—history, art, and power. “Hello, we’re from the internet,” for example, was a series of guerrilla attempts by Internet activists to remake the Jackson Pollock room at the Museum of Modern Art into a space in which they have a voice using augmented reality apps—without the permission of the institution (DeGeurin 2018). Efforts like these coalesced, in particular, around physical monuments and the stories they tell, as with the work by the Monument Lab to develop experimental platforms that allow for alternative historical context and narration.¹⁶ Rather than see their university purely defined by those in power, *UVA Reveal* gave students a chance to see through the limited knowability of the institution and render it known, on their own terms.

###

UVA Reveal works to understand institutional legacies. The app is as an attempt by students to re-narrativize the stories the university tells about itself, its public spaces, and their inhabitants. But, in a way, the augmented reality project remains focused on the present: users must travel to the specific locations on campus in order to trigger the interactive context that troubles the historical narrative. A subsequent student project would go further, attempting to understand UVA's relationship to physical space as a contested interplay of power and economics. For the 2019–2020 Praxis cohort, the central animating question was ostensibly quite simple: How much land does the university own, anyway? Finding the answer to this seemingly straightforward question required an immense amount of work. The students were forced to dive deep into the archives to negotiate a vast web of interrelated business entities acting on behalf of the university. The driving spirit for the digital project was clear. The students wanted to know their university in ways that, at best, were not immediately obvious.

16 See Miller 2021 and Monument Lab 2021.

At worst, this information was deliberately obscured.

As with *UVA Reveal*, the origin story for the project put together by the 2019–2020 Praxis cohort is one of the staff offering one direction and students choosing another. The goal of the Praxis assignments at this time was for students to shape a digital project of their own design, but over the years our Lab staff determined that students needed some degree of guidance in coming to these topics. Asking an interdisciplinary cohort with no prior association with one another—or background in DH—to develop a project from scratch frequently brought frustration for the students who earnestly wanted to complete the task but lacked the tools to do so. The *UVA Reveal* cohort, for example, was given much more latitude to decide their topic but struggled for some time to bring their project into focus. For the 2019–2020 cohort, the staff decided to offer two constraints:

- The students would be given a specific dataset to work with containing clear research questions, but the particular exploration of these questions would be left to the students.
- The students would be paired with a stakeholder within the library who could help give context for the work.

For this year's cohort, the Lab provided the students with a set of geospatial datasets and map layers for UVA real estate acquisitions in Charlottesville and Albemarle County. As a part of the project, they engaged with Rebecca Cooper Coleman, UVA's Librarian for Architecture and Co-PI for an initiative funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services to develop a "data and policy tool for leaders and advocates to advance a more equitable community while helping citizens hold decision-makers accountable" (Association of Research Libraries 2023). The *Charlottesville Data Resource Hub* (Center for Community Partnerships n.d.) and the associated dataset provided some direction for the student work, broad research questions within which the project would take place. All the same, the staff left these connections largely implied, ready to be pursued or discarded as the students saw fit. It was the students themselves who chose to focus on transparency as a core principle and research topic in ways the staff could not have predicted while designing the assignment constraints.

The result of this work was *Land and Legacy* (The Praxis Program 2020b), a project that critiques UVA's real estate acquisitions since the

1980s by contrasting the university's public narratives about being a good neighbor with the negative impact of this expansion on the surrounding local communities. As with any humanities project, *Land and Legacy* quickly pushed beyond the limitations staff tried to impose on it. The one dataset provided to the students quickly took them to others. Even as they tried to scope their work down, the students could not help but be led on an odyssey through the archives. The project's data usage page describes a range of different sources including newspapers, meeting minutes, local open datasets, institutional websites, tax documents, architects' plans, and more (The Praxis Program 2020c). Even as the project sought to explore how UVA's relentless real estate acquisitions affected the local community, the students first found themselves pressed to understand what those acquisitions were and how the university organized itself on a fundamental level.

Land and Legacy's central intervention was to illustrate visually and narratively the complicated history of the university's reach. Doing so required the students to piece together a contested history of land acquisition that spanned centuries, involved countless university and local actors, and revealed a range of dispositions towards the land, the locality, and the legacy of the university. UVA's cornerstone was not laid until 1817, and its founding is typically dated to 1819. But *Land and Legacy* actually dates the beginning of the university's sprawling growth much earlier, with the theft of land from the Monacan Indian Nation (see Fig. 1):

The University's physical presence in the landscape began in the early 19th century with the acquisition of two parcels of land: 43 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres that would become the Academical Village and 153 acres that included Lewis and Observatory Mountains. Although these parcels were purchased from Virginia farmers, this land originally belonged to the Monacan Indian Nation. European settlers had displaced the Monacans from Charlottesville and Albemarle County by the 1750s, but they still traveled to important ancestral sites in the area. For instance, in his Notes on the State of Virginia Thomas Jefferson recalled seeing a group of Native Americans, presumed to be Monacan, near his home at Monticello to grieve at a burial mound that he later excavated. (The Praxis Program 2020a)

It is one thing to offer a land acknowledgement at the beginning of university meetings. It is quite another to spatially visualize the university's long history of colonialism alongside its contemporary rhetoric about community. This long history can be difficult to

conceptualize, so *Land and Legacy* opens with a gif that illustrates these various land acquisitions and UVA's growing footprint over time.

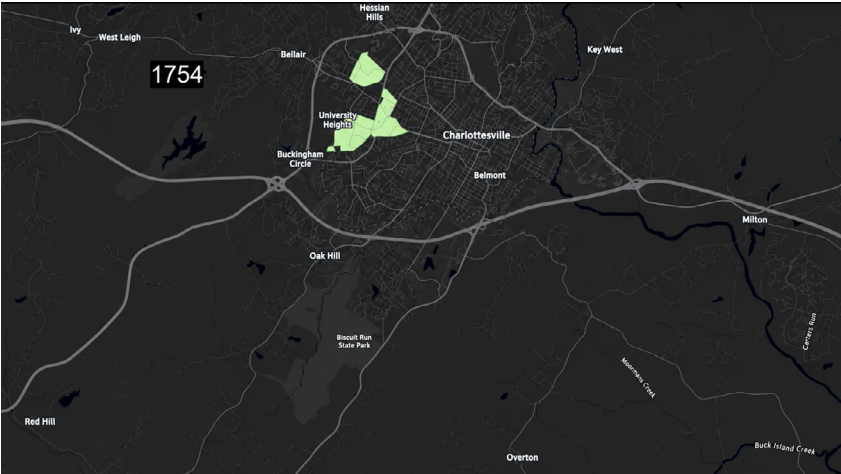


Fig. 1 Spatial visualization from the *Land and Legacy* project depicting real estate acquisition by UVA as of 1754. Praxis Program Team (2020), <https://landandlegacy.scholarslab.org/story-1-foundations.html>, CC BY 4.0.

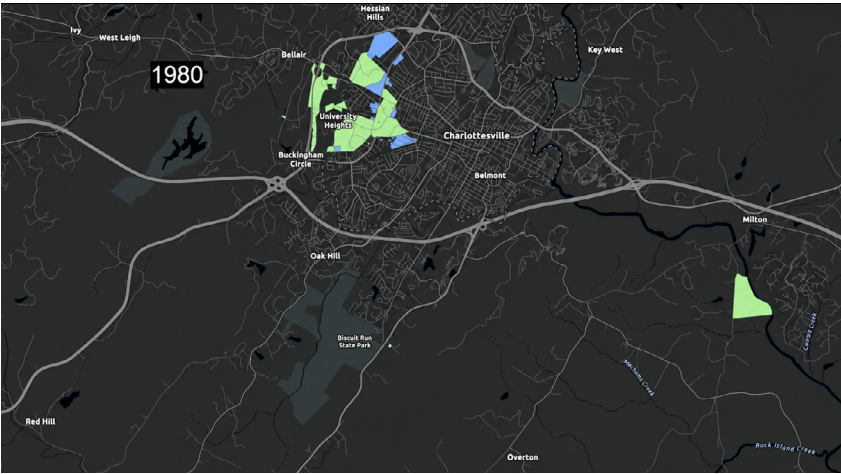


Fig. 2 Spatial visualization from the *Land and Legacy* project depicting real estate acquisition by UVA as of 1980. Praxis Program Team (2020), <https://landandlegacy.scholarslab.org/story-1-foundations.html>, CC BY 4.0.

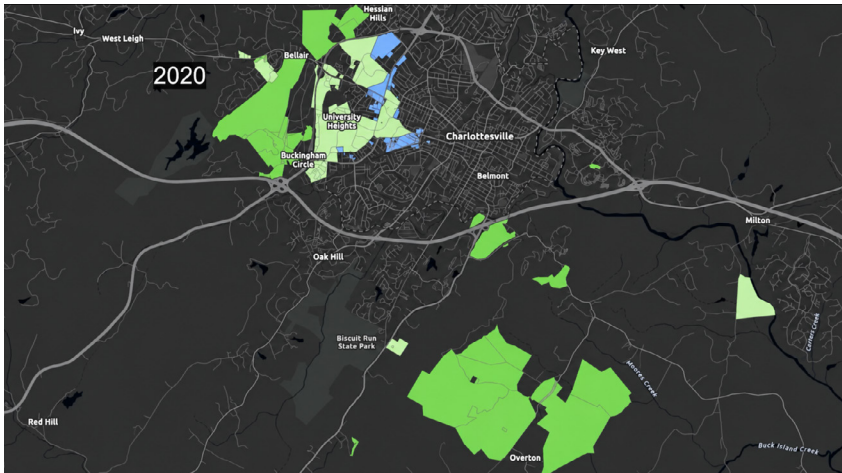


Fig. 3 Spatial visualization from the *Land and Legacy* project depicting real estate acquisition by UVA as of 2020. Praxis Program Team (2020), <https://landandlegacy.scholarslab.org/story-1-foundations.html>, CC BY 4.0.

Land and Legacy focuses, in particular, on the period since the 1980s, which saw the university's major efforts to be viewed as the premier American public university. As illustrated by the project's animated spatial visualization, the university's ambition was matched with an explosion of construction and land acquisition (see Fig. 2 and 3). The project goes to great lengths to show how this rapid development was contested, a source of tension between the university and its surrounding community. Local groups pushed back on these land grabs even as, importantly, they struggled to understand their exact nature.

The university's real estate holdings are opaque by design. The students found it difficult to determine exactly what purchases the institution had made, in large part due to the complicated ways in which universities manage their dealings. As described on the *Land and Legacy* "Foundations" essay, "Since 1986, UVA's real estate activities have been managed by a subsidiary, nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation: the UVA Real Estate Foundation (UVREF), later incorporated as the UVA Foundation (UVAF)" (The Praxis Program 2020a). The university used these legally distinct entities to manage its financial and physical growth, but, as the students found in the archives, "local residents have not always perceived them as distinct entities" (The Praxis Program 2020a). Clarifying this relationship and understanding the nature of the

UVA Foundation became one of the main challenges of the project. The project started out with the goal of analyzing and critiquing real estate practices, but it wound up simplifying its aims considerably; just helping anyone understand this messy history was an end in itself. Transparency, alone, proved to be both worthwhile and immensely difficult. *Land and Legacy* started with a dataset about the university, but it developed into an attempt to demystify the nature of that institution, which had intentionally set up a structure that frustrated its communities' attempts to understand its actions. In this way, the pedagogy and practice at the core of the project aimed to reintroduce transparency to an overly opaque system, a value that ran in direct opposition to institutional goals. While UVA claimed to be great and good, a knowable member of the community, it was, in fact, acting in direct opposition to those values and doing so with an obfuscating cloud of bureaucracy.

Both *Land and Legacy* and *UVA Reveal* point to a pervasive interest among students in understanding and critiquing their spaces of teaching and learning. Rather than accepting manufactured institutional narratives, students hunger to develop their own, authentic ways of knowing their communities. As Boggs notes, all DH work is an effort to build containers for stories. These students saw the institutional containers presented to them as black boxes, impossibly complex and obscure entities that refused to be known. They told one story but held another inside. These students, instead, helped to develop their own, transparent containers, ones that explained rather than obscured. The Scholars' Lab staff partnered with their students in the service of re-knowing their educational organizations, critiquing them, and reshaping them. In the process they helped to develop a pedagogy of transparency. Such a pedagogy is one that refuses an institution's attempts to obscure its history. Instead, a pedagogy of transparency co-creates new ways for students, teachers, and communities to re-examine the spaces they inhabit. It makes space for new ways of knowing, teaching, and learning.

As I have illustrated, the projects developed by the Praxis Program have always come into being through a complicated give and take with students, responsive to their needs and interests. This approach to curricular design is, itself, an attempt to be transparent about our own processes. In the staff charter, the statement of values that outlines the goals of the program, we write: "We will constantly re-evaluate the

curriculum with an eye to building the best experience for the students” (2021).¹⁷ The program is not one in which we share a fixed syllabus at the beginning of the course and then unflinchingly march through it week by week. The curricula shared at the beginning of each semester often undergo tweaks based on student needs and feedback that result in new workshops, new modules, and new assignments. On a larger level, the program today would look unrecognizable to someone who was a member of the first few cohorts.¹⁸ When the program began, each cohort worked on a single collaborative project for the entire year. Now, instead, we incorporate a small, low-stakes project that takes place over the course of a month in the service of offering more concentrated training in project design and management, pedagogy, and community building. All of these changes have been documented on the Scholars’ Lab blog, where I, as Head of Student Programs, make a case for the changes to the fellowship. These readings are later re-incorporated into the curriculum to expose students to the decisions made on their behalf.¹⁹ Put another way, we attempt to design and redesign the program’s pedagogy in public, in all of its administrative messiness. The hope is that this results in an experience that illuminates for students the possibilities as well as the limitations for the teaching administrator in the neoliberal university. It also helps to frame our work as always in process, always responsive to their needs. A transparent container, not a black box.

###

As this chapter has argued, institutions have pedagogies embedded within them, complicated networks of policies, expectations, and norms that give a gravitational pull toward specific kinds of educational experiences. The first step to challenging these pedagogies is to see them for what they are, to note their effects on our teaching and learning environments and how we might push back. Whether with budgets or with student projects, the teaching administrator is well positioned to help render legible those processes that might otherwise appear opaque

17 Chapter 2 discusses our lab’s use of charters at much more length.

18 I would know, as I was a member of the second cohort.

19 See “The Shape of DH Work,” 2023.

to its community. In doing so, we can shape a new relationship with our students, one in which we begin to learn more about our institutions and the challenges they face for the work we want to do. We can meet the limited knowability and opacity of the neoliberal university with a pedagogy that champions transparency, that draws students further into the gears of their education without sweeping them up within them.

Teaching in the face of an inimical institution is immensely challenging work. The embedded pedagogies have a current to them, and teaching in your own way can feel like swimming upstream. The hope is that this book will offer a roadmap and guidebook for doing so. When met with bolted-down desks, we can instead sit in them facing the opposite directions and shape new communities despite the institutional pressure. This work can be transformative and invigorating, but it can also be fraught and painful. Those desks are rigid. They attempt to enforce a particular worldview on those who sit within them. Perhaps most challenging, they appear to be passive companions in teaching and learning rather than the active agents that they are. The classroom designed in this way purports to be a flat space, a container that we can fill with whatever educational experiences we desire. But as we have seen, the desks have an agenda. And the university is anything but indifferent to the kinds of education, politics, and community members it allows into its walls. Our first entry point for pushing back on institutional pedagogies was to counter their limited knowability with transparency. In meeting the active pedagogical will of the university, we introduce the second component of the stories neoliberal universities tell about themselves that directly challenges our ability to teach justly.

Universities claim to be neutral. They are anything but, and this facade of neutrality directly undermines our ability to educate.

2. Neutral

The Neutral Classroom and the Paradox of Tolerance

The long history of political opposition to higher education in the United States could have many main characters and many points of entry. But the trend has accelerated in the past decade, when, to hear conservative politicians tell the story, universities have become hotbeds of leftist ideology, poised to convert the nation's youth to socialism. Karin Fischer points to Scott Walker as the origin of a political playbook for undermining higher education (2022). Walker's strategy to undermine faculty protections and governance, instrumentalize and surveil the curriculum, and shrink public funding and confidence in higher education has seen widespread uptake by politicians looking to boost their political bona fides and presidential ambitions. In a kind of conservative arms race, politicians like Ron DeSantis in Florida and Greg Abbott in Texas have signed increasingly punitive bans in the last several years on all manner of topics that might even be peripherally associated with gender identity, DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives, and critical race theory.

For the most part, universities have sought to meet these increasingly outrageous demands from the right with either attempts to intellectually dodge the question or to appease the critic. University administrators, when confronted with accusations of political bias, have done their best to frame the work of the university as free from all political resonance. In 2024, for example, university presidents were called before the United States Congress to address accusations of antisemitism on their campuses against the backdrop of protests over divestment and the war in Gaza. These Ivy League administrators consistently responded to aggressive Republican questioning by painting their institutions as

bastions of neutrality, spaces for the free exchange of ideas, even as they struggled to balance these differing perspectives.

A number of the universities practicing policies of political neutrality reference an intellectual lineage that goes back to a single source, a 1967 report issued by the University of Chicago. The “Kalven Report” takes its name from a committee chaired by Harry Kalven Jr. and appointed to provide a “statement on the University’s role in political and social action” (Kalven et al 1967, 2). The landmark report, only three pages long, has had an outsized influence on higher education. It argues for neutrality as essential to the character of the university: “Our basic conviction is that a great university can perform greatly for the betterment of society. It should not, therefore, permit itself to be diverted from its mission into playing the role of a second-rate political force or influence” (Kalven et al. 1967, 3). For the Kalven committee members, neutrality was not simply an attitude born of tactical diversion, it was essential to the functioning of the university.

The neutrality of the university as an institution arises then not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity. It arises out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints. And this neutrality as an institution has its complement in the fullest freedom for its faculty and students as individuals to participate in political action and social protest. It finds its complement, too, in the obligation of the university to provide a forum for the most searching and candid discussion of public issues. (Kalven et al. 1967, 3)

Only in spaces free from political pressures can such polite disagreement occur. The report goes on to identify two areas in which the university should discard this neutrality: those that “threaten the very mission of the university and its values of free inquiry” and those “situations involving university ownership of property, its receipt of funds, its awarding of honors, its membership in other organizations” (Kalven et al. 1967, 3). When it comes to these operational concerns, the university is permitted to advocate for its own behalf in the interest of maintaining its ability to serve as a place conducive to free and open inquiry. With sufficient neutrality, so goes the thinking of the Kalven Report, the university will become a walled-off garden in which inquiry and critique can emerge from the proper sources—university community members: “The instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual

faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic" (Kalven et al. 1967, 2). The institution serves as a transparent container for the political beliefs of its community members, the ones with real agency.

But even those spaces that aspire to neutrality still assert pedagogical and institutional power over their community members. Pushing back on the very notion that libraries might ever be neutral, for example, Jonathan Cope argues that neutrality itself is a convenient illusion: "The belief that a professional could operate in some kind of strictly value neutral way contradicts common sense and history. [...] The maintenance of a strict value neutrality with respect to libraries acts to obscure the numerous ways that any institution acts within the framework of larger social and ideological forces" (2017). Neutrality, after all, can be a shifting metric, one that can be questioned and exploited by those who are anything but impartial. In the days and weeks that followed the 2024 congressional hearings on antisemitism, universities across the country released statements indicating their neutrality towards public events. Political neutrality seemed to offer a safe harbor for university administrators seeking to protect themselves from invasive political questioning and interference. This posturing did not provide ongoing security. Two of the three university presidents who faced congressional testimony ultimately resigned. Liz Magill, then president of the University of Pennsylvania, did so in large part due to her responses to student protest. After Magill's resignation, Elise Stefanik, the Republican congresswoman from New York who questioned the university officials, posted on X "One down. Two to go" (2023). Claudine Gay, then president of Harvard University, did not last much longer. While Gay nominally survived the initial backlash to her congressional testimony, the inquiry provided an opening for conservative media to accuse her of plagiarism and question her academic credentials. The sum of all these events ultimately led her to resign as well. Stefanik's response: "Two down. One to go" (2024). Neutrality offered a specious illusion of safety but was, in fact, a trap. The goal of these hearings was always to undermine and dismantle university leadership. Here as elsewhere, neutral spaces actually provide fertile ground for the white supremacist and hard line conservative values and policies. In these moments, policy is twisted to be neutral for some and outright dangerous for others.

Stefanik initially targeted a small subset of institutions, but the goals of these critics are far broader. In the final moments of his sobering assessment of Scott Walker's deleterious effects on the University of Wisconsin system, Chuck Rybak offers an apocalyptic vision of the future: "If it hasn't already, this will be your state soon. All the fights that we thought belong to the future are owned by the present. Without that fight, without our contributions to it, and without new coalitions, the unthinkable will arrive: there will be no public education to serve as a pathway to a brighter future" (2017). In the first few months of the Trump administration, Rybak's prophecy proved all too accurate. The administration's use of threats towards federal funding as a cudgel to compel compliance with a range of conservative policies has shown that appeasement only leads to the further deteriorating of educational infrastructure. An American Association of University Professors (AAUP) statement on interference in higher education noted that "Since the Trump administration's executive order on so-called divisive concepts was released in September 2020, at least ninety-nine bills representing direct political interference in higher education have been introduced in more than thirty state legislatures" (2024). In the year following the much publicized hearings on antisemitism and their associated statements of neutrality, the federal government has taken a variety of actions in the name of punishing those institutions that are not neutral enough. If universities do not reshape their missions to suit the new administration, the federal government issued a broad range of threats including

- to arrest, expel, and deport campus protestors;
- to halt all federal funding from institutions that have any initiatives, research, or teaching remotely related to diversity, equity, and inclusion;
- and to slash indirect cost rates for granting agencies immediately and arbitrarily, creating instant budget shortfalls of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Make no mistake. The federal government aims to remake wholesale the entire face of the academic system in the United States as it has existed since the twentieth century. And as the demands of the federal government are often a moving target, university administrators have

tried to bolster their neutral bona fides with a variety of authoritative crackdowns on free expression and student protest, most notably by cooperating with United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as they sought to arrest and deport international students. Neutral positioning offered only fragile safety. Playing to the right offered no better. Two down. The rest to go.

This chapter argues that a politics of supposed neutrality serves, at best, as a smokescreen for institutional policies that are inimical to education.¹ At worst, the allure of neutral politics caters directly to external actors who desire the destruction of institutions of learning, speeding along their attempts to undermine the work we do. In particular, debates over free speech in higher education in the last decade echo the paradox of tolerance, whereby a sufficiently tolerant society will eventually collapse inwards as it includes those who seek its destruction. This chapter speaks to campus-wide policies of neutrality like these from the space of the library, arguing for digital humanities (DH) teaching that runs towards—rather than away from—the ever-present political and social crises that surround it. In response, I argue for teaching administrators to articulate the political commitments of their work and to meet these values with politically-engaged student assignments.

###

Institutional neutrality has direct pedagogical consequences, but, in the face of political pressures, it can be tempting to retreat into the classroom. One might hope that you could avoid the worst effects of the invasive politics of the outside world by simply attending to the work of the day. Keep your head down and just teach the material. But even if we look past the institutional level, past the ongoing threats to higher education writ large, we can see the specific ways in which a posture of neutrality has been used to affect the everyday practice of education. For years, classroom concepts like the safe space or the trigger warning were derided as individual threats to free speech. These critiques have

1 As I discuss in the Coda, Judge Allison D. Burroughs concluded similarly in her ruling that the Trump administration used antisemitism as a pretense to freeze \$2.6 billion in funding awarded to Harvard (Patel et al. 2025).

morphed from a small-scale panic about freedom of expression into outright campaigns to reshape our campuses. Neutrality serves as a convenient cover for larger actions meant to rewrite curricula by and for specific groups.

When most people think of educational censorship, they likely think of objections to specific assigned content. Legislation like Florida's House Bill 1557, the Parental Rights in Education Act colloquially referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" law, rightly drew attention for the ways it singled out the LGBTQIA+ community, and banned books regularly feature in news stories about students forced to learn about "controversial" topics. Typically, these "divisive" materials concern marginalized communities, whose artistic expression or histories are presented in ways deemed objectionable by members of the conservative right. Stories like these, as troubling as they are, incorrectly frame debates about educational freedom around the objections of individual people to specific texts or topics. As noted by PEN America, a nonprofit that tracks censorship in American education, during the 2022–2023 school year 74% of book bans were connected with "organized efforts, mainly of advocacy groups; elected officials; or enacted legislation" (Meehan et al. 2023). In Clay County, Florida, 1,200 objections were attributed to a single person, Bruce Friedman, who was proclaimed the "Michael Jordan of book banning" by *The Daily Show* (Lovett 2025). Even in this case, though, Friedman locates his concerns less in his own individual objections and more in political ideology: "Friedman says his campaign is about protecting children from what he describes as a surge in books promoting 'corrupting' ideologies, from critical race theory to gender identity" (Lovett 2025). Movements like these are larger than any specific censored text; they represent coordinated efforts to determine the kinds of teaching, learning, and representation allowable in the classroom by those with a political agenda.

Given statistics of this kind, one cannot argue in good faith that challenges to particular books, subject matter, or language are about maintaining an inoffensive classroom. Instead, it is clear that neutrality has been used as a weapon by a specific few to advance their political viewpoints. PEN America further notes the shift towards neutrality as a specific tactic by political actors:

Educational censorship is changing. The educational gag orders of 2021 that directly prohibited teaching specific topics are largely a thing of the past. In 2024, most educational censorship bills don't fulminate against critical race theory or the *New York Times'* 1619 Project. Instead, they are more likely to attach themselves to a worthy goal, like promoting "institutional neutrality" or "viewpoint diversity," combating antisemitism, or treating all students equally. (Sachs and Young 2024)

Policies with overt censorship goals have twisted language like neutrality or diversity into euphemistic fig leaves to cover campaigns to remake how education is carried out. At East Carolina University, for example, "University officials again used a keywords list to search through the course catalog and ensure no general education or major requirements were focused on DEI" (Weissman 2025). When universities force instructors to submit their syllabi for review to ensure that they conform with institutional priorities of neutrality, the practice represents far more than an attempt to safeguard individual courses from material objections. These actions demonstrate an overt effort to put guardrails around the kinds of pedagogy available to teachers.

The new phase of educational censorship is not simply an attack on specific disciplines or areas of study. Instead, what we are seeing is an attempt to seize the discursive power of teaching and learning, to reshape the very possibilities afforded by the classroom. The push towards neutrality is an attempt to inject a new kind of embedded pedagogy into our institutions. What we are seeing across the United States of America is a renewed push against education itself, as Karin Fischer has noted in relation to the political history of education in Wisconsin: "The United States has had many education governors, elected officials who have touted their records on public schools and colleges. Scott Walker, however, was the anti-education governor" (2022). The philosophy espoused by political calls for neutrality might be best called a destructive anti-pedagogy, an approach to teaching and learning that is actively hostile to both.

This anti-pedagogy aims to destroy the very institutional neutrality it claims to desire. As has been demonstrated by the second Trump administration, no level of neutrality will prevent bad actors from attempting to seize control over the educational process from teachers and learners. In this context, the neutral classroom is perhaps better

understood as a defenseless classroom. Without a core set of beliefs and ideologies to hold onto, spaces of teaching and learning are all too easily disciplined and made to conform to political agendas. As historian Kevin Gannon has argued, “pedagogy is political” (2020a, 22). Our communities demand that we rise to meet the challenges of the day by acting as such. As I argue throughout this book, teaching does not happen only in the classroom. But this will certainly be the case if our classrooms cease to exist because they are left defenseless against attacks on the very idea of education.

Notably, although it took time, some university leaders did begin to push back on the second Trump administration. Michael S. Roth, President of Wesleyan University, offered one of the first rebukes to university leaders who obeyed in advance by locating resistance as integral to the history of higher education:

Although university leaders do have a long history of capitulating to the powerful, there have been times when they have stood up for the values on which the missions of their institutions were built. Frances Wayland at Brown University spoke powerfully against slavery, as did Jonathan Blanchard, the president of Knox and then Wheaton College. Charles Finney at Oberlin College and Horace Mann at Antioch also were prominent in their support of abolitionist activities. A century later, Kingman Brewster at Yale, Theodore Hesburgh at Notre Dame and Harold Taylor at Sarah Lawrence made sure that critics of the Vietnam War got a hearing. And they were not demure about speaking out themselves. (2025)

Notably, protests against the Vietnam War were the immediate context for the University of Chicago to draft the Kalven Report on institutional neutrality. Where those who idolize the Kalven Report claim one lineage, Roth identifies another. Instead of capitulation, Roth points to a rich tradition of disobedience running parallel to and against the pedagogy of neutrality. As of spring 2025, a range of universities from the Big Ten Conference have joined together in a kind of mutual legal defense fund, pledging to defend each other against federal overreach by pooling resources (Behrens 2024). And in April 2025, more than four hundred university and scholarly society presidents signed onto a letter from the American Association of Colleges and Universities calling for “constructive engagement” in response to coercive federal practices:

We are open to constructive reform and do not oppose legitimate government oversight. However, we must oppose undue government intrusion in the lives of those who learn, live, and work on our campuses. We will always seek effective and fair financial practices, but we must reject the coercive use of public research funding. (American Association of Colleges and Universities)

These statements are a good start, but they can go further. After all, it is difficult to imagine constructive discussion with one actor whose stated priority is to destroy the other members of the conversation. Statements can be one tool, but it is clear that institutions alone cannot be relied upon to sufficiently push back against intrusive politics and their associated pedagogies.

A common response from university workers to calls for political action is to note that staff do not enjoy the same academic freedom protections as faculty. It is, of course, true that every person has a specific risk tolerance and that their institutional position will inform this. Those with more safety and security have a moral responsibility to do their part to advocate for those who do not. It is, however, a mistake to believe that tenure offers any real protections that cannot be taken away by sufficiently motivated actors. Academic freedom as such is no more or less protected than freedom of speech as articulated by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Values need defending. On the hand, this might be frightening. No one is safe. No one can enjoy the security of expressing one's views without the threat of retaliation. On the other, if no one is safe, then one might as well act. It starts with us.

####

In response to partisan witch hunts, institutions of higher education have been chasing and professing a kind of neutrality that does not exist. Attempts to do so are easily exploited. The many attempts by willing participants to satisfy calls for educational neutrality often remind me of Theseus's Paradox, a thought experiment that asks whether a single ship, dismantled board by board and rebuilt with new materials, still exists as the same ship or as a new entity entirely. What exactly is it that makes an educational institution? How many individual courses, books, faculty, or students can be sacrificed before it ceases to be itself? Many educational organizations do not actually have a sense of what

lies at the core of what they do, the motivating values that shape their work. Mission statements might provide a start, but they do not go as far as a core set of animating beliefs in helping a group cohere in the face of threats. The DH teaching administrator must shape a pedagogical practice that meets neutrality with well-articulated principles.

It can be difficult to know how any single educator can change something as abstract as institutional values. In this chapter, I argue that we must start small, by helping our learning communities articulate our explicit values in spite of embedded pedagogies of neutrality. But the nature of this value-oriented pedagogy is deeply important. As Emmett Macfarlane claimed in a thread on Bluesky, neutrality is less of a problem than the idea of giving over the power a community has to determine its own systems of belief:

I'll never get over the implication that this shouldn't be anything but normal. Universities as institutions aren't supposed to take stances, they're supposed to be support structures for the freedom of *their members* to take stances. (2025a)

Some people on the left in particular hate the word 'neutrality', but why would you want to cede political authority to pronounce on social and moral issues to the President of a large organization? What makes you think they'll adopt the position you want them to, and not the opposite? (2025b)

Macfarlane correctly identifies the danger in debates over neutrality that comes not from an absence of values but, rather, in who is allowed to speak for an institution. Institutional values, as articulated by Macfarlane, undermine the ability of teachers and learners to articulate their own beliefs. I disagree with Macfarlane in how he characterizes neutrality, but I agree with his assessment of whose voices we should prioritize. Our pedagogy should shape and support the values of the foundations, not the ivory, neutral walls of the academic institution. We need stronger materials for our institutional beliefs than what we have been given, and we can assemble them by working directly with our students.

In the chapter to come, I articulate two approaches the DH teaching administrator can take to combat the inimical pedagogies of neutrality as practiced by institutions. Even as it might seek to be inclusive, institutional neutrality cannot form the basis of a durable community. As a counter, drawing upon our administrative practices in the Scholars'

Lab, I offer the use of charters—collectively authored statements of practices and values—as pedagogical tools that intentionally frame a group’s identity around the politics and values at the heart of their work. Co-creating the terms of these communities with students can help to establish a resilient system of values ready to engage with the crises of the moment. Producing explicit statements like these can help a community to develop a shared sense of identity in the face of institutional politics that, in the service of neutrality, all too often tend to corrode the classroom, teacher autonomy, and student agency.

I then discuss DH projects with explicit values systems that extend these statements to action-oriented assignments that have an effect beyond the classroom. Committed student work that engages the political moment shows the transformative impact that purposeful pedagogy can have both on local institutions and on students themselves. There is a vast range of student work carried out with political convictions, particularly in regards to organizing and understanding local histories. In this chapter, I focus on just three examples that illustrate how a politically-committed pedagogy can engage students and teachers in the present moment: *Baltimore Traces*, the *Chicagolandia Oral History Project*, and the *Northern Illinois University Latinx Oral History Digital Project*. Each of these teaching projects engages student collaborators in politically-motivated work that explores the stories of their institutions’ local communities. In doing so, they provide the groundwork for values-driven DH that can serve as an antidote to the pressures of political neutrality in the classroom and that can work towards a more equitable university.

Co-creating Committed Communities

It can feel difficult to work as a committed individual in an institution that asserts pedagogical neutrality. If the Kalven Report has at its core the idea that the neutral institution exists as a container for individuals to express values and opinions, as we have seen, it is actually the case that this neutrality frequently interferes with individual pedagogical convictions. At best, neutrality sands off the edges of values that might otherwise have real worth. At its worst, neutrality can be used as a euphemistic screen for politically-motivated censorship campaigns that directly shape what is possible in the classroom. One way to begin pushing back against

neutrality is to cultivate community values outside the structures of the institution. The tools of the DH administrator can offer a way forward. The traditions of management and project design that facilitate DH work can be adapted to bring about the communities of learning that we want to see. We can meet the anti-pedagogies that face us with our own, firm beliefs. The teaching we do matters, and we must articulate it as such.

Statements of values have a long history. The Magna Carta. The United States Constitution. Documents meant to govern the principles and practices—however limited or flawed they may be—of a collective that also speak that community into being. Perhaps because DH practitioners come from a wide variety of institutional positions and, thus, are keenly aware of labor issues that can affect collaboration, the field offers a range of statements that explicitly articulate values that can form the basis for equitable work. The “Collaborators’ Bill of Rights” provides a landmark description of how credit can be managed equitably in DH collaborations (Clement et al. 2011). The “Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights” offers a touchstone for how to engage students as full peers in digital research and compensate them meaningfully for their time (Di Pressi et al. 2015). And the “Postdoctoral Laborers’ Bill of Rights” valuably extends these conversations to the equitable design of professional development opportunities for those in some of the most precarious positions in academia (Alpert-Abrams et al. 2019). Admirable as these documents may be, the models they offer for values-driven practices and behaviors stand at a remove from the communities they address. The documents do not serve any specific communities or bodies of people; collaborators, students, postdoctoral laborers exist as abstract classes rather than quantifiable groups of people. These examples serve best as aspirational pieces that local groups might use to develop their own materials.

Project charters offer just such a local turn and serve as an introduction to how abstract principles can be enacted for specific learning communities, as the basis for a viable alternative to a pedagogy of neutrality. Charters emerge from the world of software development and project management, typically to facilitate a project by a specific set of people. As practiced by the DH community, though, charters have come to describe committed principles as much as specific collaborative practices. Perhaps because of how often DH projects require the work

of many hands, organizations engaged in this labor frequently begin by expressing how they want this effort to take shape. Work on a charter is a recognition of the radical individuality of everyone in the room, that “everything about a project would be different if there were a different person in any of the chairs” (Ruecker and Radzikowska 2008, 289). In addition to laying out specific practices and workflows, DH charters are often invoked as a means of managing and cultivating the kinds of communities that we want to see.

Often, this practice of articulating explicit statements of practices and values is carried out most saliently by those groups whose work specifically directs itself at cultivating and serving specific communities. For example, the US Latino Digital Humanities Center (USLDH) co-directed by Gabriela Baeza Ventura and Carolina Villarroel, “serves as a venue for scholarship focused on the US Latino written legacy that has been lost, absent, repressed or underrepresented” (Arte Público Press n.d.). However, USLDH does more than cultivate scholarship and create archives. In their published statement of values, USLDH reaffirms their own community, puts into practice those principles central to it, and adopts an expansive sense of how this collective can be grown:

We acknowledge the role of Latina/o communities in the creation of US culture—cultivating and documenting their history. Recovery scholars work hand-in-hand with local, national and international producers of knowledge to achieve this goal.

[...]

USLDH seeks to create a space of collegiality and respect by creating physical and virtual spaces for training, mentorship and internship opportunities to extend the knowledge production of recovered Latina/o archives. (Baeza Ventura et al. 2021)

USLDH recognizes the politics inherent in focusing on materials from Latina/o communities. This work is anything but neutral, and their statement explicitly acknowledges this fact. The focus is less on a particular strand of research or pedagogy, though these do take shape in turn from the stated focus on their community. In practice, USLDH recognizes that the cultivation of a specific community with a shared set of values, practices, and objects of study forms the core of their work.

In their generous spirit of credit and attribution, USLDH cites another values statement as inspiration for their work: the “Project Principles”

document developed by *The Colored Conventions Project (CCP)*. CCP is an innovative attempt to catalogue, transcribe, and archive the documentary record of “nineteenth-century Black organizing,” but it is also a group that attempts to put into practice the very values of the peoples they study, the “collective organizing principles and values that were modeled by the Colored Conventions Movement” (The Colored Conventions Project n.d.). CCP describes this ethos at length on their project site: “Like the Colored Conventions Movement, our project aims to highlight and center Black lives. By this we mean Black communities, Black intellectual production, including Black scholars/hip and Black collections [...] our project seeks structures and support that honor the work members bring to the project through equitable compensation, acknowledgement, and attribution” (The Colored Conventions Project n.d.). The CCP charter goes beyond a list of values; it describes the ways in which these principles will be reflected in the project itself. The document notes the value of naming as a meaningful act unto itself: “We seek to name Black people and communities as an affirmation of the Black humanity inherent in Black data/curation” (The Colored Conventions Project n.d.). The writing of the document is significant in and of itself, and, as with USLDH, words can offer a powerful corrective to historical absence. For both CCP and USLDH, the very act of acknowledgement is a radical act of justice-oriented labor.

Like USLDH, CCP goes a step further than simply describing their own values; CCP also locates a lineage for these beliefs and practices in “the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing created on December 8, 1996 and named after the Jemez pueblo in New Mexico where the meeting was held” (The Colored Conventions Project n.d.). While the Jemez Principles might be new to those working in DH, they are likely to contain echoes familiar to much of our work:

1. Be Inclusive
2. Emphasis on Bottom-Up Organizing
3. Let People Speak for Themselves
4. Work Together in Solidarity and Mutuality
5. Build Just Relationships Among Ourselves
6. Commitment to Self-Transformation. (Working Group Meeting on Globalization and Trade 1996)

The Jemez Principles emerge out of an environmental justice context, but they were intended to be broadly applicable to a range of social justice work: “A set of recommendations called the Jemez Principles were written in 1996 as a foundation for diverse coalitions to make justice-based decisions together” (Frierson 2022). Notably, the principles articulate an ethos and practice of grassroots community formation while also aiming to leverage this power into social change. The authors go on to elaborate on their “Commitment to Self-Transformation”: “As we change societies, we must change from operating on the mode of individualism to community-centeredness. We must ‘walk our talk’” (Working Group Meeting on Globalization and Trade 1996). The very process of community formation can be powerful in its own way.

DH is a field as subject to exclusivity, privilege, and systemic inequality as any other. But it is remarkable that a political document, particularly one with justice-oriented democratic organizing as its focus like the Jemez Principles, can feel resonant for DH work. USLDH and CCP, like the Jemez Principles, recognize the political dimensions of forming a community around shared values. The recurring influence of statements like these and the ways in which they shape one another offer, perhaps, important answers to the field’s rightful obsession with sustainability. Perhaps, more than any digital project, values can endure; they can live on beyond a single team and inspire work to come.

###

Charters are a powerful way to center student desires and needs as integral to the learning process, allowing them to shape their classroom environment. For many students, writing a charter will offer the first chance in their education to describe how they feel about the work of teaching and learning. The institutional pedagogies of neutrality are felt most acutely in these moments, as students might actually resist the process and require coaching in how to use their own voices. Graduate students, in particular, are often trained in guild-like disciplinary norms. As such, sometimes they bring with them associated principles of rigor, neutrality, and objectivity. The charter gives an opportunity to push back on these ideologies and invites students to design their own learning spaces with their own values and praxis in mind.

While most students will have filled out teaching evaluations, those documents have the effect of isolating students' experiences from one another. These individual pieces of feedback do not cohere into a whole. This anonymity aims to convey an objective sense of the teacher's performance, but, as we have seen, neutrality has pedagogical costs. Evaluations are also typically carried out *ex post facto*. The feedback is not incorporated into the learning experience, except insofar as it might impact future learners. Charter conversations can often be the first time that students are asked to reflect seriously on their needs as teachers, learners, and collaborators in ways that take this input into account before the collaboration has taken place.

Students new to DH often require a good deal of guidance in order to learn how to uncover their values and articulate them as individuals, let alone to triangulate their feelings against the competing needs of a group.² Our first step when our group runs this process in our own classrooms is to share our own documents in this genre with our students. The Scholars' Lab has published a range of values statements that describe everything from a generalized ethos that "build[s] up people and practices more than products" (2016) to our specific pedagogical goals to position "students out in the world acting as professional scholar-practitioners from day one" (2018). The documents invite the students to see us and our spaces for who we are and as different from other locations on campus. We then challenge students to write a charter of their own as one of their first tasks with us. We typically ask students to develop their values statements by following a systematic pattern of scaffolding:

1. Examine examples of values statements as shared by us and by other institutions.
2. Discuss the kinds of communities that have worked well for the students in the past.
3. Explore the ways that the students want their community, here and now, to be together.
4. Ask students to deliver a draft of their own statement of values for discussion after six weeks.

2 Ronda Grizzle, the project management and training specialist in the Scholars' Lab, is our in-house expert on the process and frequently the one to carry out these workshops.

5. Publish the final draft of this document two weeks later in collaboration with the students.

The scaffolded process we follow deliberately moves from the outside in, from the kind of classroom discussion that might be more familiar to students towards conversations that might feel more alien. After all, graduate school is typically a solitary activity in the humanities. (Think of the lone scholar working on a monograph or single-authored publication in isolation.) The process of writing a group charter is often a new experience for these students who might be more used to thinking of group work as a complex experience filled with dread and trauma. Students often have feelings about collaboration that are quite strong, but I find they tend to submerge them in an overt layer of intellectualism that might feel more appropriate for academic work. Charters ask students to consider these emotions as the materials by which those collaborative processes can be reconstructed to be easier and more enjoyable.

The process of writing a charter can be an invitation for students to see with new eyes the kinds of feelings, practices, and principles that are permissible for forming an academic community. During these discussions, students are likely to focus first on their approach to the outcomes of the intellectual work under consideration; they want to finish a project, publish an article, or deliver a conference presentation. We often must coach students through the process of developing ideas beyond these statements by offering directions and topics that might be overlooked, including ethos, accountability, social norms, communication tactics, regular practices, and more. To take one concrete example, students new to DH are typically only used to single-authored publications. Topics like collaborative credit and citational norms can be radically unfamiliar and force students to confront new questions of labor equity. Those with last names early in the alphabet might bristle at the idea that author order might be alphabetical and misrepresent their contributions to a project, which can lead to fruitful discussions about more creative approaches to representing the work done by various participants to a project.

Perhaps most importantly, students often need help recognizing that values can be met with and made more meaningful by concrete action. Graduate students, for example, tend to be socialized in a

particular performance of intelligence, a need to demonstrate their guild qualifications through communicable expertise. As I have written with Amanda Wyatt Visconti (2021), this posture can be detrimental to equitable collaborations as students compete to be the smartest person at the table. Helping students work past this approach to collaboration, in more than just theory, can be one of the clearest ways the teaching administrator can introduce students to new ways of being and working together in the academy. One way to do this is to offer students tools that facilitate generous, rather than extractive, collaboration. The teaching administrator can share specific methods for putting an ethos of collaboration into practice. *GenderTimer*, for example, is a now defunct app that was used to track how long people of particular gender identities speak in a meeting and still serves as a useful model for how to promote equitable conversation, even if it can no longer be used (Rutherford-Morrison 2015). It can also be helpful to point to practices drawn from real life. Women in the Obama White House, for example, regularly reinforced points made by each other as a way to counteract the tendency for men to take credit for the opinions of others (Eilperin 2016). Offering these examples to students can be an invitation to think of different ways they can be and act with each other and often leads to deep introspection about how they intersect as individuals with the group in formation. This imaginative work is a first step in the direction of developing an institution that centers the voices and values of those who do not often have a say in how their learning communities should look.

We have had our students in the Scholars' Lab's Praxis Program write cohort charters for more than thirteen years now. Each group posts their charter online, and the collection of them can be found on the Praxis Program website (2011). While each document is a significant statement in its own way, the collective body of text represents a fascinating corpus created by students attempting to develop their own academic spaces on their own terms. To examine them as a whole, I loaded thirteen years of cohort charters into *Voyant Tools*, a browser-based tool for text analysis (Sinclair and Rockwell 2016).³ As a body of work, the documents total

3 The data used to generate the analysis in this chapter can be downloaded at <https://doi.org/10.18130/V3/K0D2LM> (Walsh 2025b).

15,208 words of students defining themselves in consultation with Scholars’ Lab faculty and staff. The ten most frequently used terms in the corpus (see Fig. 4) reflect students coming to an understanding of themselves in a new context. “Work,” “project,” “digital,” “learn,” and “time” would be likely candidates for group charters in a broad array of contexts. The other terms, however, offer a view of labor likely unfamiliar to humanities students: “team,” “members,” “credit,” and “lab.” Here, we have evidence of individual scholars negotiating, in real time, new modes of working with others and how to offer equitable credit for that labor. In particular, the presence of “lab” is telling, as it shows the students’ ongoing recognition that the library staff are visible stewards of the program, full collaborators in the project as opposed to invisible service providers.

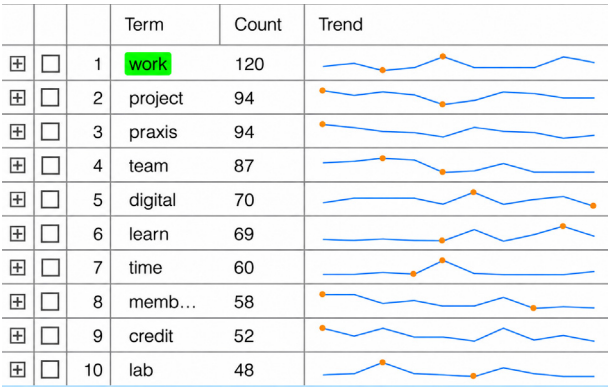


Fig. 4 Top ten most frequent terms for the first thirteen Praxis Program cohort charters as calculated by *Voyant Tools*. Visualization by author (2025), CC BY 4.0.

Viewing the most distinctive words in each document relative to the corpus as a whole offers a view into the ways the program has shifted over time to focus even more on the affective nature of shared labor (see Fig. 5). In early years, dominant references to “prism,” “deliverables,” “launch,” and “ivanhoe,” refer specifically to the assigned digital projects the students worked on.⁴ Over time, the program’s curriculum was revised to move away from a sense that the goal was to launch a specific named project and towards an understanding that the

4 Available at prism.scholarslab.org and ivanhoe.scholarslab.org

project was the student cohort itself. This transition is reflected in the emergence of “syndrome” (as in “imposter syndrome”), “kindness,” “difference,” “vow,” and even “favorite” as distinct terms, which suggest that the cohort increasingly viewed themselves as unique, embodied individuals with desires and needs that intersect with the whole.

Distinctive words (compared to the rest of the corpus):

1. 2011-12 Praxis Program...:
prism (9), program (14), participants (5), publications (3), suggestions (2).
2. 2012-2013 Praxis Program...:
team (17), prism (4), humor (3), deliverables (3), program (9).
3. 2013-2014 Praxis Program...:
conflicts (5), agree (4), team (14), launch (2), member (6).
4. 2014-2015 Praxis Program...:
ivanhoe (12), game (6), diversity (6), team (26), documentation (4).
5. 2015-2016 Praxis Program...:
technology (3), reflect (4), change (5), past (4), works (2).
6. 2016-2017 Praxis Program...:
syndrome (3), show (3), imposter (3), extroverted (2), departments (2).
7. 2017-2018 Praxis Program...:
revision (2), praxis.scholarlab.org (2), http (2), compromise (2), expect (3).
8. 2018-2019 Praxis Program...:
methods (3), build (7), tradition (3), engaged (2), emily (2).
9. 2019-2020 Praxis Program...:
information (4), widely (2), anti (2), acknowledgement (2), we're (3).
10. 2020-2021 Praxis Program...:
we're (9), lead (3), kindness (4), flexible (4), people (14).
11. 2021-2022 Praxis Program...:
difference (4), lorde (3), jack (3), halberstam (3), audre (3).
12. 2022-2023 Praxis Program...:
katherine (5), mckittrick (4), wonder (3), stuck (3), stories (3).
13. 2023-2024 Praxis Program...:
respond (6), favorite (6), music (5), vow (4), technology (5).

Fig. 5 Most distinctive words in the first thirteen Praxis Program cohort charters as calculated by *Voyant Tools*. Visualization by author (2025), CC BY 4.0.

The trends I identify above are even more striking when viewed through the lens of topic modeling, a method that looks for clusters of words that co-occur a statistically meaningful number of times in particular documents and then maps these same thematic clusters across a corpus as a whole. These clusters of words are left to the reader to interpret, but they do tend to cohere into thematic groupings and can be useful for exploratory research. As illustrated in Figure 6, the topics produced by the technique suggest broad areas of concern like community (topic 1), professional development (topics 5, 6, and 8), or building (topic 5). Topic modeling can also be useful for seeing the ebb and flow of concerns over time, as the associated probability scores convey the likelihood that a particular document might be associated with a specific topic. Topic

2 conveys a series of words that suggest the program looking inward at itself: “team praxis program open equal tool charter community year final.” This topic dominates the first four years of the corpus, years 2011–2015, hovering around 24–26%. In a stark contract, the last four cohorts in the corpus, 2020–2024, each possess a different top topic. As was the case with the count of distinct words above, this shift tracks how the staff have understood the program. The first years of the Praxis Program defined itself by focusing on digital project development that resulted in a pair of named releases: *Prism* and *Ivanhoe*. The curriculum pulled back from project development as time went on and was redefined around a series of portfolio activities that represent a range of different kinds of digital work. Instead of focusing on any specific piece of work, the students were elevated as the centerpiece of the program. This new frame is reflected in an increasing individuation among the cohort texts that increasingly come to have unique sets of concerns, goals, and needs from one another.

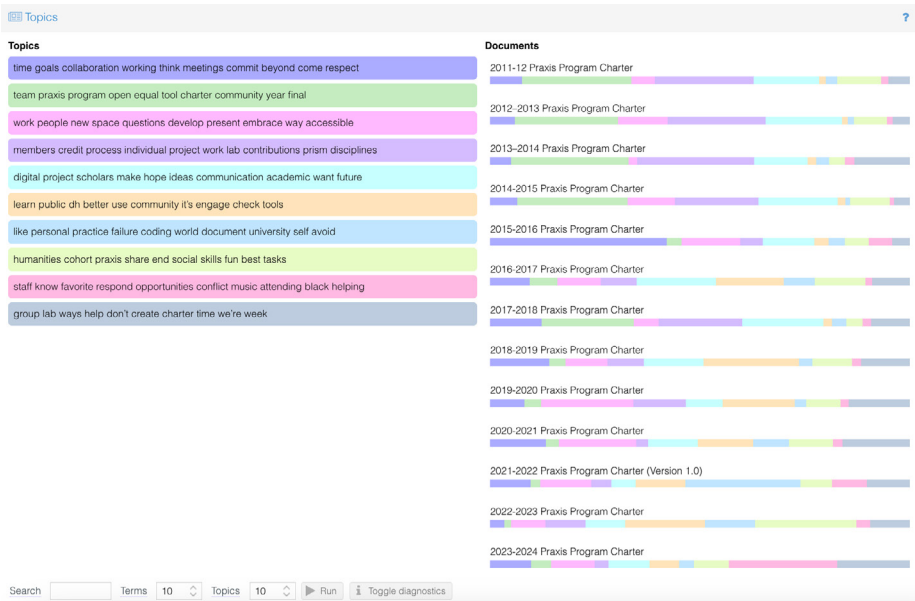


Fig. 6 Top 10 topics calculated from the first thirteen Praxis Program charters as calculated by *Voyant Tools*. Visualization by author (2025), CC BY 4.0.

This trend towards unique, personalized cohort charters is starkest in the most recent cohort to join the program, the fourteenth, one that was intentionally left out of this text analysis corpus because it stands alone and merits discussion on its own (Scholars’ Lab 2024a). To begin, the 2024–2025 cohort wrote a vast amount of text for their charter. The cohort wrote 4,059 words, over twice as much as the next longest charter. The top ten terms for the 2024–2025 charter strongly overlap with those from the Praxis cohort as a whole: “work time people digital collaboration praxis research music like want” (see Fig. 7).

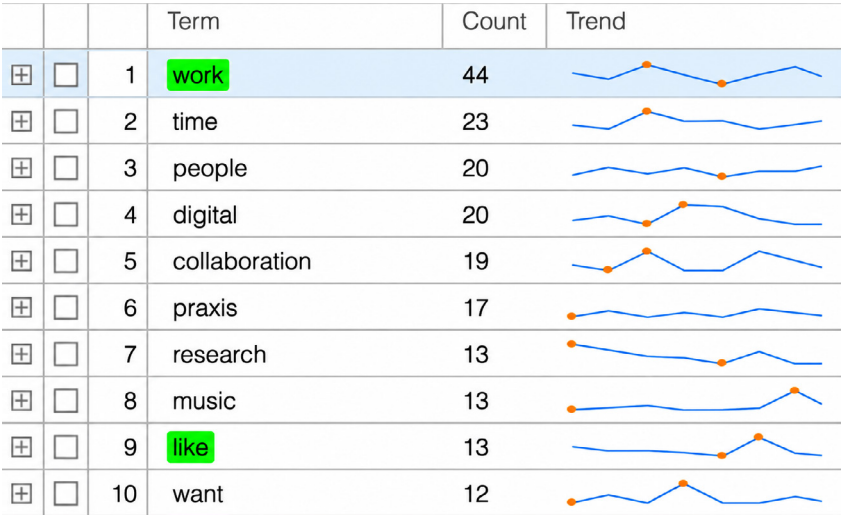


Fig. 7 Top 10 most frequent terms for the 2024–2025 Praxis Program cohort as calculated by *Voyant Tools*. Visualization by author (2025), CC BY 4.0.

The language of this cohort’s charter might seem similar, even if the length suggests they were overly verbose. But it is the format of the document that causes it to stand alone. The 2024–2025 charter includes far more than just text. While a few other cohorts incorporated one or two images in their document, no group went as far in designing a boutique charter that exists as a standalone website. When visiting the 2024–2025 charter for the first time, site visitors are greeted with a hand-drawn, animated gif of a garden that layers on images of growing plants, a watering can, a shovel, and smiling sun (see Fig. 8).

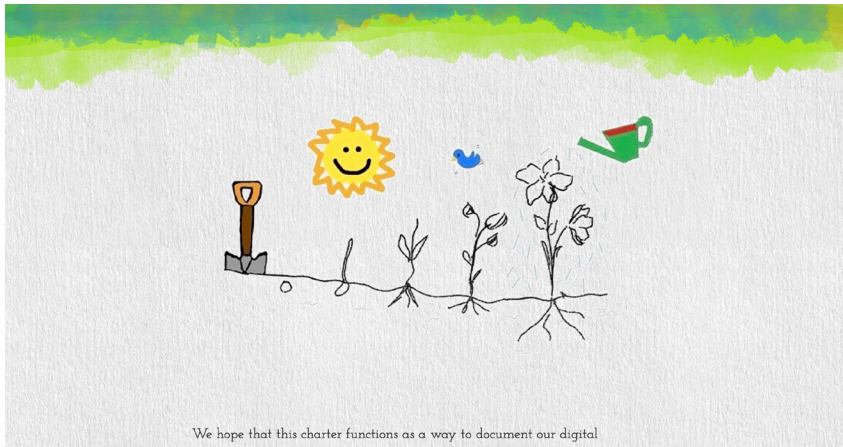


Fig. 8 Front page of the 2024-2025 Praxis Program charter, an animated gif of a garden in development. Praxis Program Team (2025), <https://praxis.scholarslab.org/charter/charter-2024-2025/>, CC BY 4.0.

Upon clicking into the charter (Scholars' Lab 2024b), the small garden sprouts into a full tree on top of shared text describing the community's values and goals. Visitors can click on a series of colored blossoms to enter into mini-charters provided by each team member (see Fig. 9).

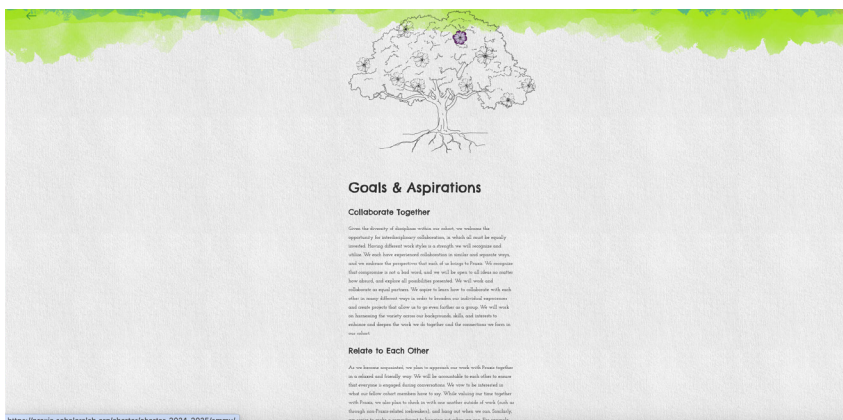


Fig. 9 Interior page of 2024-2025 Praxis Program charter, featuring a clickable tree with colored blossoms to enter into individual pages on top of collective text describing the group's ethos. Praxis Program Team (2025), <https://praxis.scholarslab.org/charter/charter-2024-2025/#charter>, CC BY 4.0.

For only the second time in the program's history, the students invited staff to contribute their own charter text about their hopes and goals for the year. For the first time, however, the students chose not to distinguish staff from student; nothing inherent to the design of the site serves as a marker of institutional position. Only on clicking into a blossom does one even find the name of the flower's owner, and nothing in a person's response specifically prompts them to discuss their institutional role.

The 2024–2025 cohort saw the writing of their charter as a serious contribution to community formation. According to group member Emmy Monaghan, “one symptom of being the 14th cohort to write a Praxis charter is that we wanted so badly to be different from everyone else.”⁵ Kristin Hauge commented on how the artistic approach to the assignment was a way for the group to express themselves: “I remember us talking a lot about how we wanted our charter to not look like a business document, so we decided to design the site in a way that allowed us to present our charter more creatively.”⁶ Oriane Guiziou-Lamour focused on the writing of the charter as an attempt to write into existence a new future for the group: “[a] promise to one another (vulnerability), a promise to the staff working with us (gratitude), a promise to our future selves (accountability).”⁷ In form and content, their document establishes a new group that had not existed before and cultivates the website as a shared space for that community to exist. In doing so, they dismantle traditional academic hierarchies and cultivate, instead, a shared working space for peers. When given the chance, students are excited for the chance to redesign collectives that speak to and for them. These small pockets of community can speak back to pedagogies of neutrality by offering, instead, a robust set of internal values upon which to build teaching and learning.

####

The charter activity does not merely surface principles that already exist in a community. Writing a statement of values can also help a group discover what they believe. The writing process can serve as a tool for developing

5 Slack message to the author, May 5, 2025.

6 Slack message to the author, May 5, 2025.

7 Email message to the author, April 18, 2025.

community at the same time that it articulates that collective. As a genre, charters are best understood as a group speaking itself into being, to itself. Such a formulation can be quite powerful. But it is worth noting that charters are in many ways distinct from institutional analogues, those public mission statements that define what an organization is and what it does to a public audience. Pamela R. Lach notes that each of these genres serves a distinct purpose, and they can conflict with one another: “there is resistance to articulating a set of academic library values beyond providing access to information, teaching information literacy, and supporting the research enterprise. Such resistance is a product of the racist, colonialist, and imperialist history of US libraries, much of which is obscured by and for library workers” (2024, 44). Power coheres in specific places in any institution, and this is especially so when it comes to defining the terms of work. The kind of collective formation epitomized by charter writing, especially, grinds against the embedded pedagogies of the institution that would only allow certain groups to define themselves in acceptable ways. Alternative community formulations and distinct value systems determined from the ground up pose powerful correctives to institutional neutrality.

Charters can offer a means by which communities can stand in the face of outside pressures, but these values statements can easily be questioned and critiqued. Used to dealing with easily articulated mission statements, institutional forces might not know or understand what it means to formulate a community based on shared values as opposed to deliverables. Indeed, in many cases, the very act of questioning a group’s identity can be an attempt to re-consolidate institutional power, a way to undermine the right of that collective to exist in the first place. No definition will be satisfactory for these kinds of institutional actors. It can be helpful to recognize bad faith questions as such, lest the interrogation draw a group into an endless cycle of redefinition. Procedures for handling these critiques can be useful to include in the charter itself. Even if charters are meant to be internally directed documents, they can still be a space to strategize about how to translate these self-definitions for others. Part of this work involves planning for how to defend those values against those who would question them. As a starting point, consider the following procedure for dealing with critique that might be incorporated into a community charter:

1. Recognize that your self-definition is in question.
2. Recognize whether or not your self-definition already exists in a publicly accessible space.
3. If it does, remind the questioner that this document exists and ask them to review it.
4. Ask for specific, concrete ways in which these definitions are inadequate for the purposes of the discussion.
5. Point to prepared, principled replies. If none exist, develop them to use in the future.

It can be easy to feel thrown when your community is repeatedly asked to redefine itself, but a strategy for responding can help mitigate the anxiety that such a moment can represent. A durable definition is granted from within the community, not without. As Lach argues, “Focusing on the community and their shared values allows DH library programs to weather institutional shifts and commitments by focusing on the work that matters most to the people who matter most” (2024, 56). Chasing endless redefinitions in the service of responding to bad-faith questioning results only in a situation where the center no longer holds. By clinging to the values that really matter, the ones that constitute our learning communities at their core, we can learn to survive difficult institutional circumstances.

Some things should not be negotiable. Charters can help a group identify its most important beliefs, formulate them, and decide what must be defended at all costs. This degree of confidence and self-definition can be particularly urgent in an academic context where so much priority is placed on a hermeneutics of suspicion, the idea that a particular object derives its worth and rigor based on the amount of critique levied upon it. When dealing with community values, critique should not be mistaken for care. A more generative posture of trust and empathy can help a community to constitute itself, but these values are not necessarily rewarded in academia. Charters can be a space to develop a pocket within our institutions where these values can be newly welcomed, centered, and defended.

We see the hermeneutics of suspicion at work in the perennial question, “What is DH?” A question that can never be satisfactorily

answered and is often deployed by critics of the field. A more useful reframing for a pedagogy that aims towards institutional change would be, “What should DH be for us?”⁸ I encourage teaching administrators to demand a DH that, in shape and form, defends the community it serves. A wall-to-wall DH that counters institutional pedagogies that seek to divide learning communities by, instead, offering a radical collective co-created by teachers and learners, staff and students alike. A DH pedagogy that means something beyond the neutral political vacuity of institutional mission statements. A DH pedagogy that refuses bad faith questions and partisan calls for neutrality. A durable pedagogy built on a shared commitment to mutually determined values.

Values-based Pedagogy in Times of Crisis

When asked to locate our values in the classroom, we might first look to the learning goals that appear at the top of a well-planned syllabus. This space is often the point at which an instructor states the priorities for the course, skills to be learned, and broader takeaways. One might argue this is the first and best place in which an instructor can make their stated values known to new students. But learning goals often reflect a narrow view of the work that teaching can do. After all, as L. Dee Fink has argued, the content of a course itself is only part of what makes for a rich learning experience: “learning goals for a course should include but also go beyond content mastery” (2013, 38). For Fink, our goals for the syllabus should look outwards beyond the course itself, beyond the limits of the syllabus. Doing so does not betray your course material: “No, we have not abandoned course content. We have simply given it a new name, foundational knowledge, and then wrapped several other important kinds of learning around it” (Fink 2013, 65). We never teach everything, but by taking seriously the range of social-emotional, community, and cognitive development a course can offer students, we recognize the rich ways in which our teaching can impact students’ lives.

For Fink, this synergistic approach to teaching offers a pathway for

8 Here I nod to Roopika Risam’s four recent questions for DH, meant to act “as a heuristic for determining what is necessary and sufficient”: “what do we need,” “what do we have,” “what must we prioritize,” and “what are we willing to give up?” (2025).

deeper learning. Fink refers to this component of significant learning experiences as the “caring” portion, those elements of teaching that encourage the development of new “feelings,” “interests,” or “values” (2013, 38). A commitment to clearly articulated values, then, is also a commitment to rich learning experience. A pedagogy of neutrality undercuts this benefit, as it eliminates a necessary component of what makes learning experiences meaningful for students. Further, as I discuss throughout this book, the realities in which we find ourselves require that we teach with the world outside the classroom in mind. We are, first, people in a world on fire—teachers and learners second. It is extremely challenging, if not impossible, for students to separate the classroom and its inhabitants from the larger political systems in which they are embedded. We do not teach in politically neutral times, and pretending that the classroom can be a neutral space disadvantages those students who are especially vulnerable to systemic abuses of power.

The previous section focused primarily on how charters can function in liminal educational spaces, those locations that the DH teaching administrator is likely to inhabit. But the tool offers lessons for more traditional curricular structures as well. Charters can be used to extend the values of the syllabus into the practical work of the classroom. In this context, charters are frequently used as a way to bridge the small group work of the classroom with the outside world, as a way to nod towards practices of a professional DH environment. Given that these same methods are drawn from software development, the approach has sometimes been derided as an example of encroaching neoliberalism in the academy, a nightmare in which the spirit of the humanities falls away in favor of the creeping, skills-based world of big tech.⁹ While this critique may be fair in a narrow sense, in practice instructors frequently push back upon this instrumentalist approach to the genre and require students to focus on their community formation as much as upon deliverables. Caroline T. Schroeder requires students to submit group charters for final projects that consider questions of licensing, credit, and communication, but the documents also must touch upon “general principles and values (including ethical principles)” (2015). Miriam Posner uses charters in an introductory DH course as an invitation for

9 See “Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities” (Allington et al. 2016).

small groups to negotiate roles, work procedures, and scheduling, but she also deliberately invites students to engage in the process with a spirit of play. Posner asks students to “choose three words to describe the spirit in which your group will work together. Tattoo them on your arm. (Just kidding about the last part.)” (2017). She closes the assignment prompt by sharing a CIA “Simple Sabotage Field Manual” as an example of practices the group should avoid. The 1944 document Posner invokes is telling, as it “was intended as a guidebook to citizens living in Axis nations who were sympathetic to the Allies” who intended to slow productivity and sabotage everyday efficiency in the service of a political cause (Feloni 2015). Even though the document is offered as a counter-example to good collaboration, its inclusion reflects a specific set of pedagogical values: our groups will not need to engage in these practices because we will not be fascist. By merely sharing the pamphlet, students are equipped with the tools to practice this mode of resistance in or out of the classroom. Posner’s subtle move shows how classroom charters and the values they describe can have real-world impact.

Charters can be a powerful tool for exploring the goals and values of a committed set of teachers and learners in a classroom as well. As I have discussed, the first step we can take towards a pedagogy of more engaged values is to invite students into conversations about how our collectives should be constructed and how this process impacts our pedagogical practice. Having located where our values exist in the classroom, both as embedded and explicitly articulated pedagogy, I close this chapter by turning towards ways we can enact our value systems as tangible teaching activities beyond statements of intent. In particular, I focus on classroom projects that take as their subject the same carefully articulated and negotiated values described in charters. If charters form groups, student projects that continue to take community formation as their subject best reflect the ability of pedagogical values to infuse our work.

####

A charter is a way for a community to tell a story about itself, both for itself and for others. While we can find similar moments in a syllabus’ learning goals, we can extend the model more explicitly into course assignments themselves and into classroom projects that ask students

to tell stories about their local communities and how they fit into them. Community-engaged oral history work brings the spirit of the charter to specific disciplinary contexts. Furthermore, projects that take university and community relationships as their focus frequently critique the university's effects on the surrounding area, calling into question the neutral positionality of the institution. In what follows, I focus on three such projects: *Baltimore Traces*, the *Chicagolandia Oral History Project*, and the *Northern Illinois University Latinx Oral History Digital Project*. These three digital projects each grew out of coursework but have gone on to exist beyond a single set of students. All three projects demonstrate how committed pedagogies with articulated values can help communities to know themselves in new, durable ways over time.

Baltimore Traces: Communities in Transition grew out of early course collaborations at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County between Nicole King and Bill Shewbridge, but the project has grown to represent a range of teaching initiatives that ask students to produce clusters of media artifacts about Baltimore, Maryland. For King, the early work that would go on to serve as a foundation for *Baltimore Traces* was grounded in a belief that student work could have a real-world impact: "In the context of the course I designed, to preserve places is to recognize their histories and the relationships people have formed with the built environment over time and to see how to connect these places to larger issues" (2014, 427). In articulating and interpreting the complex stories of the neighborhoods in question, King's students both preserve and critique the neighborhoods' presence in the historical record. As described on the *Baltimore Traces* project site, "The foundational question of the project is 'How do neighborhoods change and how do people feel about those changes?'" (King and Shrewbridge n.d.). With subjects like "deindustrialization, redevelopment, and gentrification" as foci, the project explicitly recovers narratives of loss and resilience that might otherwise go unheard (King and Shrewbridge n.d.). The project helps preserve community histories even as it creates them, ensuring that the stories of individual neighborhoods will not be taken out of locals' hands and told by others.

Baltimore Traces draws students into closer connection with their communities while at the same time problematizing their relationship to them. Rather than assume that students are or are not members of

the locales in which they study, *Baltimore Traces* exposes the student relationship to community as a process of becoming. Reflecting on the podcast series associated with the project, King notes the importance of listening as a key methodology for group: “we learned to listen with the city and to build a sense of community with its people and places” (2021, 140). The project asks students to reflect on their own position in Baltimore, even as they develop new understanding of and appreciation for it. Listening is not a skill typically rewarded in the academy, which tends to favor, instead, performances of intelligence. King makes this connection explicit:

As we tried to answer our central guiding question—“How do neighborhoods change and how do people feel about those changes?”—another question rather than a definitive answer arose. “What do we need and how do we get it?” With the latter question, we can attempt to think through our collective needs, both as a city and as human beings. Higher education, especially when committed to public engagement, must learn to value the cacophony of voices in new ways. What would institutions of higher education look like if we listened, really listened, to the word on the street and embedded those sounds, those voices and human strivings, more deeply in our institutions? (2021, 146)

Baltimore Traces merges values, subject, and method into a unified pedagogical approach. For King, this tactic directly challenges institutional norms. Instead of allowing their work to be shaped by the embedded pedagogies around them, King and her students developed their own vision for what their teaching could be and what it could do. If I described politically motivated pedagogies of neutrality as anti-pedagogical, we might flavor King’s work as counter-pedagogical for the ways in which it directly challenges the institution by offering a different playbook for how the college and community can relate to one another.

While *Baltimore Traces* asks students to focus on the stories of urban residents, the *Chicagolandia Oral History Project* (COHP) uses oral histories to document the communities outside of the urban center who are sometimes overlooked. Narratives about gentrification typically tell a story of white flight, but COHP recovers and amplifies the histories of the Latinx communities in the suburbs around Chicago. Project Director Antonio Ramirez describes how the project grew out of a class:

I built my course on the history of Latinas and Latinos in the United States around this project. Its final assessment asks students to do an oral history interview and make it available for the public. We go through all kinds of cool in-class activities. We work on writing questions, actually listening to others, approaching a narrator with humility, and things like that. We talk about choosing a subject and then conducting the interview. Students have then made public presentations on campus to share their interviews. (Ramirez et al. 2024, 104)

The scaffolded approach to the material ensures that students will find the support that they need while engaging a course assignment that might introduce them to new tools and methods. By embedding the project in the curriculum, Ramirez's pedagogy implicitly destabilizes the boundaries between the confines of his course and the world outside, as well as those between teaching and research. Education can have a real-world impact, and students can contribute their expertise to projects, even as they are developing the proficiencies to do so.

The pedagogy at work in *COHP* directly engages students in the political agenda of the project. Ramirez describes the goal of the project as an effort to build a "just and equitable future for all Latinx communities" (Ramirez n.d.), but its origins were much "more quotidian concerns: an effort to build relationships with and support unionized janitorial workers on a single professor's community college campus" (Ramirez et al. 2024, 101). What started as an experiment in connection and empathy has developed into something much larger. Like King, Ramirez argues that oral history possesses a radical politics in its very methodological foundations:

And oral history is not only about seeing other people's humanity, but it's also about deepening connections and sitting in solidarity with another person.

So I think that the dynamics of solidarity and understanding that underpin oral history are critical to the future of history as a discipline and the future of humanity. It's clear that historians need to be more publicly engaged in order for us and our discipline to survive, and that we need to share the important things we're doing and insights we're discovering. (Ramirez et al. 2024, 109)

Ramirez views oral history as a method that can rework the shape of the profession, which finds purchase in the community around his institution. Crucially, Ramirez enrolls students in this work, and they

come to be powerful agents of change that reshape their institutional context at the same time that they recover stories about their community that might have been overlooked.

For Ramirez, the political powers of both *COHP* and of oral history are not just abstract: they reflect an understanding of storytelling as central to the ways power is constructed. He reflects on the intersections between more traditional, legal structures of influence and the work his students do in the classroom:

We often think that power lies in government agencies or in the vote or in a budget, and those things are all certainly true. But I increasingly feel like what undergirds those things are stories and conceptions of reality. The real power of oral history, of listening to someone's voice and someone's story, is that you can gain a more broad and loving conception of reality. Then the political possibilities can expand as well. (Ramirez et al. 2024, 103)

Ramirez elevates the power of storytelling to the level of legal actions, and he creates a space in which his students can engage in this reality-shaping work. The power of personal testimony can, in his estimation, go on to have political ramifications. In doing so, Ramirez practices a pedagogy that is anything but neutral. His teaching has power, impact, and value. His students are equal practitioners and owners of this vision.

Baltimore Traces and *COHP* each showcase the power of storytelling to recover the histories of communities who might otherwise go overlooked by dominant media narratives. A third project, the *Northern Illinois University Latinx Oral History Digital Project (NIULOHDP)*, emphasizes the power of storytelling to change both the speaker and the listener. As described by Project Director Christina D. Abreu et al., *NIULOHDP* aims to “answer questions about the Latinx communities of the Midwest in relation to identity and identity formation—and vulnerability and resiliency—in individuals, families, and communities” (Aubry 2024). *NIULOHDP* began as cross-cutting work that took place on and off the curriculum: “an undergraduate student research engagement project. Students conduct interviews and generate transcripts as part of a course assignment, summer research opportunity, and/or independent research project” (Aubry 2024). For the students that work on the project, exploring the subjects in the archive also helped them understand their own identities in new ways, as Sandra González describes her work on

the project: “It was an opportunity that permitted me to learn about Latinx decolonization, equity, and delve into my own Salvadoran roots” (n.d.). González’s comments reflect the power of oral history to connect interviewer and interviewee, to blur the lines between subject and object, and to enable communities to form themselves in new ways.

Even as it engages in a political project, *NIULOHDP* unsettles differences in power among the various participants. Illinois Senator Richard J. Durbin discusses the importance of storytelling for building visibility for the children of undocumented immigrants who are recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (2017), for example, but his comments are embedded alongside other members of the community under discussion. In doing so, *NIULOHDP* elevates storytelling to a political intervention in the same mode as with *Baltimore Traces* and *COHP*. Abreu frames the *NIULOHDP*’s work as an attempt to push back against toxic anti-immigrant rhetoric, as a way to “counter maybe some of the more harmful narratives that are floating out there and showcasing the real richness and depth of the Latino presence in the area” (Lara 2024). These stories are more than just empty narratives. They do work in the world. One interviewee, Erick Flores, specifically expressed ambivalence about the act of verbalizing his own complex identity:

ERICK: I don’t know. It just—it would feel weird. Like, I feel if someone were to come up to me and say, “What are you?” And I said, “I’m American,” they’d be like, “No you’re not.”

AYDE: So, is it something more that other people would disagree with you?

EF: I think, yeah. Just to make it—I guess, just to make their lives easier and to simplify. Because mostly, most of the time when, like, people ask you, “Where are you from?” they kind of want to know, like, I guess, where you’re origin-wise from. So, just to simplify, I just say, “Oh, I’m Mexican.”

AYDE: Do you...

ERICK: But even that feels weird.

AYDE: And talk about that. Why?

ERICK: I don’t know. It just, it just feels weird that you have to tell people. I don’t know. Saying.

AYDE: What do you mean it feels weird that you have to tell people?

ERICK: I don't know. I just, I'm not...

AYDE: What feels weird about it?

ERICK: Like I, I prefer to say, "I'm from Mexico" than "I'm Mexican." (2015)

For Flores, identity and belonging are personal possessions. When spoken, an identity can be questioned and contested; he carefully performs his sense of belonging in a way that allows him to safely navigate social spaces. The interviewer presses him on the discomfort, though, until Flores expresses a nuanced understanding of himself, his background, and his personal relationships. In this instance, the interviewer is actually Ayde Flores, the interviewee's cousin. The pair acknowledge this relationship in the interests of full disclosure at the beginning of the interview, and the moment further elevates the power of the conversation. As a listener, we are experiencing a conversation in which a family describes, examines, and re-evaluates how it understands itself.

These projects serve as powerful examples of how pedagogical values can be enacted through all stages of the teaching process, in assignment, structure, and outcome. In discussing the projects, however, I have necessarily touched upon complex questions of identity and community formation only in passing. I do not pretend here to exhaust these topics and the complicated ways in which individuals of particular groups intersect with them. I would refer readers interested in exploring the issues further directly to the digital projects themselves. After all, each project's pedagogy centers on the idea that individual voices of community members can offer powerful testimony if teachers and learners will only listen. In doing so, they offer a model for how pedagogical values can be made legible and durable beyond the classroom. The effects of these projects will live on long after the semester concludes, teaching for years to come.

####

I conclude by pointing to another sense of value. As Brian Croxall and Diane Jakacki have noted, teaching has been an ever-present part of DH practice even while tenure and promotion committees place more

importance on “research and its outputs [...] rather than pedagogy and its results” (2023, ix). They write: “This undervaluing of educational effort continues despite the fact that it is the students, through their tuition dollars, who make possible the time faculty have to research” (2023, ix). When Croxall and Jakacki speak of value, they refer to the professional legibility of the labor that takes place in the classroom. In the currency of the academy, teaching has less worth, but the pedagogy of values as I have articulated it in this chapter can rework this imbalance. I have described a pedagogy of clearly-articulated and lived principles that is co-created between teachers and learners, in and out of the classroom. Thus far, I have invoked this pedagogy of values in opposition to an embedded pedagogy of neutrality that divides, censors, and inhibits the ability of instructors to carry out just and equitable teaching. A pedagogy of values, in this sense, has substance in the face of a void. It is legible; it is tangible. Its substance is one whose definition is created by the community itself. For both students and teachers, such an approach to teaching has immense worth, but they decide what that means—not institutional norms. This pedagogy is *valuable*, both in the sense of its principles and its reworking of what worth means in the university.

In making the shift to economic terms, I am once again consciously invoking the example of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator with vast influence over the fields of critical digital pedagogy and DH and who modeled a pedagogy that was anything but politically neutral. In Freire’s economic reading of traditional educational structures in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the instructor possesses knowledge—facts—that they distribute to students who are running a deficit. The power lies entirely with the teacher, and the students ultimately aspire to possess and exchange the economic currency of the classroom. Freire viewed this model of education as conservative, not just in an economic sense, but also in terms of its politics. For the socialist Freire, the best kind of education was a fundamentally transformative political act. Education is a means of social revolution in which the working class develops a new understanding of themselves and their communities. Change starts with re-engineering the classroom. In Freire’s reformulation of education, students bring a range of experiences and expertise to the classroom. We can see glimpses of this approach to the classroom in a range of pedagogical approaches, everything from critical pedagogy to inquiry-

based models of teaching to DH pedagogy. Any time a students' skills are leveraged against real-world problems and produce knowledge, one can trace a direct line back to Freire. The classroom can have a real effect on the world. Students have real power.

Freire teaches us that education is anything but neutral. In both the banking model as well as in more transformative, engaged teaching, a pedagogical politics is at play. There is a pedagogical values system at work. Accordingly, it is vital to understand that the opposite of an explicit articulation of values is not a neutral teaching environment. Neutrality is still an ideology and serves certain kinds of politics. As we have seen, pedagogies of neutrality have an inimical effect on teaching and learning. They promote an approach to education that, at best, serves no one. At worst, they cater to the vision of specific partisan actors while alienating, censoring, or excluding others. Teaching administrators can counter these embedded pedagogies by, instead, cultivating committed communities within the academy. These pedagogies have a story to tell, one of values instead of the void. Freire would be the first to say that his transformative sense of education is not one free of value, even in an economic sense. Value simply becomes redistributed. The best teaching and learning systems are those that aim for some purpose. It is an immense gift to be able to teach. Let us not squander it by pretending teaching and learning have no currency. Instead, let us live up to the immense promise of education as we practice our craft.

But the value systems of the university operate with a different currency than the one discussed in this chapter. Insisting on a pedagogical system of values means little when confronted with the need to provide concrete citation metrics to a tenure and promotion committee that deems such things more important. And student-centered, values-driven teaching fits uneasily into a publish-or-perish model. It is not enough to challenge the embedded pedagogies of neutrality at work in higher education. We must match our grassroots pedagogical value systems with efforts to change the very economies of academic labor and value at work at the university. Kevin Gannon puts it thus: "One of the most unproductive and dangerous assumptions we make in higher education is that compassion and student-centered pedagogy somehow equate to 'less rigorous' learning. Rigor is for corpses. And the way we weaponize 'rigor' is so often where learning goes to die" (2020b). Gannon contrasts committed student-centered

learning with abstract concepts of academic excellence, and the flippant pivot to dead bodies is telling. So often the conditions of learning at the university aim to prioritize everything but the needs of the bodies in the room in the name of achievement. Student needs are political, but they are also embodied. For Gannon, the best learning can only take place when students “feel totally present in the learning space, they see themselves as active agents (and not simply passive recipients) in the learning process, and they are secure and confident that they can take risks, stretch themselves, and perhaps even be wrong in this community of practice” (2020b). Safe spaces are not neutral, nor are they free-floating abstractions divorced from the needs of working bodies. In Gannon’s formulation, the most powerful act a teacher can take is to push back against institutional norms that might frame the classroom as an apolitical, intellectual place of competition. By building our learning spaces on safety, wellbeing, and compassion—rather than on neutrality—we create the conditions for our learning communities to flourish. When universities promote a culture of individual intellectual achievement, though, they undercut teachers and learners’ ability to participate in the shared project of education.

With this pivot, we take up our next embedded pedagogy. Universities aspire to be intellectual, but this framing devalues educational labor and ignores the pedagogical impacts that material conditions have on teachers and learners.

3. Intellectual

Bodies, Not Brains

My first run at applying to graduate school was unsuccessful for a range of reasons. I had no sense of what academic work looked like, nor did I have any sense of how to prepare for it. Most saliently, I was a bad undergraduate student. I struggled with the freedom granted by college course schedules. I skipped a lot of classes, especially in the first year of my degree, and it took quite some time to learn how to study, how to write, and how to succeed at academic work. Without any PhD offers from my first attempt at applying, I enrolled in a terminal MA degree at my undergraduate institution. Those two years stand out in my memory as enormously stressful, as I had to learn so much about academia's curricula, explicit and implicit. When I applied once more to doctoral programs two years later, I was fortunate enough to receive some offers. I stepped off the plane for one memorable visit and was immediately confronted with an urgent question by the older PhD student who would be hosting me: "There are an infinite number of books you could read, and there is a finite amount of time each day. What do you do with that?"

Later that evening, I stared at the ceiling of my host's dorm room, unable to sleep. What could do you do with such an irreconcilable problem? What did it mean for me, someone who was just getting started, who barely even knew what academia was, and who had no sense of how I fit in?

Around the same time in my life, I was moving apartments and binging the animated television series *Futurama*. I was struck by how much the science-fiction show resonated. In one plot line, technology has advanced such that heads can be preserved intact, entirely separate from their bodies. The most common recipients of this treatment are

celebrities and politicians, most notably Richard Nixon, who uses his new life as head in a jar to circumvent the Constitution. When confronted with the knowledge that nobody could be elected president more than twice, Nixon responds: "That's right, no *body*. But as you can plainly see, I've got a shiny new body" (Haaland 1999). Nixon reveals a robotic body meant to replace his old, human one, which had died centuries earlier, and he goes on to be elected President of the Earth. The recurring bit allows the show to implant references to any notable figure it wants to satirize, but it also serves as a trenchant commentary on the nature of identity and labor. *Futurama's* vision of Nixon might be one of unchecked power, but it is also a nightmare of limitless work that carries on beyond the body's ability to sustain it. The body breaks down until we are left only with a head in jar. The work continues but at a cost.

As I stared at the ceiling as a prospective academic, I could not help but feel the limitations of my own body. I felt as though I were being asked to be a head in a jar, no matter the cost. For an aspiring faculty member, the university can offer the allure of a career path ostensibly separate from the labor conditions found elsewhere in capitalist society, a life of the mind that values individual, intellectual achievement. The honors thesis, the dissertation, the tenure portfolio. Institutional reward mechanisms encourage this mentality, in which the work inside the university is meant to be different from that outside its walls. Outside, capitalism sees you as one of many working bodies. Inside the walls of academe, however, you are valued as an individual thinker. Other careers mercilessly enforce rigid work days, but the academy can be a space where you make your own hours, where you can labor on your own terms. In practice, though, this means that the work bleeds over into all hours of the day and night. You work your own hours, but that work never ends. Too much to read and write; too little time in which to do it.

The way we frame academic work can mask those labor issues that can render it just as exploitative as work outside of the academy. As critical university scholar Katina Rogers has argued, viewing the life of the mind as a refuge from the material conditions of capitalism is only possible for a privileged few and papers over exploitative labor conditions within academia itself. In particular, the rhetorical framing of academic labor as a higher calling, as a matter of love, often has the effect of submerging the material conditions of work: "Emphasizing

love in a context of labor is a tidy way of de-emphasizing things like wages, benefits, and working conditions—the material realities that, because they relate to bodies, seem somehow beneath the so-called life of the mind” (Rogers 2020, 22). Librarians working in and around this institutional context can fall into the same trap, becoming enmeshed in what Fobazi Ettarh calls “vocational awe,” wherein a feeling of collective pursuit of high-minded academic achievement leads individuals to suffer the corrosive effects of toxic work environments. Ettarh writes that “Awe is easily weaponized against the worker, allowing anyone to deploy a vocational purity test in which the worker can be accused of not being devout or passionate enough to serve without complaint” (2018). As Romel Espinel and Eamon Tewell put it, our high-minded ambitions can mask our status as laborers: “Professionals in academic settings can have the tendency to associate their labor with the intellectual aims of education, and as a result fail to realize their labor is exploited just as workers in any other sector” (2023, 578). There is no real way to separate the head from the body, to work outside the material conditions of the academy. But rhetorical moves like these have the effect of rendering problematic practices, institutions, and pedagogies as beyond account.

A relentless push towards intellectualism and a beloved vision of academe at the cost of broken bodies actually creates learning environments narrowly focused on toxic and competitive individual achievement. We devalue teaching because of its limited utility for tenure and promotion. Do not sleep because your peers are working on their dissertations deep into the night. Do not complain about your stipend size because someone else will gladly take your place. The result is a system wherein rockstar faculty in positions of power can produce cutting-edge research, while simultaneously abusing vulnerable students physically and mentally. For myself and others in my graduate student community, the labor conditions presented by endless work were a recipe for mental health disasters. I saw friends broken down by mentors in the service of building their dissertations back better; through tears, they expressed gratitude for the mental abuse visited on them. I lost friends to suicide, in part because the labor conditions in graduate school prevent regular access to health insurance and mental health care. These working conditions become undergraduate student

learning conditions. A system wherein everyone is out for themselves leads teachers to view students with suspicion, not solidarity.

There can be another way. By treating teaching as solely the work of cultivating individual intellects, we actually create conditions hostile to collective growth. Instead of burnt-out teachers and students in competition with one another, we should be working towards teaching and learning grounded as communal, lived activities. In this chapter, I advocate for a pedagogy that refuses narratives about the life of the mind and, instead, centers bodies and laborers. By slowing down, embodying our teaching, and working with students rather than against them, we can develop the conditions for transformative learning. In order to do so, I argue for two intertwined approaches to the classroom. First, I argue for a pedagogy of solidarity, wherein teaching administrators work toward better understanding and advocacy for student living conditions through labor organizing. Second, I link this approach to a digital humanities (DH) pedagogy drawn from Black abolitionist thinking that brings rest into the classroom as an anti-capitalist tactic. When implemented together, these two approaches can re-center and recover the body by recognizing the centrality of living and working conditions to the work of teaching. By embracing the role of the body in the classroom—rather than denying it—we can create the conditions by which our students and teachers can flourish.

####

The life of the mind might be a fantasy of intellectual work untethered from the material conditions of reality, but this vision is nonetheless seductive. When confronted with the limitations on our resources, it is enticing to think that our problems would be solved if we simply had more. We need more time. We only have students in our orbit for a limited number of weeks, and we want to make the most of this narrow window. We need more students. In a world of shrinking humanities majors and budget cuts, we must prove to the administration that our enrollments are healthy and growing. We need more funding. We require money to continue on with basic operations, to say nothing of the big dreams that we have for our departments and curricula.

We need more. We deserve more.

Chasing these dreams of intellectual fulfillment can feel noble, but they incorrectly frame the problem as one of scarcity. As discussed in Chapter 2, Paulo Freire envisioned traditional educational approaches as cycles of economic exchange, deposits and withdrawals of rote information. But a better analogy for the function of our broken education system might be one in which the bank has a fixed amount of currency in circulation. The economics of the system pit teachers and students in competition with each other in a zero-sum pedagogy with winners and losers. The funding windfalls received by the colleague across the hall appear to take away from the bottom line available from your work. It can feel like a loss if the bright student in your course declares a major in business instead of English.

The solution to this pedagogical dilemma is not to contest the lack of supply in circulation but, instead, to rethink the system entirely. Instead of chasing a pedagogy based in abundance that does not exist, we must reckon with reality. Student enrollments will wax and wane. Time is finite, and no amount of wishing will add an extra hour to our day or an extra week to our syllabus. There will never be enough funding for all the big ideas. There is often not enough money for the small ones. Instead of pursuing a fictionalized life of the mind, divorced from the day-to-day possibilities in the classroom, we must resist institutional narratives that encourage us to think about our work as teachers and learners in competition with one another. We must, instead, re-affirm our shared educational mission, one that must be collective and embodied.

After all, the body is inescapable. Christine Smallwood's 2021 novel, *The Life of the Mind*, describes the difficult labor conditions of a young college instructor who struggles through post-PhD life in a world with too few job postings and too many obligations. The novel's view of this intellectual life is, from the very first sentence, inescapably tied to the body: "Dorothy was taking a shit at the library when her therapist called and she let it go to voicemail" (2021, 1). Dorothy, an adjunct, is several days into continuous bleeding following an abortion that she has not discussed with her therapist (one of two she is currently seeing). Smallwood is intentional in her setting of this moment in the library. The infrastructure that supports intellectual pursuits fails to address the needs of Dorothy's body and means little in the face of these failings. Throughout the novel, Dorothy juggles her own arrested development,

academic obligations, and tormented body, all of which thwart her attempts to address her mental wellbeing.

Smallwood's novel describes a woman in stasis, unable to pull herself out of a cycle of pain and neglect because of her labor conditions: "That Dorothy seems to view her life at a remove has much to [do] with her in-between professional status, which has made it impossible for her to think beyond the end of the semester. How can you plan if there's no stability?" (Linden 2021). Unable to plan and pinned down by precarity, Dorothy drifts from moment to moment, struggling to exist or to feel, approaching everything with clinical detachment. In another memorable scene, Dorothy encounters a graduate school ex-boyfriend who insists on reading Frank O'Hara poems into her vagina during sex. The moment crystallizes the novel's parody of academic ecstasy, but Dorothy finds herself unmoved: "She had been confused for somebody else, the kind of person who could orgasm over a poem" (Smallwood 2021, 116). In the terms the novel puts forth, the mind cannot be sustained without the body, but the mind also cannot give real, authentic pleasure. The title becomes a joke. *The Life of the Mind* is one bawdy encounter after another, as body and mind smash into one another.

The Life of the Mind might feel sensationalist, but if anything, it undersells the real-life working conditions of adjuncts. While persistent Dorothys do exist, hustling to get by despite the pain it inflicts on their bodies and souls, her example is far from the direst. In 2019, Thea Hunter's adjunct positions left her without health insurance, and she eventually passed away from a health condition exacerbated by her inability to seek a diagnosis (Harris 2019). In 2013, adjunct professor Margaret Mary Vojtko passed away "after a heart attack at the age of 83, destitute and nearly homeless," while she and others attempted to unionize at Duquesne University (Sanchez 2013). Ellen Tara James-Penny lived out of her car for nearly a decade while teaching four courses each year at San José State University (Flannery 2017). For every Dorothy, there are countless stories of teachers struggling to make ends meet in pursuit of a life of the mind that leaves their bodies devastated or barely hanging on. The body cannot be ignored.

If the material conditions of teachers directly affect their ability to teach effectively, students are no different. The media has a tendency to frame college students as entitled, upper class, white, and elite.

But, if we look closely at real student stories, we find an altogether different picture. Sara Goldrick-Rab's work with #RealCollege and the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice shows how often these narratives ignore the lived realities of our students. Goldrick-Rab "[encourages] institutions of higher education to focus on the basic needs of college students (food, housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health)" (Freie 2010, 178). To put it plainly, the life of the mind means very little without a body to sustain it. It is hard to learn while hungry. It is hard to study while depressed. The body holds important sway over one's ability to participate in education.

We might think that we know what it means to live an academic life and make reasonable asks of our peers. We might ground such assumptions about what it feels like to be a teacher or a student in on our own experiences. But our understanding of living a certain way gets weaker with every year that passes between us and the actual experience. Consider the massive shifts in education in just the last few years: MOOCs, the COVID-19 pandemic, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Sea changes like these have repeatedly rendered higher education virtually unrecognizable every few years in the last few decades. This is to say nothing of personal struggles with conditions such as poverty, racism, or chronic disability that impact student life on an ongoing basis. We also cannot know what it is to live the work of a fellow teacher. Your colleague might be struggling with mental health. They might lack secure and stable housing. They might be caring for a loved one in ways that prevent them from doing their job. There is no escaping the limitations of our bodies and the ways in which they affect our ability to teach and learn. And we cannot understand these factors in isolation. What we need is a pedagogy that recognizes the personal and collective struggles of all bodies.

We ignore the ways our institutional structures encourage pedagogies of intellectualism and deny the body at our own peril. At best, doing so creates learning environments ignorant of the very real conditions under which teachers and students work. At worst, doing so can pass on generational trauma, where our students and fellow teachers must suffer because we once did. As I argue throughout this book, we can teach our way towards better institutions. Our pedagogies can seek to understand and uplift rather than divide and

oppress. They can heal rather than harm. We can teach from and to the body, not the brain.

###

Thus far, the topics in this book have largely concerned the qualities of our institutions, the ways they aspire to be knowable and neutral. But intellectualism, given how often it bleeds into individual feelings of vocational awe, can feel hopelessly intractable for the teaching administrator. The topic might feel too small in that it reflects a deeply held perspective on one's own personal relationship to labor. Simultaneously, though, the topic might feel too large. Anyone who attempts to develop a different relationship to labor than their peers cuts against the grain of a guild-like structure that has been perpetuated for decades. It is all too easy for individual efforts at developing alternatives to be overwhelmed by such a powerful labor ideology. The first step in translating individual discomfort with the status quo into culture change is to further illuminate the ways in which institutions cultivate cultures of intellectualism at the cost of the bodies of their teachers and students, to render ideology knowable in the terms of this book.

In this chapter, I trace a middle way between two paths: labor activism and restful pedagogy. In the first path, thinkers like Marc Bousquet call for institutional revolution through collective action. For Bousquet, the academic labor system at the university operates precisely as attended. Academia produces an underclass of low wage workers, traps them in a labor system from which they cannot escape, and alienates different classes of laborer from one another in a manner that renders solidarity and progress impossible. Bousquet's work, while radically rooted in a Marxist rendering of the political capital of the university, seems to offer only wholesale, radical revolution as a path towards institutional change. On the other hand, Patricia Jennings advocates for social-emotional learning and resilience on the part of teachers, healing burnout by way of mindfulness. While her focus on mindfulness might seem to place the onus on the individual to resolve their situation, Jennings does note the need for systemic change and identifies how infrastructural problems disempower teachers and force them to survive on meager wages with no voice in their material conditions. I aim to reconcile these two paths

in a pedagogy capacious enough for both the political organizing of Bousquet and the social-emotional interventions of Jennings. I do so by recommending an approach that centers the needs of the body within the power—and the demands—of the group.

The group in question in these efforts must include students as well as teachers. Students are essential to conversations about labor and embodied learning, but they often find themselves shut out of the discussion. It is incumbent upon teaching administrators to actively work to include student perspectives. Besides useful information for planning and administration, the mere act of asking students about their day-to-day needs can often go a long way towards creating good will within your community. Of course, the opposite will be true if students feel as though their perspectives are ignored. As teaching administrators, it can be easy to assume that we know better than students what is possible, and a gut response to such moments, particularly if the feedback is negative, can be to get defensive about our decisions. But resist the urge to justify the way things are. Instead, as I argue in Chapter 4 on future-oriented pedagogies, take students' perspectives as inspiration for alternative ways in which your work could be done.

It is tempting to take my argument as a suggestion that those of us in positions of power need to be better listeners. While listening is an admirable goal, we should not make the mistake of seeing it as an end in itself. Sean Michael Morris argues that teachers must reframe their understanding of the conversation entirely:

We need to change our minds about speaking as coming from a single mouth, a single amplified signal. We must learn to hear the patterns in the noise... And we probably shouldn't call it noise any more—all those blogs, all those domains of your own, all those sites where educators get angry or get sad or begin the long path toward empathy. (2016)

We need student voices to be able to do this work well, but they are systematically excluded from the institutional spaces that make decisions about their bodies and their livelihoods in the name of safeguarding their intellectual futures. Conversations with students give us opportunities to offer not just a listening ear, but also a conduit for those student voices that are not otherwise allowed in particular rooms. In what follows, my argument and examples explicitly center the needs and powers of students to shape the circumstances of their own learning.

In this chapter, I draw from my experience in higher education labor organizing to resituate DH pedagogy in embodied collectivity. We can look to the administrative lessons of wall-to-wall labor organizing as a means of building solidarity across job classifications. Rather than treating students as individuals siloed off from the staff and faculty who teach them, we can think about all of these persons as part of a community engaged in common goals. As a case study, I reflect on the pedagogical dimensions of my own organizing experiences at the University of Virginia (UVA), where advocating on behalf of students has made me a better teacher while also striving to improve their working conditions. I then go on to broadly address those teaching administrators who might be reluctant to see the pedagogical implications of labor advocacy. Instead, I argue for a crosscutting pedagogical solidarity with a variety of actions available even to the most skeptical workers.

We can match these practices with teaching approaches that refocus the intellectual labor of the classroom around feminist practices of care to nurture and cultivate the material conditions necessary for pedagogical flourishing. Building upon the work of The Nap Ministry, Catherine Denial's pedagogy of kindness, and Moya Bailey's concept of a slow DH, I argue for a DH pedagogy that aims for rest, wellbeing, and care for the body more than the rapid development of student projects. Put simply, the life of the mind withers without a body to nourish it, and, as administrators working at the intersections of teaching and policymaking, we should center the lived experiences of our colleagues and students in the work that we do. A focus on solidarity and collective wellbeing can serve as important counters to institutions that prioritize intellects but fail the bodies they need to survive.

Collective Action and Intellectual Solidarity

In my experience, many higher education workers have specific images in mind when they think of unions. Often, these conceptions will come from media, as with the Longshoreman's Union from *On the Waterfront* or the International Brotherhood of Stevedores in season two of *The Wire*. Both of these examples are based on fictionalized versions of the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) and the union's "ties to organized crime (real and imagined)" (Press 2024). With these images in

mind and backed by decades of similar propaganda from corporate and political interests, I find higher education workers often view unions as external forces, separate from the workers, corrupt and working against their own interests. I do not intend to dismiss such concerns. Unions are composed of people, as subject to disorder, chaos, and corruption as any other collective, and my own experiences in labor organizing have been anything but smooth. But it is worth approaching such concerns critically, as *a priori* perceptions of union organizing in higher education can serve the interests of power if they go unexamined. In particular, the life of the mind and the university's pretense towards intellectualism create a divisive class narrative. Unions are for others, not in academia, because they are for those who labor with their bodies, not their minds.¹ But organizing is often most needed where it feels most alien. One of the greatest barriers to institutional change is the inability of higher education workers to see themselves as workers, as a collective capable of action that transcends individual intellectual endeavors.

In many ways, we are at a watershed moment for labor organizing in American higher education. In 2016, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that student assistants and graduate workers were university workers and could unionize (American Association of University Professors 2016). In their annual publication describing the state of unionization in academia, the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions noted dramatic increases since they began tracking labor organizing metrics in 2012:

We have found that the overall rate of faculty union representation is 27%, with the number of represented faculty increasing by 7.5% since the 2012 Directory. However, the rate of GSE union representation is even higher at 38% and the number of represented GSEs has increased by 133% in little more than a decade. Similarly, there has been significant increases in the number of separate bargaining units of exclusively postdoctoral scholars, academic researchers, and undergraduate student employees. (Herbert et al. 2024, 43)

More faculty and students are organizing than ever before, this despite the fact that the political sphere is actively hostile to both higher education

1 As though those who labor in physically demanding fields do not use their minds in those jobs.

in general and labor organizing in particular. A full discussion of labor organizing in higher education is out of the scope of this text, but I want to reflect on the pedagogical ramifications of these developments as they pertain to the work of the teaching administrator. We are working bodies, not thinking brains in jars. Seeing ourselves as workers can allow us to develop institutions with the capacity for collective pedagogical flourishing, but only if we refuse intellectual frames that view such moves as existential threats to the goal of education.

There nonetheless persists a strain of hostility towards labor organizing efforts in higher education. Writing in 2024, Leonard Cassuto spoke anonymously with three higher education deans who identified the ways in which graduate student unions would affect graduate education. In the piece, Cassuto gives pride of place to the concerns of these administrative interlocutors, offering only passing responses from labor organizers before returning to the concerns of leadership. The overwhelming emphasis remains on how labor organizing in graduate education stands to damage the landscape of graduate education, in particular on how “program sizes will shrink” and “graduate-student advising may become more businesslike” (2024). One of Cassuto’s interviewees, a Midwestern dean, especially laments the ways in which faculty’s “connection to their students will become colder,” going so far as to ask “will collective bargaining ‘make everything antagonistic’?” (2024). The relations in question have little to do with the classroom: “I hear faculty worrying that they won’t be able to have their advisees to dinner anymore” (2024). The descriptions instead reflect nostalgia for a time when students knew their place, academically and socially. In this understanding, faculty-student relations cannot survive equitable labor conditions.

The concerns reflected in Cassuto’s article are worth highlighting both for how common they are as well as for their pedagogical ramifications. They frame a world in which any discussion of labor, indeed any advocacy for the body, puts the worker at odds with the life of the mind. The NLRB ruled that graduate students are employees, and, it seems to follow, this fact actively damages the work of teaching. But nothing could be further from the truth. Teaching and learning are entwined, as are teacher and learner working conditions. The NLRB ruling provides a patina of administrative and legal recognition of the truth about labor conditions for student workers in higher education. And this visibility

matters. Ambiguous working conditions are a clear mechanism by which those in positions of power—faculty or otherwise—can abuse and exploit those below them. Ignoring power hierarchies does not prevent them from existing; it exacerbates them.

Divisive hierarchies among teachers and students serve neither group; they create conditions hostile to learning. Paulo Freire’s conception of the classroom was one in which disrupting such separations leads to transformative learning. Freire was also a Marxist. For him, teaching done right was a means to social revolution. In what follows, I argue that the inverse remains true as well. Labor organizing in higher education offers powerful pedagogical dividends. Students and teachers can work together—as peers—towards better working and learning conditions for everyone. Students learn best when they are respected and have the material conditions to feel safe. Teachers work best when they have the conditions that make the work of learning possible. The solidarity created during labor organizing helps to elevate student voices as peers in educational institutions while yielding trust and respect for teacher allies.

The DH teaching administrator is especially well-suited to take on this work. After all, so many teaching administrators actively build the infrastructure that supports academic work. While it should not be solely the responsibility of staff to organize their workplace, they are perhaps more likely to see their work *as* labor. Throughout this book, I argue that pedagogical interventions can offer ways to reshape the subtle effects of our institutions on the work that we do. Labor organizing is the most powerful way to make direct institutional change, to reshape our organizations along terms that serve our own teachers and learners rather than the desires of capital. This work has profound pedagogical ramifications. It builds student trust by developing a community built on interrelated sets of concerns and needs, and it acknowledges that intellectual work is inseparable from lived conditions. This solidarity can form the basis of a powerful pedagogy.

###

Labor organizing can sound like something done out there, carried out in the world by other people. It conjures images of strikes and picket lines. But it actually starts smaller. The first organizing action is always

education—something university workers know plenty about. The teaching administrator looking to push back against the embedded pedagogies at work in their institution can best begin by learning about strategies and tactics for collective action. Doing so offers a path for teachers to see themselves and their students as allies engaged in a long struggle towards the construction of a better university; it inculcates a pedagogy of solidarity. In what follows I will discuss my participation in a series of freely available online labor trainings and my observations of the organizing campaigns that benefited from these experiences. I was far from the most active member in our organization, and I eventually had to step back after the birth of our family's first child. I do not wish to overstate my role in these campaigns, which was vanishingly slight in comparison to the tireless work by other organizers. But, while my own impact on campus organizing might have been small, my participation in these spaces has been transformative for my work as an educator. In this spirit, I hope the following section elevates the powerful work of others, labor to which I was fortunate enough to bear witness.

Begun as a collaboration with the late Jane McAlevey, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation offers a free online training program entitled *Organizing for Power (O4P)*, a six-week, skills-based course on organizing your workplace (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung n.d.). I attended this series in the summer of 2021 as a part of Communication Workers of America Local 2265, the United Campus Workers of Virginia (UCWVA). I logged onto the Zoom meetings each week as a higher education worker, but the calls included thousands of people in them from around the world and from workplaces far beyond academia. Electrical workers from Gambia joined the call alongside nurses from Germany, who spoke about leading a campaign for better working conditions. At the beginning of one session, we celebrated the election of the new left-wing Chilean President. During one memorable session, the facilitator greeted participants with expressions of solidarity in dozens of different languages. The sense of kinship I learned to feel with people whose work looked very different from mine was profound. More than anything else, the O4P trainings taught me that the work we do is part of a global movement to fight for more equitable working conditions. Academia is not something separate from this world. It is a part of it.

In addition to reframing how I saw academia's work in the world, O4P provided participants with a range of practical knowledge and skills. The curriculum involved training in specific labor organizing strategies, tools, and tactics like structured organizing conversations, power mapping, structure tests, and more. As a part of the workshops, we read case studies, held discussion groups, and practiced role-playing a variety of scenarios drawn from life. In one memorable moment, we practiced identifying leadership qualities among a range of different employees in a hypothetical workplace. In another, I acted out reluctance to participate in a protest action while my scene partner attempted to convince me to join. As a result of these activities, I came away feeling prepared to engage in a range of different workplace campaigns. Labor organizing is challenging, difficult work. Emotions run high. But O4P gave me the skills to approach this work systematically and professionally, a valuable backstop against the anxiety and stress that can otherwise be generated in such situations.

These experiences with labor organizing might feel far afield from the classroom, but UCWVA's own history illustrates the deep connection to educational practice. UCWVA was formed in the summer of 2020, against the backdrop of the complicated negotiations around returning to in-person work during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated conversations about working conditions. Graduate student workers, especially, were instrumental in the development of the union and foundational to its growth. The reasons for this are clear. Graduate students occupy especially precarious employment positions. In addition, graduate school can often feel like an uneasy combination of the personal and the professional. Because of this, graduate students talk about their labor conditions. A lot. UCWVA gave students an avenue through which to articulate their anxieties about their own workplace safety and a means by which to do something about them. But UCWVA goes further. It practices wall-to-wall organizing, meaning that it comprises a range of different job categories. Rather than organizing, say, only graduate students or only faculty, membership is open to anyone who receives a paycheck from the university and whose job title falls below senior leadership. The result is that, while graduate students provide a core constituency for the union, they are joined by faculty, staff, hospital workers, and other likeminded individuals from across the institution.

Unions are not some separate entity. They are the people in your workplace. At UVA, this meant that the union included my coworkers and former mentors. But most important to me, the union was my students. People I had accepted for fellowships and people I had rejected. Students who I had met on their first day at UVA and students who I would celebrate on their last. I overcame my initial hesitation to join because I felt that I could not in good faith continue to pretend that I advocated for my students if I did not join the organization. I talked with my own students as peers about joining and, once I became a member, I saw many faces I recognized in the membership. These were my students, people who I had long described as my equal collaborators. Working under the umbrella of UCWVA was a means for me to back up my talk with action, to move beyond asking about their concerns and to work alongside them as equals to change their working conditions. O4P enriched this work and, in so doing, made me a better teacher.

O4P gave me the tools to work directly with students on issues that mattered to them, and my time with UCWVA showed me the pedagogical ramifications of organizing efforts. For example, as I discussed in Chapter 1, university financial systems are notoriously complex. Many students do not know their inner workings, and many administrators can easily lose sight of how anxiety producing it can be to live paycheck-to-paycheck. The #CutTheChecks campaign at UVA worked over several years to encourage accountability within the university for lost or delayed graduate student paychecks (United Campus Workers of Virginia 2023). Thanks to the organizing efforts of graduate students, the campaign pushed UVA towards accountability. The President's office eventually convened a task force committed to studying the issue, recommending steps forward, and implementing solutions (University of Virginia Office of Graduate & Postdoctoral Affairs 2023). Another, more specific, example: Rosa Hamilton, a PhD student in history at UVA, was told her dissertation advisor of four years could no longer serve in that role. Rosa had previously received written permission for this professor to serve as her adviser, and the decision to remove her was not communicated to Rosa directly. This supervisor was best suited to advise Rosa's research—work that was already well underway as she entered the final year of her PhD: "So, when UVA's administrators took away Rosa's chosen advisor, not only were they breaking an agreement they

had made with her last Fall; they were also taking away a critical aspect of her control over her own working conditions” (Luo 2021). While it is true that, as a humanities student, Rosa’s funding was not dependent on this particular supervisor, their removal still posed a significant threat to Rosa’s ability to progress towards her degree. While it could theoretically have been possible for Rosa to find a new advisor, graduate life is tenuous enough that this development could have prevented her from finishing entirely. Rather than accept these developments as given, Rosa organized with fellow UVA workers and successfully petitioned the university administration to overturn the decision. Crystal Luo, a participant in the efforts, describes how the campaign cut against the isolating nature of academia:

In past years, Rosa would have had to deal with a situation like this one largely alone. Like many graduate student workers and other UVA employees, she would have individually prevailed on the willingness of an administrator to make an exception in her favor, or hoped that her department’s Chair would go to bat for her and her advisor. This time, however, she had the backing of her workers’ organization behind her. She knew that no matter what steps she chose to take, she wouldn’t be doing them alone. (2021)

Both Rosa’s story and the #CutTheChecks campaign point to the distinct ways in which administrative decisions about finances and labor have pedagogical effects for students. Students cannot learn if they cannot afford to eat or pay rent, and they make slow progress towards their degrees when supervisors might be removed with little notice. Institutions can make us feel as though these are individual problems for individual people. But these campaigns show that the problems are actually systemic and can be met with collective action.

I could say more about the ways labor organizing helped my teaching, as well as my ability to run a meeting, manage difficult conversations, and work with groups of people to break an abstract, intractable problems down into smaller, actionable steps. But perhaps the most powerful result of my involvement with graduate students in the union has been the trust built by these efforts. It is one thing to claim that one cares about students. It is quite another to take their concerns seriously and provide tangible demonstrations of that care. Trust is earned by teachers, not owed to them. And the trust built by pedagogical solidarity

can pay immeasurable dividends in the classroom. The participants in Cassuto's article bemoaned the ending of social dinners between advisors and advisees. But I would wager such events can still take place. Now, though, students join the table as equals.

####

For readers already engaged in campus labor politics, much of what I have written here likely seems obvious. For these readers, I encourage you to see the pedagogical values in your organizing activities. Still others might find themselves largely onboard with the argument but feel unable to participate in labor activism as much they would like, ground down by new campus obligations or exhausted from already doing as much as they can. To these readers, I express solidarity as someone who reached the limits of my own ability to participate in our union's activities when my wife and I became new parents. These days, instead, I largely support our active members from the sidelines. All this being said, I also expect some readers to be outright skeptical. In my experience, some of the most profoundly challenging workplace labor conversations come not from those on the political right; they come from those colleagues who might otherwise appear politically aligned with the goals of the union. The coworker who published an article on the importance of labor movements in graduate school might be actively hostile when confronted by efforts to organize their own workplace. The same friend who enthusiastically volunteered for Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign might keep their own union at arm's length. There are a few, well-trodden reasons why this could be the case. Those accustomed to working in activist circles might question the tactics of the group or why they were not involved from the beginning. Others might incorrectly view higher education work as a different kind of labor that should not be the face of unions. Others might fear retaliation from their own institution even though they otherwise agree with the union's activities. Still others might believe incorrectly that unionizing in their workplace is illegal.

Each of these concerns merits its own response, and a fuller discussion of them all is out of scope for this project. But I do want to dwell briefly on the way such critiques connect to the broader pedagogies of

intellectualism in the academy. Writing from the vantage point of literary theory, Rita Felski argues that academic critique is a rebranding of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, an orientation characterized by specific relationships between the text and critic: "Suspicious reading inscribes itself in the psyche as a particular mode of thought and feeling, a mind-set equipped with distinct qualities: distance rather than closeness; guardedness rather than openness; aggression rather than submission; superiority rather than reverence; attentiveness rather than distraction; exposure rather than tact" (2011, 222). For Felski, suspicion and critique can only get us so far. While they do offer insights, these frameworks can also foreclose all other attitudes as unserious. After all, she argues, "Who would want to be associated with the bad smell of the uncritical?" (2015, 8). Instead, Felski calls for other ways of conceiving of the relationship between reader and object of study. Texts can enchant us. We can trust them. We can read generously. We need not always be suspicious.

Felski writes in the context of how we consume cultural objects, but her lessons can be applied to labor politics in the academy more generally. In no way am I arguing that labor organizers on campus are beyond criticism. But it is worth considering how the academic tendency to consider all critique as an end in itself can undermine the ultimate goal of working towards a better university. As I discuss in Chapter 2, not all critique is in good faith, and ungenerous suspicion can undermine values-driven communities. Instead, I suggest we counteract cold, intellectual forms of engagement with a radical politics of collective solidarity. Instead of subjecting our work and our pedagogy to endless critique in the service of intellectual rigor, let us consider how to move from a focus on performing our own intelligence to something more generous and greater than ourselves.

Simply put, we need a new way of conceiving of our work in the academy, one that does not fetishize individuals in intellectual competition with one another. To skeptical readers, I ask that you read this text with a generous spirit and open your heart to the pedagogical ramifications of the work that might be happening separate from or in spite of you. I also offer the following concrete actions that you can take separate from joining a union or actively participating in public campaigns. There is much work to be done, and not all of it takes place

on the picket line. Kelly McElroy and Diana Castillo argue that day-to-day labor organizing consists of “many little moments” that can be just as profound as large strikes, noting how “Storytelling and one-on-one conversation is a deep part of union and organizing culture” (2024). Accordingly, I invite skeptical readers to first interrogate the stories they tell themselves about their own relationship to labor organizing in the workplace.

- Educate yourself. Our information ecosystem is fundamentally broken, but misinformation is especially rampant as it pertains to questions of labor. “Right to Work” laws, for example, are frequently written in such a way that they sound pro-labor, even as they restrict the abilities of labor unions to organize. But they also do not outlaw labor organizing, which is constitutionally protected under the First Amendment’s freedom of assembly. Spend time researching what the actual law is in your area so that you do not spread misinformation.
- Question yourself. When trying to recruit someone to an organizing cause, the conversations typically follow a standard structure involving a series of questions. Even if you do not want to actively engage in these dialogues, you can save organizers—and yourself—energy and time by asking yourself probing questions. What might lie beneath your skepticism of labor organizing on campus? Are these concerns born from actual lived experience on the ground? Can you talk with someone about them? If you view the goals of campus organizers as generously as possible, what are they trying to achieve? Why do you not want to be a part of it?
- Remove yourself. Labor organizing takes many forms, as does participation in it. By the same token, it is worth considering how the shape of your non-participation might actually harm the organizing efforts of others. Campaigns for better working conditions rely on a thousand small conversations and actions. They can similarly be undermined in a thousand ways. Do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Concerns about tactics or tone can undermine the good work done by others. Do not stand in the way.

Each of these small, personal actions can ultimately contribute to a healthier labor movement at your place of work, and no one needs to know you are taking them. Universal suspicion serves no one but the embedded pedagogies and politics that pit students, staff, and faculty against one another. After all, as Eve Sedgwick notes, paranoia inculcates a totalizing view of history where the past and future could only ever have been one way, but if “there can be terrible surprises [...] there can also be good ones” (2003, 146). Breaking free of suspicion as a default position, reading reparatively in Sedgwick’s terms, means opening oneself to possibility: “Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (2003, 146). The past could have been different. The future can change, and our attitudes in the present are key to how it unfolds. Accordingly, I suggest we inculcate in our workplaces a pedagogy of solidarity, one that works in opposition to embedded pedagogies of intellectualism. Only together, in a pedagogy rooted in hope rather than suspicion, can we shape better futures for our institutions.

We can extend this collectivist approach to questions of labor into the classroom by approaching our students with curiosity and empathy. Chapter 1 of this book describes in detail how powerful it can be simply to recognize that administrative decisions form the texture of an embedded pedagogy. But if we are to design a just, countervailing approach to education, we must recognize the limitations of our ability to envision one alone. We cannot have a deep understanding of a community that we do not belong to. This framing nods to disability activism and the phrase “nothing about us without us,” the idea that one should not try to write about a group of people without full and direct representation from and participation by that community. One of the most powerful acts of pedagogy can be simply to recognize where your work affects students and to include their perspective.

One of the most profound pedagogical actions that a teaching administrator can take, then, is simply to ask students about their working and living experiences. My suggestion here is a direct nod to Anna W. Culbertson, who calls for librarians to employ Karl Marx’s concept of the worker’s inquiry. As described by Culbertson, this technique involves

asking coworkers questions to “reveal organizational exploitation and abuse [...] directly through workers’ experiences, which employers downplay or invalidate on a continual basis” (2024). I adapt Culbertson by redirecting this inquiry towards students as fellow laborers in the university. So often decisions are made that affect students’ learning by those who would never think to include them in the conversation. The following questions can offer a starting place for asking students about how their living conditions affect their ability to learn:

- What can they afford?
- What stresses do they face?
- Do they make enough to live?
- What kinds of things do they value?
- What are they getting out of their education?
- What do they need from you?

These questions might feel far afield from the work you do as a teaching administrator, but the responses could not be more integral to how we establish a strong pedagogical foundation. A pedagogy focused on the needs of the body can be a powerful corrective to institutional narratives around intellectualism. Rather than treating workers as abstract concepts, this pedagogy approaches higher education workers as embodied individuals with interrelated sets of concerns. As Culbertson notes, direct and meaningful discussion of mutual labor conditions can create powerful connections within a working community: “imagine what wholesale validation could occur, what solidarity could be built if we inquired of ourselves without the mediation of administrators and outmoded professional strategies” (2024). As put by Romel Espinel and Eamon Tewell, “our working conditions are inextricably linked with students’ learning conditions” (2023, 580), and the work of teaching relies on a fuller understanding of the material realities of your learners. Solidarity in the classroom is built by recognizing teachers and learners both as living, working humans.

This chapter is a call to think beyond intellectualism as the precondition for successful institutions. The life of the mind can take us only so far. It gives rise to isolated, competitive individuals ignoring the needs of each other. In contrast, our pedagogies can find root in collectivist, embodied

actions that work towards better living and learning conditions for everyone involved. Teaching administrators can lead the charge in this work. Our work is uniquely able to draw focus to the labor conditions of intellectual work and the scholarly dimension of organizing. Faculty, staff, and students all have something unique to contribute to the project of building a better future for the university. It will take all of us. A key tool in this ongoing campaign is a pedagogy of solidarity, one that works from a place of centering bodies and the work they do.

More life. Less mind.

A Digital Humanities Pedagogy for the Rest of Us

Much of what I have discussed in the context of labor organizing from a staff perspective applies to teaching faculty as well. Indeed, a wall-to-wall approach to organizing would have us see teachers, administrators, and students all as workers who can engage in collective action towards a more just workplace. And this labor can create working conditions conducive to teaching and learning. Rather than reiterate these same points, I will pick up one specific thread as we turn to the classroom more directly. Organizing movements in higher education teach us that intellectual work is still labor, and there can be no life of the mind without the body. These bodies have needs, and, in what follows, I advocate for a reinvigorated sense of a DH pedagogy that makes space for the body. We must counter institutional pressures to abandon our values for the sake of relentless intellectualism by re-embedding pedagogies of care, both for individual bodies in and the collective wellbeing of our community. Bodies make all our work possible, and they can only do so much. We need a pedagogy that takes care of us, and that work continues in classroom practice.

In some ways, a pedagogy of care can feel like a poor fit for the DH classroom. Many who make the case for the field do so by focusing on scale, speed, and innovation. With our skills and resources, we can analyze millions of texts, bringing together the humanities and technology in a way that disrupts the typical way the university functions. I too am guilty of engaging in this rhetoric. For years, I have used the “Cult of Done Manifesto” as a means of introducing Agile project management to my humanities students (Pettis and Stark 2016; see Fig. 10).

The Cult of Done Manifesto

There are three states of being.
Not knowing, action and completion
 Accept that everything is a draft. It helps to get it done
There is no editing stage
 Pretending you know what you're doing is almost the same as knowing what you are doing, so just accept that you know what you're doing even if you don't and do it
Banish procrastination
 If you wait more than a week to get an idea done, abandon it
 The point of being done is not to finish but to get other things done
 Once you're done you can throw it away
Laugh at perfection. It's boring
and keeps you from being done
 People without dirty hands are wrong
 Doing something makes you right
Failure counts as done. So do mistakes
 Destruction is a variant of done
 If you have an idea and publish it on the internet, that counts as a ghost of done
Done is the engine of more

Fig. 10 Joshua Rothhaas, "Cult of Done" (2009), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/joshuarothhaas/3327763912/>, CC BY 2.0.

These students, trained as they are to strive for perfection in their research, often find iterative design thinking transformative. The "Cult of Done Manifesto" asks us to "laugh at perfection" and, instead, rapidly prototype drafts for the sake of moving forward. When I taught the material most recently, though, my student, Amna Tarar, and colleague, Shane Lin,

shrewdly critiqued the pseudo-religious language of the document as a part of what they called the “secular American religion of productivity.” The document frames itself as a cult, and it contains echoes of Facebook’s erstwhile motto to “move fast and break things” (Wired Staff 2012). As I argue in Chapter 4, such narratives sell a kind of techno-utopian snake oil for their own benefit and at the expense of the teachers and learners. I thought the document offered useful lessons for students about how to reframe their own work, but my students refused this message for the ways it enflamed and reinforced the very labor politics we wanted to push back on in other parts of our conversations. Simply put, a pedagogy of intellectualism cannot be countered by a relentless focus on outcomes. In refusing the Cult of Done, my students advocated instead for us to slow down. Pedagogies of the life of the mind need to be countered with a different framing altogether. A pedagogy that restructures, rebuilds, and connects, that heals even as it works towards a collective future.

DH also contains within it a strong counter-thread of critics who point out the limits and dangers of techno-utopian rhetoric. Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel introduce their volume, *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, by turning narratives of disruption on their head, reappropriating the term to elevate alternate mappings of the field: “We reimagine DH as not the seamless products of the neoliberal academy, non-profit ‘philanthropists,’ fascist government, and the military industrial complex, but as the work of people, labor, and voices at the margins creating friction and fantasy, mapping edges and new locations, playing slanted and in glitches with distributed resources and global communities” (2018, 22–23). Such work challenges the field’s self-mythologizing as a space of niceness and inclusivity while still reproducing the white and Anglocentric biases found elsewhere in the academy. Silicon Valley’s echoes of speed, efficiency, and whiteness need to be challenged explicitly, and doing so necessarily disrupts business as usual.

All the same, the rhetoric of breakage co-opts the same language that it critiques and offers a poor frame for a DH pedagogy of solidarity and healing. Digital librarians, especially, might find such language to be a poor fit for critical librarianship, given how often we find ourselves “[cleaning] up the mess that disruptive innovation leaves in its wake” (Espinel and Tewell 2023, 579). Amanda Wyatt Visconti, for their part, cautions against disruption as a motivating epistemology for framing

DH: “Disruption can be a force for good, especially against systemic problems. But to my ear, disruptive is not what I want DH to be. Disruption is inherently non-introspective; you disrupt others, rather than looking hard at yourself” (2017). Rather than disruption, Visconti argues, we should look at DH work as a force for generative difference. Instead of viewing the field narrowly as a change agent, we should also consider it as a space of experiment, play, and possibility. Simply put, we need a different approach to DH pedagogy that can counteract the damaging, disembodied labor politics of Silicon Valley by offering a new mode of thinking entirely.

One potential path forward comes in the form of the slow DH movement.² As described by Tonya Howe, “Slow DH is a concept in digital humanities—and an approach to the practice—that privileges a deep understanding the nature of our work and the values that inform it, like the slow food movement” (2023). As Moya Bailey theorizes the term, slow DH intentionally introduces friction into collaborative processes by moving at “the speed of trust”: “Here, the speed of trust is used to connote a slowing down and a need to nurture relationships before trust is established. The plans will fall apart if we move faster than people can depend on one another” (2021, 292). Claudia Berger connects the discussion of slow DH to “other ‘slow’ movements, like slow food, fashion, etc.” in how they ask us to make “deliberate choices about our values” (2019). For Berger, these principles are explicit:

- Treating our sources (and data) ethically
- Spending time with our materials
- Keeping sustainability in mind
- Practitioner focused (2019)

Slow DH refuses typical neoliberal rhetoric and offers a different epistemology for collaboration, one that centers trust, partnership, and intention. Rather than directing working practices towards outcomes, slow DH centers the people in the room. This formulation carefully nurtures a healthy community of practice alongside project work rather than in spite of it.

2 For a more generalized application of the slow movement to academia, see Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber’s *The Slow Professor* (2016). Chapter Two on “Pedagogy and Pleasure,” especially, is relevant to my discussion above.

Calls for slow DH typically focus on projects and collaborations, but I would extend these calls for a slow DH into the classroom. After all, slow pedagogy is a methodological approach that already exists: “slow pedagogy is not just taking your regular course calendar and adding more space between due dates; it invites instructors to reflect on how a class is designed and facilitated. From this space, teachers can cultivate awareness of how and why certain content is taught—and to extend [sic] that culture of attentiveness to your students” (Fournier 2024). Calls for both a slow pedagogy and a slow DH pedagogy each center intention, a kind of living in the moment that offers collaborators and students the flexibility to grow only as quickly as feels sustainable.

My intention is not to close this chapter with a call for slow DH pedagogy. To my mind, “slow” is too much of an adjective and not enough of a verb. We must live intentionally in our collaborations and our present moment. We must adapt our teaching strategies to the flexible needs of our bodies. Admirable as these approaches might be, I aim to extend the concept towards action rather than reaction. It is not enough to slow down an already breakneck pace. Taking lessons from the previously discussed pedagogies of solidarity and collective action, I argue that our teaching should counter embedded pedagogies of intellectualism with teaching that asks for other ways of existing. With teaching that demands rest from those institutions that would otherwise refuse care. With teaching that connects and grows. An embodied, healing DH pedagogy.

A DH pedagogy for the rest of us.

####

In graduate school, I always got the teaching slot I wanted. Throughout my degree, I was part of a lonely club of graduate students who volunteered to teach 8:00 AM discussion sections. My reasons were strategic. I found the performance anxiety before teaching consuming, and I was unable to focus on anything else all morning if I knew that I had teaching later in the afternoon. But I also loved the students who opted into 8:00 AM courses. 9:00 AM classes were for those who left high school thinking they were morning people only to find out otherwise later in life. 8:00 AM students were a rare breed. Pre-med students, athletes coming off

four hours of working out, consummate morning people. The students were dedicated, and the energy usually hummed. It was still early in the morning, though, and one semester I taught a student who frequently fell asleep. I remember the nervousness I felt the first time I saw him asleep in class, and my thoughts raced with stories of how others had dealt with it. One apocryphal narrative recalled a UVA professor setting a newspaper on fire in front of the student's face. Another professor yelled loudly and clapped to wake drowsy students. I also thought back to my own past and remembered how often I fell asleep in high school as I struggled to adjust to 7:00 AM classes. I was not always a morning person, and I could not will myself awake no matter how hard I tried.

Reader, I let him sleep.

Students come into our classes with a range of experiences, good and bad, and these backgrounds manifest in ways that might be difficult to read from the front of the room. When Trevor Muir found a student sleeping in class, he yelled at her, only to find that she was underslept due to a traumatic family emergency. The experience was transformative for Muir's teaching: "I became aware of the reality that students are not just blank slates when they walk into our rooms, but instead are more like characters living out stories with very real conflict" (2024). These stories, in many cases, will remain unknowable to us. But denying their existence in the service of a life of the mind serves no one. If our pedagogies make space for the needs of the body, we can also lay the foundation for transforming our institutions.

Rest and recovery are radical acts that can serve as counters to the "Cult of Done," and they offer a religion unto themselves. Tricia Hersey argues that rest is a sacred right, one that has been socialized, legislated, and stolen from us by a culture of productivity. Hersey develops the idea most fully in her two books *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* and its follow-up *We Will Rest: The Art of Escape*, but rest, for Hersey, is not just a theory, it is a practice. In 2016, Hersey founded an organization called The Nap Ministry, a group that approaches rest with all the trappings of a spiritual experience. Hersey's work is both a call for individuals to practice rest on their own and a set of loosely organized group events where strangers meet to seize moments of rest in communion together. In Hersey's formulation, rest is not a pathway to greater productivity but an end unto itself, a deliberate disruption of white supremacist,

capitalist systems of power. Our institutions want us to do more, to grind ourselves to dust in the service of productivity. Rest, in contrast, turns inwards to heal, recover, and be.

Our DH pedagogy of rest must be proactive. In *A Pedagogy of Kindness*, Catherine Denial recommends including moments of rest in our professional lives as a means of necessary self-care for both teachers and students. Doing so makes space for us to teach as whole persons, and Denial extends this practice to syllabus construction: “And do not schedule every minute of every single day. Allow space for unexpected moments to occur” (2024, 52). Rest allows flexibility in your syllabus, giving an instructor space to accommodate unexpected circumstances and curricular needs. While useful, these measures can all too easily frame rest as a gap meant to be filled in; the goal ultimately is to increase productivity and quality, albeit in a more healthful mode. I would incorporate Hersey’s radical politics to extend Denial’s formulation into an actively restful pedagogy, one that seizes moments of rest out of the syllabus because it is our right to heal our bodies. Even the most adventurous instructors might feel inclined to justify restful choices to students; I can remember several times in school when a teacher told us, “we are going to end class early because it is nice outside.” Resist this urge. Instead, the only justification that need be offered is that we deserve it. As Hersey would argue, rest is our divine right. Our bodies deserve the care and attention that we can offer them.

With Hersey and Denial in mind, I offer an activity for incorporating rest into the classroom. The first day of a new course often follows a familiar sequence: roster checking, syllabus description, and some small teaching activity. I sometimes derisively refer to this first meeting as the “recitation of the tax code.” But we can do better than routinely recount policies. The first day can, instead, center the needs of the bodies in the room and situate the values we bring to our teaching on full display for our students. I call one way to do so “A Syllabus for the Rest of Us,” an activity that frames your course values around wellbeing and care by asking students to intentionally center their own rights to healing and recovery on day one. After introducing the syllabus on the first day of class, invite students to inject rest into it. Students will decide on a single change to the plan for the semester in negotiation with their instructor and peers.

"A Syllabus for the Rest of Us"

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Pre-work: Ask students to read the syllabus ahead of time to make space for the activity and come prepared with questions to streamline typical discussion of the course logistics.

Prompt: "The syllabus provides much of the structure for our course material, and we take it up as a contract, an invitation into a new conversation with a new community. But it is impossible for circumstances in our lives outside not to influence our work in this room. In this spirit, I want to include you in the design of the course to make it more human and more restful. Why? Because you deserve it, and this class recognizes you as full human beings with challenging lives. Today you will propose changes to the course in small groups and together we will vote on one way to modify the syllabus."

Lesson Plan

1. Planning (10–15 minutes):

- Students break into 3–4 small groups. With the syllabus in hand, each group will discuss and propose a single change to it. While students can propose other ideas in the same spirit, example modifications might include:
 - Cancel one day's session.
 - Require students to miss one assignment.
 - Replace one reading with an assigned nap.
 - Host a guided meditation in place of one meeting.
 - End class early on three dates.

2. Presenting (10–15 minutes):

- Individual groups make their case to the larger class.
- Urge students to think critically about their instincts to justify their choices. The goal is to frame the course around healing and wellbeing—not productivity.

3. Voting (10–15 minutes):

- The class votes on the preferred option.
- Make every effort as an instructor to accommodate the class's desires, only negotiating the parameters of the change if absolutely necessary.
- Make a show of the class, collectively, changing the syllabus together. Pass out sharpies.

4. Discussion (remaining time):

- How did the activity make your students feel? How do they feel about the syllabus now?
- How have past learning experiences centered or refused their wellbeing?
- What other support do they need to participate in the course successfully?
- How will they commit to a culture of rest and recovery in the course? To caring for each other?

This activity might feel as though it undercuts the course before it even begins, making a joke of the work we do. Our syllabi are carefully crafted objects, after all, and giving over any space betrays the hard work that we put into designing them. But the trust built in showing care for your students will pay dividends that far outweigh the loss of any particular topic or class session. The mere fact that such an activity feels radical proves that it is worth doing. Change is possible. As I have argued, the life of the mind is a lie. A pedagogy of rest and recovery, one that centers the lived experiences of students, is the best way to push back on toxic cultures of intellectualism that leave ruined bodies and hearts in their wake. Students deserve better. Teachers deserve better. We can build a better institution. Activities like these can be a start.

####

Each chapter in the book thus far has offered a pedagogical approach that can be deployed in opposition to the ones our institutions thrust upon us. We meet limited knowability with a pedagogy of transparency. We confront institutional neutrality with a pedagogy of values. Now, we refuse cold intellectualism in favor of pedagogical solidarity, perhaps the most direct tool for effecting institutional change in the classroom. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that institutional pressures towards intellectualism, towards a life of the mind, inculcate pedagogies that harm our students and teachers. We see this every time a student or instructor expresses anxiety about a DH course not being technical enough. Our students feel this anytime they are subjected to a draconian course policy in the name of intellectual rigor. In this chapter, I have argued for a twofold response to embedded pedagogies of

intellectualism: organize your workplace for better working conditions and demand that our teaching center the needs of the body. The result is a pedagogy of solidarity on both large and small scales. Our classrooms can be both spaces for providing transformative care as well as the engines for developing broad movements for change. But this is only possible by approaching our students as allies in the struggle and recognizing the limits of everyone's ability to make their way in the face of hostile institutions. Work requires rest. Change requires wellbeing.

One could argue that this argument does not feel specific to DH. Indeed, the restful approach I outline above could be included as a part of any first day of class. In one sense, this is true. The argument does exceed the particulars of any one research and teaching area. But I also find DH teaching especially in need of such an intervention. As I have argued elsewhere (Walsh 2019), DH classrooms are spaces of heightened emotions. The skills and methods we teach students can be challenging in their own right, but learners do not approach our material with a blank slate. Many students find their way into humanities fields as much out of distaste for math, science, or technology as they do out of a passion for their chosen subject. In addition, students who are not white, cisgender, or male are more likely to be socialized away from these same careers and disciplines. When students come into our spaces, they are often forced to encounter years of accumulated trauma related to their own intellectual and social upbringing. DH students are in need of thoughtful, caring pedagogies of solidarity and rest. The ways in which we craft our courses can exacerbate, mitigate, or harness the affects at play in the DH classroom.

Furthermore, DH spaces are especially well-suited to a collectivist pedagogy. The field demands collaborations across academic hierarchies and beyond individual institutions. It pushes the boundaries of what scholarship can look like and what counts for tenure and promotion. All of these factors mean that DH teaching administrators confront labor issues that might otherwise be submerged in the fabric of intellectual work. The field draws criticism for adopting neoliberal, hyper-capitalist approaches to intellectual work, but there are also loud voices advocating for labor justice across the university in ways harder to find in academia writ large.

In a broader sense, however, I welcome the critique that this argument is not specific to DH. After all, one of the foundational lessons of labor organizing is to recognize the interrelated nature of experiences that

might otherwise seem unique. As Sarah Jaffe puts it, “Solidarity isn’t exactly love, and it’s not the same as friendship; it is an understanding that our lives are bound up together whether we like it or not. It is, at bottom, about recognizing the humanity in each other, and this once again is what brings us to the fight” (2024). A pedagogy of solidarity transcends specific disciplinary contexts in favor of a broader recognition of how teaching and learning function in the university. We are all teachers, and we are all learners. The sooner we begin to organize alongside one another in ways that transcend institutional categories while respecting the living and working conditions of everyone in our orbit, the sooner we will achieve what bell hooks calls “education as the practice of freedom” (1994).

I opened this chapter by invoking *Futurama*’s image of heads in jars as a convenient metaphor for how universities can spin out fantasies of intellectualism divorced from the lived conditions of the body. I read the show’s imagery negatively. Those heads are doomed to work forever. Academia operates in the same mode. Make your own hours, but you will always be working. Love what you do, and you will never work a day in your life. But you will also never stop doing what you love. A pedagogy of solidarity is a call to refuse such narratives, to refuse to see ourselves, our colleagues, or our students as heads in jars. It is a call to recognize how capitalist logics of relentless, individuated work infiltrate even academia and to reject them. Instead, a pedagogy of solidarity asks us to envision new ways of being and working together. It also asks us to recognize the limits of the body and our ability to engage in cultures of overwork.

But one person’s nightmare is another person’s dream. It is no accident that, in the example I cited, Nixon is actually overjoyed to be capable of running for an additional term. For him, the mind-body split offers a tool for solidifying his grip on power for years to come. Perspective matters, especially so when it comes to how we talk about the future. Science fiction, after all, always offers a commentary on the here and now. The ways in which we discuss the possibilities for tomorrow and our ability to shape it have everything to do with power.

And so we turn to the last chapter and the final embedded pedagogy by which universities structure the nature of the teaching and learning permissible in their halls. Universities claim to prepare their communities for the future, but they set strict parameters around the voices allowed to shape visions of tomorrow.

4. Future-oriented

Pedagogy of Contested Futures

I had terrible handwriting in elementary school, and I regularly received pig stamps on my homework assignments to admonish me for it. In second grade, I complained about this, and my teacher had a predetermined response: “This will not pass in the third grade.” When we began to learn cursive, the refrain became even more pointed: “When you get to the next grade you will have to write in cursive for everything.” I was terrified of this future in which I would not be able to do the basic tasks my teachers asked of me, so I dutifully practiced my loops and curls. Third grade came and went without the rigid law that I had been promised, but it did bring a new refrain: “In fourth grade, you will have to use cursive exclusively.” And so on. I never encountered a teacher who actually required cursive on all assignments, but I had plenty of instructors who threatened me with futures in which I would. My handwriting also never improved.

Over time the prophecies would change. In grade school, I was warned to expect cursive as a constant presence in my life, but that day never came. In middle school, I was told that one day I would not be able to use a calculator so I had better learn to do things by hand, but before I knew it, I had a phone in my pocket that could do quick calculations at a moment’s notice. We were warned of all manner of things that would not be tolerated by college professors, only to find that university teachers could generally not be bothered by such policing.

Laying claim over the future is a way for power to consolidate itself in the present. In the previous examples, the future was used as a cudgel to ensure I obeyed. The power remained with the instructors. The teachers knew what was to come, and I did not. All I could do was listen and

obey or preemptively accept that I would fail next year. Such visions were, of course, nonsense. No one knows what the future will bring, even within the rigid confines of a Virginia elementary school subject to standardized testing. But relentlessly appealing to the future shaped my own ability as a learner to imagine what the next phase of my education could be. Even once I left school and began work, appeals to the future like this continued to be a part of my life. A new dean would start soon who might be hostile to your work, so best to act accordingly. Everything relies on the upcoming gubernatorial election, which will change the nature of our shared governance model. All roads lead to the future, so the present had better fall in line.

But the future is not a given. The 2024 protests over divestment and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank were a contest over institutional neutrality, as we have seen, but they were also a conflict over the future and to whom it belongs. The Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, made his narrative of the events clear when he visited Columbia University's campus during their local protests: "Today, Hamas issued an endorsement statement of the protestors on this campus. They called them the future leaders of America. It is detestable. All of this has to be said because the cherished traditions of this university are being overtaken right now by radical and extreme ideologies" (2024). Johnson's comments point to the political tension of the moment, but they also show the contested nature of educational futures. "Leaders of tomorrow," a phrase perhaps more familiar in the context of marketing campaigns or graduation speeches, here becomes a discursive tool with which to suppress dissent. Johnson attempts to control who is allowed to speak of tomorrow and who is permitted to exist in this imagined world.

Even as universities claim to shape the future, to offer a path for social mobility, and to create the leaders of tomorrow, their rhetoric often clings to a hyper-conservative narrative about the past. Johnson speaks of the "cherished traditions" of Columbia that are under attack. In other parts of the speech, Johnson further appeals to the past: "Throughout history, Columbia students have contributed to the great storybook of America's life and thought. [...] The founders and the great leaders who had come through this institution in the past believed in religious liberty" (2024). By appealing to institutional tradition, Johnson attempts to define the past, present, and future of learning spaces. In doing so, he

creates a narrative and a set of practices that calcify these histories and legitimates only particular futures for particular people.

The final chapter of this book turns towards tomorrow and the ways the term “future” is deployed by institutions and actors strategically for pedagogical and political ends. “This is not who we are” also became something of a refrain in 2024 for university presidents overseeing police crackdowns on students who argued, in response, “But this is who we could be.” Teachers and students are caught in the middle of these conflicts over the past, present, and futures of universities while others—administrators and politicians—lay claim to what the future of this work will look like. I have argued for teaching administrators to assert their own ability to push back against the embedded pedagogies at work in their institutional contexts. Our institutions can do better, and we can work to make them so. Our work is to advance a vision of the future other than the one that power at the top has laid out for us.

Teaching is fundamentally imaginative work, an attempt to guide students towards new versions of themselves that do not yet exist. What we are seeing at institutions across the world is a conflict over different futures, an attempt to embed within our learning spaces specific pedagogies that shape different kinds of worlds. In adrienne maree brown’s terms, teachers are caught up in an “imagination battle,” a contest over different understandings of what is possible: “We’re living inside of imaginations that other people told us were true and told us, this is how the world is” (2022). Throughout this text, I have argued that the digital humanities (DH) teaching administrator must see anew the forces shaping their work, and this is true more than ever in the struggle to imagine a better pedagogical tomorrow. Instructors can help their communities imagine more just, capacious, and enlivened teaching spaces alongside their students.

Teaching is hopeful work, imaginative labor. The final chapter of this book argues that no one has the right to define the future for a teaching and learning community besides that group itself. Imaginative work can feel abstract, however, and this chapter aims to offer concrete ways in which teaching administrators can understand and deploy the stakes of future-oriented work in the classroom. In some cases, that might look like helping students to connect their own imagined futures to their present lives. In others, this might take the shape of projects like *Stanford 2025*,

which advances a speculative vision for what the university might look like in the then-distant future. Throughout, I argue we can best shape our educational practices around the future by centering student voices and helping them to think critically about the limits of their own imagination.

The classroom is an engine that can create new futures, but it can only do so if we refuse the controlling effects of embedded pedagogies enacted by those hostile to education.

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Institutional pressures toward future-thinking have direct pedagogical impact on the classroom. Claims of futurity most directly arise in how they frame educational work as an intermediate step in the journey of one's life. The future is the ultimate goal. The present education is merely a preparatory moment. In a world of scarce resources, humanists, in particular, often feel the need to justify their worth and impact by noting how humanities majors will fit into students' long lives. Countless articles have been written on the value of an English degree, the lifelong skills it will provide, and the ways in which it will prove marketable. Humanities degrees do have value, of course. I myself have three. But it is worth examining how such future-oriented framing imposes unwanted pedagogies on our work.

DH practitioners often experience an inversion of the same pressure to justify their work in terms of job preparation. It is often taken for granted that DH experience will be useful, but the skills and experiences students obtain in DH courses are sometimes seen by critics as *too* transferrable. The field is regularly criticized in these terms for being too neoliberal, as well as for how it draws upon tools and methods associated with the software industry:

Rather than act in vocal opposition to the university's transformation, and to the forces driving it, the Digital Humanities social movement seeks to prove that a humanities education is beneficial to job seekers by reinventing that education as a course of training in the advanced use of information technology. It unavoidably also suggests that other approaches in the humanities fit less well into the contemporary university, because the implied measure of success is economic. (Allington et al. 2016)

In this reading, DH not only helps prepare students for the future, but it also dismantles the academic present in the process. To prepare for the future is hopelessly corrupt, an inexcusable attack on the life of the mind. As I argue in Chapter 3 of this book, such narratives ignore the labor structures already at work throughout academia. Even so, the longstanding critique of DH as neoliberal is not without some merit. DH offers skills to students that speak to a broad range of contexts, and they can certainly serve a corrosive purpose that instrumentalizes teachers and students. We should be careful to resist such cults of productivity and the grind culture that they represent. Too much focus on the future leaves the present a hollowed-out husk. But critiques that the field focuses too much on skill building and career preparation ignore the larger threats facing higher education.

Anxieties about the future and who owns it are at the core of higher education's present. When embedded pedagogies of futurity argue for or against careerist mentalities in the classroom, they do so out of an anxiety to safeguard their wellbeing and importance in the here and now. But such internal fighting over the purity or corruption of higher education also leaves it exposed to interests that are actively hostile to the project of education. Anxiety over the relevance of classes, majors, and degrees has been exploited by the entrepreneurial class who stand to make extraordinary amounts of money by selling solutions to educational problems while dismantling our institutions.

Big tech's aversion to higher education has been so well-documented as to become part of the industry's mystique. Mark Zuckerberg dropped out of college to found Facebook. Elon Musk thinks "college is overrated" (2024). Perhaps most relevant, since 2010, Peter Thiel has offered an annual fellowship of \$200,000 for young people to drop out of college because "some ideas can't wait" (The Thiel Foundation n.d.). In this formulation, college is not just a barrier. It actively harms important work that can only be done outside of the classroom. Despite this pervasive hostility, the technocratic class does have a vision for the future of higher education, and it is one in which they would fundamentally transform it on their own terms. As Henry Giroux argues, "the corporate world [...] would like to take advantage of the profits to be made in higher education, while simultaneously refashioning colleges and universities in the image of the new multiconglomerate landscape" (2002, 443). This

vision is one in which academic labor is disempowered, disorganized, and increasingly subject to the whims of the market. When Silicon Valley sells tools to preserve higher education's relevance—tools that will do nothing of the sort—they instead embed their own pedagogies in our teaching and learning spaces.

Writing about technological developments in winter 2026 feels like a fool's errand, as anything I say will doubtless be outdated by the time this gets printed. The pace of change is blistering. Most notably, advances in generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) have become inescapable for those of us working in higher education. GenAI typically refers to a cluster of related technologies built on large language models that, using vast amounts of training data and statistical modeling, can generate inferences about the most likely words to follow given a previous amount of context. Such things have been possible for decades, but OpenAI's release of ChatGPT in 2022 represented a massive leap forward in the technology. Now, given a user query, any number of GenAI chatbots can provide responses that are passably human and serve in a range of different domains. At their most innocuous, this process might generate shopping lists, emails, or unusual solutions for a given problem. At their most dangerous, the chatbots might generate legal briefs, military battle plans, disinformation, encouragement to commit suicide, or much more. It is more feasible than ever for anyone to experiment online with how the technology might intersect with all parts of their life, and no one wants to be left behind. Institutions of higher education are no exception, as their leaders view these developments as existential threats and financial opportunities. In March 2025, OpenAI announced that they would invest \$50 million in a research consortium aimed at promoting the use of GenAI in education (Palmer). The University of Florida's partnership with Nvidia included a \$50 million gift to the institution, and Arizona State University is collaborating with OpenAI to provide paid licenses for ChatGPT to faculty and staff (Burke 2025). The examples are numerous, and at present, institutions of higher learning are rushing to embrace the new technologies with an almost religious fervor. C. Edward Watson, the Vice President for Digital Innovation at the American Association of Colleges and Universities, sounds ominous in how he describes GenAI's inevitability: "I don't know how higher ed could not embrace AI literacy as a learning outcome, [...]. We can't not lean in to provide students with

the skills that we know they're now expected to have when they graduate" (quoted in Burke 2025). AI is the future, and for colleges to stay relevant they have to embrace the new wave of hype. As Marc Watkins puts it, "Universities simply don't want to be seen as lagging behind. Every institution that can want[s] to claim they're on the cutting edge, coherent strategy for AI integration be damned" (2025). The future, once again, is used as a tool to serve the ends of power in the present.

A fuller discussion of GenAI is out of the scope of this book.¹ In what follows, I will focus specifically on how narratives of GenAI's inevitability affect the ability of educators to imagine their own present and future in the classroom. After all, teachers and learners will be the ones left struggling with the results of the rapid push to adopt GenAI in the classroom. As argued by Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna (2025), the term "AI," even though it functions as a wrapper to describe various advances in machine learning, most often serves as a catch-all advertising tool, a magic bullet solution to any imaginable problem. The implementation of such a tool can have disastrous consequences. Bender and Hanna link AI to the long history of corporate profit via automation at the cost of the lives of laborers, and the pedagogical ramifications for education are already stark. Victoria Livingstone describes a dystopian encounter with GenAI and its fallout in the ominously titled article "I Quit Teaching Because of ChatGPT":

As a result, I found myself spending many hours grading writing that I knew was generated by AI. I noted where arguments were unsound. I pointed to weaknesses such as stylistic quirks that I knew to be common to ChatGPT (I noticed a sudden surge of phrases such as "delves into"). That is, I found myself spending more time giving feedback to AI than to my students. (2024)

1 For a more thorough critique of GenAI that centers the harms caused by the technology while refusing to ascribe to it apocalyptic powers, see Claudia Aradau and Mercedes Bunz's "Dismantling the Apparatus of Domination? Left Critiques of AI" (2022). Charles Logan's elaboration of a "luddite praxis" may also prove instructive, as he argues for a politics that questions and refuses GenAI literacies (2024). The Luddite Lab Resource Hub offers "resources for unions, labor organizations, and worker-organizers fighting AI and automation at work" (Distributed AI Research Institute 2026). The "AI Resist List" counteracts extractive, hyper-capitalist AI agendas with inspirational examples of thinkers and technologists who "center community, celebrate human agency, honor local context and history, and rejuvenate the planet" (Hao et al. 2026). I am deeply grateful to Matthew Kirschenbaum for pointing me to these resources.

The tools are already causing educators to leave the profession by forcing them to reckon with fundamentally different pedagogies than they would otherwise want to employ. The paragraph above is often-quoted, but I find Livingstone's description of the change in her students' attitude even more unsettling. She notes that her students understood all the risks, ethical implications, and drawbacks of GenAI. But they used it anyway: "Students must learn to move forward with faith in their own cognitive abilities as they write and revise their way into clarity. With few exceptions, my students were not willing to enter those uncomfortable spaces or remain there long enough to discover the revelatory power of writing" (2024). AI destabilizes labor in the classroom. Students no longer see the utility of classic tools like the essay, and this skepticism undermines the whole enterprise of teaching. Livingstone describes the existential crisis that led her to quit, but the costs are far deeper. She no longer trusts her students, and she cannot imagine a future without this shared sense of accountability.

The breach of trust between students and teachers is just one of the pedagogical crises caused by GenAI, though it might be the most salient for educators. As discussed by Bender and Hanna (2025), students actually are not cheating in greater numbers using GenAI, but instructors' concerns that this might be the case are leading to some alarming efforts. Anxiety about the future drives educational institutions to AI in the first place, and stress about GenAI plagiarism similarly means big money for companies like Proctorio and Turnitin, which offer educators a one-stop shop to assuage their concerns. If Paulo Freire's central metaphor for conservative education was the bank, a more appropriate one for the age of AI might be the prison. Jeffrey Moro defines "cop shit" in the classroom as "any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers" (2020). Caught between the pressure towards AI hype on the one side and the resultant anxiety on the other, educators run the real risk of being forced into the role of the prison guard, diligently safeguarding academic integrity against the criminal actions of students who can no longer be trusted. Educators find themselves in such a position, in part, because of the speed with which change is taking place. In a lengthy exchange, Pamela R. Lach and D. J. Hopkins describe how San Diego State University's shared governance model struggled to respond dexterously to a technological climate changing underneath their feet:

Lach: Well, I was just thinking about what we have done through shared governance mechanisms related to generative AI. So I chair our Senate Committee on Academic Policy and Planning.

Hopkins: I've heard of it.

Lach: You just so happen to be the former chair before me, but some of the things that we've done, so we've taken a very small and incremental approach, in part because we can't—there's no way to keep up with this pace of change, and so we started by thinking about AI in a context of plagiarism. And then when we added the uncited use of generative AI to the plagiarism policy, we then realized a year later we would have to also require faculty to have some sort of statement of appropriate use in their syllabi. And that use could range from it is never allowed to it is always allowed, or it depends on the assignment. It doesn't matter what they say, they just had to say something, because it was very confusing to our students, who were given an SDSU branded chat bot, and then told in some cases they couldn't use it, and others they could, and in some cases they didn't know.

Hopkins: Right. As friend of the pod, Zach Justice wrote shortly after the CSU launched ChatGPT edu, whether or not a fact, an individual faculty member might assign generative AI for a particular course, the very fact that the entire university system has given it to all our students is a tacit green light to use.

Lach: Right, it's a lot of mixed messages. (2026, 20:53)

In Chapter 3, I argued for slowing down the pace of academic life. Here technocratic influences employ speed as a tactic to render resistance untenable. The pace of change is deliberately disorienting and anxiety producing. Accordingly, concern about the future, again, drives institutions in the present to force their institutions to adopt specific teaching roles and practices they might not otherwise care to use. Powerful influences are using anxiety about the future to embed their own pedagogies of power in our institutions. They tell us that the future will look a certain way. They pay lip service to individual choice while dictating the horizon of possibility.

We are at a critical juncture in the history of technology's role in education. We are being told that the future is inevitable. Sarah Morris argues that such narratives serve strategic purposes to sideline critique and resistance: "A prevailing sentiment seems to be that AI is here, it is

not going anywhere, and everyone must adapt themselves to this new AI-driven reality. This sort of narrative can dissuade questioning, both through more overt prohibitions and through more subtle implications about futility (if AI is inevitable, then what use is it complaining or questioning?) and progress (if you question progress does that mean you are somehow backwards?)” (2026). But AI is not the only possible future for teaching, and teachers and learners are not powerless to change the future. In part, my decision not to turn this whole chapter or this whole book into one about AI is a strategic choice to refuse the totalizing vision of the future where GenAI dictates the terms of teaching. There is another way, and it does not lie in mercenary careerism, in AI, or in cop shit. The problem with embedded pedagogies of futurity is not forward thinking as such. Rather, it lies in how institutions use the idea of the future to shape particular kinds of futures for themselves while they work hand in glove with external forces that seek to destroy them. The future can be a tool for power to collect itself and resist institutional change. But imaginative visions of the future can serve other ends. Instructors must reclaim the future for themselves and offer alternative, grassroots versions that are more inclusive, more equitable, and more just.

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The book thus far has called for teaching administrators to recognize the pedagogical forces that their institutions marshal against them. Each other chapter has been framed around a binary: specious knowability vs transparency, neutrality vs commitment, and intellectualism vs embodiment. By seeing the effects of institutional pedagogies for what they are, I have argued that teaching administrators can begin to effect real change in the present. Undergirding all of these discussions is a belief in the power of teaching to imagine new possibilities, new futures for the work that we do, and it is to this discussion of a future-oriented pedagogy that I now turn. In doing so, however, I do not offer a new binary. The solution to higher education’s persistent push towards particular futures is not to retreat into the past. Indeed, doing so paves the way for far-right political actors and technocratic oligarchs to embed their own corrosive pedagogies in our institutions. Instead, I argue for developing alternative, parallel and intersecting visions of the future. In

opposition to the institutional pressures towards toxic futures built from the top down, I argue that we must embed grassroots imaginations in our pedagogies. In and out of the classroom, the teaching administrator can enact a future-oriented pedagogy that allows students to see new futures for themselves and for their universities.

Digital humanists are especially well-equipped to architect these speculative timelines, as noted in André Carrington's editorial headnote to the "futures" keyword in *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities*: "Rather than preparing students to experience progress on terms that are not of their own making, educational strategies that employ technology to interrogate the unmet needs of the present enable students to reinvent the means and ends of learning in accordance with the futures they want to create" (2020). Digital humanists can subvert the conservative attempt to narrow the future to a single, inevitable point by working with students to design alternatives. Tomorrow is not fixed. I offer a vision for the teacher who prefers not to act as a prison guard but, instead, aims to work *with* students to preserve the classroom as a radical space of possibility. Institutional power resists giving students the space to shape their futures. I argue for a practice of teaching and learning that meets these challenges by offering an imaginative vision of the future while remaining radically situated in the present struggle. I conclude by reflecting on teachers' ability to shape the narrative imagination of the communities they work within and alongside.

One way that teaching administrators can help challenge institutional narratives about what is to come is by offering alternative pathways for their students as they seek to shape their own futures. I draw upon my own experiences as Head of Student Programs in a DH center to frame the impact that staff can have on the possible futures students see before them. Students in a moribund academic job market are hungry for experiences, training, and community that can help them see alternative possibilities for their lives. There are myriad examples of these alternative pathways—so many, in fact, that the "alt-ac" career has become less an alternative and more the norm. Starting first with a discussion of professional development activities staff can carry out on an individual basis, I then bring into focus networks of professionals working on a broad scale to change how we prepare students for a range of careers. In doing so, I tie together the many administrative lessons of the book into a reading

of professional development as a pedagogical act. By bringing students into the lives of those who work in the university, we teach them how to envision different futures for themselves and for their institutions.

Having argued throughout the book for an expanded view of teaching, pedagogy, and the spaces in which they both thrive, I conclude by focusing on the small ways in which DH educators can offer students transformational experiences. Drawing on the work of design thinking and speculative pedagogical studies, I suggest that we turn to imagination as an engine for building a better institution. My final classroom example suggests that speculative digital projects that ask students to imagine alternative university futures have real-world impact in the here and now. As a case study, I examine *Stanford 2025*, a 2014 speculative design project that conveyed a grassroots vision for Stanford's then-distant future. Student projects like this argue for alternative conceptions of the university's many possibilities as they critique the present, even if this vision ultimately proves limited in its ability to conceive of a world outside the grip of technology and capital.

The chapter ends, thus, by looking to the power of teachers and learners to shape alternative visions of their own educational future. In the face of large, inscrutable organizations that exert their own pedagogies on our work, it can be easy for educators to lose faith in the power of their craft to push back. Teaching in the modern university can often require one to inhabit uncomfortable positions of instability and ambiguity, but I have argued that teaching administrators can embrace these uncertainties and marshal them towards institutional change. The first step in doing so is to imagine that a better pedagogy can exist.

Professional Development and Imagination

Throughout this book, I have argued for transformative pedagogies that draw in our students to co-create more just institutions together. Key to this framework is what Bethany Nowviskie has described as "a feminist ethic of care," one that "seeks instead to illuminate the relationships of small components, one to another, within great systems" (2019). The lives and labor of teachers and learners are all interconnected. Even as we work in radical solidarity with our students, though, we cannot paper over the power differentials that exist in the academy. No matter how transformative

our teaching, our students' institutional positions will fundamentally differ from our own. As I have argued throughout this text, teaching administrators can leverage such differences to the benefit of their students. Our institutions often suggest one kind of future for our learners, and those narratives can feel quite powerful. But our work is uniquely positioned to help our students craft their own visions of what their lives can be.

Throughout this text I have described people in positions like mine as teaching administrators, a term that aims to describe our work in intersecting roles that might otherwise seem separate. More typically, careers like these might be termed alternative academic, or "alt-ac." Some take issue with the term alt-ac for the ways it might seem to frame these careers as secondary to a primary model, the tenure track faculty position. But according to Nowviskie, the term's real resonance is meant to be speculative: "By 'alt-ac,' a growing community speaks not of 'alternatives to academic employment,' but rather of 'alternative academics'—'alt-academics,' that is, in the way that alt-country music has a bit of rockabilly and folk mixed in—or old Usenet discussion groups would signal a fringe twist on their subject-matter with an '*alt.*' preface" (2012b). In this mode, the alt-ac teaching administrator offers both an example of a viable career path as well as a new vision for what academia can be. Alt-ac labor is imagination work. While the rhetorical framing of this speculative power sometimes can tend towards the fantastical,² it is worth taking seriously how we can harness our speculative power for the good of our students.

With some notable exceptions, graduate degree programs still tend to operate as siloed training grounds for a handful of guild-like profession. The Master of Library Science or Master of Library and Information Science are typical terminal degrees for a librarian, and the PhD is the typical degree path for a faculty member. But alt-ac careers tend to exist outside typical degree-granting structures and only intersect with them in confusing ways. Graduate school is filled with important deadlines and administrative hurdles, and students looking to prepare for professions outside of the perceived pipeline towards a tenure-track professorship often must weigh these needs against more immediate departmental guidelines. As such, students frequently come to DH professional development too late. The result is often a student emerging in their final months on the

2 See "Please Don't Call Me a Miracle Worker" (Morgan 2017).

job market with a dissertation nearly in hand, panicking about the future, with little time to prepare a profile that could allow them to be competitive for DH careers. The moment feels like a disaster to these students, and the sympathetic teaching administrator can only do so much.

In such professional development conversations, a student and a mentor confront a system that fundamentally does not work. Accordingly, I propose we adapt a version of Steven J. Jackson's "broken world theory" to graduate professional development. Jackson's theory proposes we reframe our relationship to technology: "It asks what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points in thinking about the nature, use, and effects of information technology and new media" (2014). For Jackson, this new conception places repair and maintenance as the activating verbs for working through and in the world. Mark Sample riffs on Jackson by reframing the idea of the black box, typically seen as an artifact of disastrous pasts, instead as an opportunity for a "speculative care," a kind of "compassionate imagination that seeks to understand and care for the future, now, before it is broken, busted, wrecked, or beyond repair" (2019). In a related move, Stephen Siperstein has developed a concept of "broken world teaching" that "aim[s] to help students cultivate the skills and resilience necessary for working with brokenness—their own and the world's" (2021). For Sample and Siperstein both, Jackson's broken world offers a lens through which to reframe one's life and work in history.

Siperstein specifically writes in the context of climate change. He movingly describes students' discussions of their own futures in a world of ongoing climate disaster. Applying this theoretical framework to the context of graduate professional development in academia means recognizing that students who confront their own future in the face of a system that has not prepared them for it keenly feel the moment as one of apocalypse and existential crisis. Students in these positions might have thought about the years ahead, but they only have done so within a narrow scope of what they might look like. Students in these positions often have not seriously considered the kinds of careers they might inhabit beyond the tenure track. They also typically have held the future at a remove, sometimes at the advice of faculty mentors who operate under well-meaning but outdated conceptions of an academic job market where there are enough jobs for every graduating PhD.

Even students earlier in their graduate degrees and further from the job market sense that the world fundamentally does not function as advertised. This pervasive sense of gloom acts as a veil through which they see all their work, and it has real pedagogical consequences.

The teaching administrator is uniquely positioned to adapt broken-world teaching to the context of graduate professional development. We regularly engage in cross-disciplinary conversations about longevity, systems care, and sustainability. We are the maintainers.³ We typically carry institutional knowledge, given that we tend to remain in place longer than students who must, by definition, move on. Teaching administrators can help bring the future into students' present, to make it alive for them in new ways. Institutional narratives about futurity that tend towards careerist, capitalist ends are not inevitable. Instead, we can help students to find their own way through the shattered promises of academia by using creative, speculative exercises that restore the sense of imagination to the professional development process. By embedding students in communities of care drawn from across institutional positions, we can help to build up alternative networks of support and solidarity outside departmental silos.

###

One of the most profound interventions an alt-ac teaching administrator can offer to students is simply to share their own personal career journey. The *#alt-academy* collection (MediaCommons 2014), to offer one notable example, shares a range of reflections by alt-ac professionals on their careers and how they came to work in these spaces. In the introduction to the collection, Bethany Nowviskie presciently notes how the contributors to the volume represent a new generation of practitioners as well as a new future for the academy, "harbingers of things (we know not what) to come" (2011). For Nowviskie, the work looks back on personal trajectories as much as it does help others project forward to unknown professional futures. Alt-ac professional development is imaginative work.

Speaking in Code was an event funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities that similarly aimed to share tacit knowledge related

3 See "Maintainers" (The Maintainers 2025).

to DH development, its intellectual nature, and the barriers one might find to joining the work (Scholars' Lab 2013c). But perhaps the most widely cited element of the project comes in the form of a series of origin stories that give readers a glimpse into the personal histories of their authors (Scholars' Lab 2013a). While some of the participants do describe early precocious childhoods spent programming on their graphing calculators, the bulk of the stories encourage readers to seize their ability to craft new futures for themselves regardless of their background. Nowvieskie contributes her own story and writes "You know more than you can comfortably say" (2013). Bill Turkel advises readers that "you don't have to justify anything" (2013). Rather than tie professional development to a particular set of skills or credentials, comments like these invite individuals to chart their own course outside of institutional structures that might inhibit them.

Of the many contributors, Amanda Wyatt Visconti most cannily links the origin story genre to the imaginative work newcomers must do for themselves: "I don't have a great general answer to how a person gets started in DH dev, because it all depends on why you want to learn: ask yourself what you want to see exist, and work backwards" (2013). Visconti points to the inherent paradoxes in life writing. An origin story writes about the past retrospectively from the future, as though you will be able to give a full account that makes sense of the life. As *Tristram Shandy* teaches us, though, autobiographical writing can never quite reach the present moment of writing, as the present keeps providing new material to document. Endings will always be arbitrary and provisional. Visconti advises readers to run towards these challenges by likening the process of writing one's own narrative—and looking to the lives of others for guidance—more to science fiction than to memoir.

It is easy to think of school as a pipeline with a straightforward path towards a career. But this feeling, however much it might be reinforced by institutions and mentors, is specious: academic careers exist in fewer and fewer numbers each year. Teaching administrators can help students to see their educations instead as spaces of possibility. One activity for doing so I call "The Speculative CV." This exercise takes the very documents that normally order students' lives into tidy narratives and instead uses them as tools to explore many imagined worlds.

“The Speculative CV”

Duration: 60 minutes

Pre-work: Provide students with preliminary materials to read in advance, including at least a few job position descriptions and sample CVs. *The Academic Job Market Support Network* (2020) is a robust resource for finding such materials.

Prompt: “Our understandings of future careers are often limited by where we are in the present. But we cannot know what the future will bring. This activity asks you to imagine yourself in the future as extravagantly successful, writing a letter back to yourself in the past about how far you have come.”

Lesson Plan

1. Brainstorming (10 minutes):

- Ask students to analyze the pre-circulated materials. Make time for both emotional responses as well as informational concerns.
 - What parts of the jobs would bring them joy?
 - What feels overwhelming?
 - What questions do they have about new terms?

2. Speculation (20 minutes):

- Ask students to answer the following prompts:
 - “It is 10 years in the future, and you work in the perfect job for you. You have never been happier. While cleaning out a drawer, you find the original job ad you applied to. What does it say? What qualifications does it ask for?”
 - “After musing wistfully on the ad for a few moments, you set it aside and find the CV you used to apply for it. What does it look like? What person does it describe? What skills and experiences does it list?”

3. Discussion (30 minutes):

- During this time, ask students to reflect on the future they have imagined for themselves:
 - What feels out of reach?
 - What barriers do they see in the present to bring that future self and the present one together?
 - What concrete plans can they make for becoming that person in the coming months?

Students thinking about making the leap into an alt-ac career often need help imagining what that future can look like outside of the framework their standard disciplinary graduate program has provided for them. Origin stories offer one powerful avenue for showing them what is possible, but “The Speculative CV” can close the circle by allowing them to make the imaginative connections for themselves.

Activities like the “The Speculative CV” can help students spin out imagined futures for themselves regardless of institutional pressures. “The Speculative CV” does run the risk of crossing into utopian thinking, of presenting a world in which the students can get any job they want if they have just the right set of qualifications. One way to counteract this tendency is by drawing inspiration from Quinn Daedal’s *DH RPG* (2020b). Built on the original Star Wars D6 role-playing game, Daedal’s game asks students in a semester-long course to play out the lifecycle of a digital project after adopting fictional roles from across the institution (2020a). In doing so, Daedal’s students grapple with professional development questions separate from the vocational awe associated with the life of the mind: “the simulation showed students that individual priorities, social and financial context, and even personal preferences not only can but should play an integral part in the decision of what type of job they seek” (Backman et al. 2024). Combining this role-playing spirit with the resonances of broken-world teaching, we might introduce provocations during the final stage of “The Speculative CV” to encourage students to live among the failures and unexpected life circumstances that can derail a career. How would their future self adapt? How would they move on and thrive? Raising these conversations in a fictional scenario can offer important space for conversations about careers, belonging, and identity that might otherwise feel terrifying in reality.

It should be emphasized how challenging this work can be for facilitators. Conversations about student futures, particularly in the current political moment and given the current state of high education, can easily become overwhelming for all members of the conversation. This emotional labor takes a toll, as an earnest commitment to helping students navigating uncertain futures entails, to a degree, living those futures with them. One could argue that this work should not be the responsibility of teachers or, indeed, of staff, but such an approach would not eliminate the emotional work; it would only deny its existence. Paige

Morgan notes that emotional labor cannot be avoided, and argues instead for proactively acknowledging its existence, reframing it, and negotiating its shape with collaborators: “Emotional labor is not going away. The real question is what it will become” (2016). Patricia Jennings’ work on burnout in the classroom suggests that all teachers require training in emotional resilience to withstand the emotional work that comes with mentoring (2020). My own suggestion is to foreground the emotional labor involved in working with students to imagine their own futures and to do so in the conversations with students themselves. This helps reframe the discussion in a way that makes invisible burdens legible for students and can allow teaching administrators to establish boundaries. Furthermore, such open, emotionally vulnerable discussions could prove cathartic for the mentors themselves. When discussing library staff, for example, Jade Geary and Brittany Hickey note that “an overwhelming percentage of librarians experience burnout. [...] Librarians need to be able to openly discuss burnout and know that they are not alone in dealing with it” (2019). By discussing the emotional burden of educational work and the pains it can cause with students, teachers honor the truth of their shared realities working within unjust institutions. While such conversations must be approached with care, when done well they can help students and teachers find solidarity with one another.

###

The imaginative professional development I have offered so far focuses on individuals charting out their own careers. These interventions can be transformative for specific students, but they might feel like a poor fit for a book on the embedded pedagogies of institutions, which operate on a much larger scale. Indeed, in “Against Mentoring,” Elizabeth Losh argues for a move away from individual mentors and towards collective, distributed bodies of care (2018). Such a move would share the burden of empowering students and early-career scholars by connecting them to a feminist community of support. But these networks of reform are inseparable from the individuals who serve as nodes in the broader constellation. “The Speculative CV,” for example, draws inspiration from Hannah Alpert-Abrams’ *Finding Your Purpose* workbook (2022), which offers a range of activities for higher education workers to meditate on,

reimagine, and discover anew their relationship to their labor. This work is deeply personal but not isolated. Extensive segments on “Lineage” and “Community” invite the reader to see their own imaginative work in dialogue with a range of found families. Honoring such inspiration is both a way to draw strength from the example of others as well as an attempt to extend the broader web. Sustainable futures require a networked interplay between individuals and communities of care.

These networks of care can offer alternative found communities at the same time that they shape new ways of understanding the spaces in which we work and live. In discussing the future of higher education in the digital age, Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg offer the term “mobilizing networks” as an alternative way of understanding what we might otherwise call an institution. Institutions can feel fixed and established, but the mobilizing network underscores the functions of the organization, how they “aggregate, coordinate, disperse, balance, and adjudicate complex flows of resources” (2010, 129). They go on to note the reciprocal nature of this work: “Institutions are mobilizing networks. At the same time, we must use our networks to mobilize our institutions” (2010, 143). This formulation is useful for the ways in which it exposes the agency of the nodes in the network. If we understand our institutions as mobilizing networks, teachers and learners are not passive recipients of the embedded pedagogies at work around them but can actively work to reshape them.

The idea of the mobilizing network also offers a pivot towards the ways teachers and learners can create their own institutions, alternative networks of support that transcend local boundaries. The Visionary Futures Collective (VFC) emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as one such response to the ways its members felt abandoned by their institutions. Amanda Henrichs describes the group’s formation as an attempt to reclaim a sense of ownership over the future:

In an effort to counter the crisis thinking endemic to academia—and which is particularly strong in the humanities—members Hannah Alpert-Abrams and Brian DeGrazia came up with our name to foreground the possible liberatory and visionary futures that could be created out of this moment of crisis. In other words, we in the VFC want to imagine what we can build when everything is falling apart. (2020)

The group encapsulates a number of the principles that this book has tried to outline. The first VFC projects spoke to their present crisis by

countering the inscrutability of university practices with transparency: *#CovidCampus* (n.d.-a) and *The COVID-19 Response Tracker* (2021) both document a range of institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that can be difficult to see from the outside. The VFC offers a range of values statements on their project site: “We are constantly learning new ways to enable change, but this group focuses on increasing transparency in higher education; creating compassionate communities through shared vulnerability; and working collectively to shift institutional practices” (n.d.-b). The VFC comprises members from a range of institutional positions: students, staff, faculty, and non-academics. The group offers a model for breaking free of the embedded pedagogies at one’s home institution entirely, imagining new futures outside institutional walls that can nonetheless be brought back to effect real local change.

Another example of the activating power of networks that cut across institutions is the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC), billed on their website as “the world’s first and oldest academic social network” (n.d.). Despite this description, the organization serves a range of purposes for its members that deepen digital connection, providing mentorship, an annual conference, and resources. I first knew the group through its HASTAC Scholars program, which offers selected graduate student cohorts recognition and professional development opportunities. Perhaps most saliently, as described by Davidson, “The HASTAC network often provides individuals who are isolated, marginalized, sometimes even under-appreciated within their departments or institutions access to a distributed community” (2010, 149). Opportunities like these allow students to link themselves to a broad web of care outside their institution even as the program encourages students to tie themselves back to their local DH context.

Looking outside one’s local support networks can offer inspiration as well as community. This is as true for administrators looking to shape new programs as it is for the students that enroll in them. Growing out of a 2012–2013 Scholarly Communication Institute on graduate education, *The Praxis Network* offers a snapshot in time of eight different programs working in various contexts (Scholars’ Lab 2013b), all with a shared commitment to rethinking humanities education and training. Just as *Speaking in Code* provided individual origin stories as a means of offering students alternative paths into DH, *The Praxis Network* provides the equivalent of institutional origin stories for teaching administrators

looking to reshape their work. The site puts forward many models for how project-based learning can be incorporated into methodological training for humanists. By comparing program missions, infrastructure, logistics, and more, the site operates with the assumption that transparency about program development can serve as a useful resource for others.

Real community requires ongoing work to develop and sustain. It can be easy to feel as though that labor belongs to someone else, someone with a bigger title or more security. But we all have something to give, teaching administrators especially. Teaching administrators are well positioned to mentor students in a range of careers, and HASTAC recognizes this; as a condition for applying to the HASTAC Scholars program, students must identify a mentor for the terms of their fellowship, and this mentor can be faculty or staff. Even so, staff might experience some pushback when it comes to providing this work from those who would prefer graduate school be a pipeline to a specific career. The aversion might also be internal. Teaching administrators might feel ill-equipped to give career advice and professional mentorship. We all have something to share, though, and students often intuit this fact. No person can advise on every possible career. Well-meaning faculty mentors might find themselves unprepared to provide advice on career alternatives to faculty positions through no fault of their own; even if they wanted to do so, it can be difficult to guide job applicants to positions for which you have never competed. Students might also feel uncomfortable asking for advice on alternative careers from those very same faculty mentors on whom they will rely for academic letters of reference. In short, alt-ac staff might be a valuable, untapped resource for students seeking professional development in a range of careers in and out of the academy. Students will be best served if we engage the imaginations of a range of allies as they envision their own futures.

Toward a Better Tomorrow, Together

Institutions purport to look forward, but their inertia often leads them backward. Conservative visions of the future that protect institutional traditions safeguard power at the top and limit control over the narratives about tomorrow. Teaching administrators and their students can and must reclaim narratives around the futures of their own institutions,

what they can be, and who they serve. One of the most notable examples of this work is *Stanford 2025* (@Stanford Project 2014), a radical attempt by students, staff, and partners to imagine into existence a new future for their own institution. The project frames itself as a retrospective from the year 2100 looking back on a series of transformations that occurred around the year 2025: “These possible shifts were shared as provocations—a subjective, student-centered imagining of what could happen as the future unfolds” (2014). The students envision four such changes, framed as moments when Stanford was forced to respond to a changing sense of what the future would look like. In this world, the students imagined that Stanford

- brought an end to a society of alumni in favor of lifetime learning;
- abolished the class year and embraced adaptive learning;
- flipped the axes of knowledge and competency; and
- students began declaring missions, not majors (2014).

The project is remarkable for its work inviting students to imagine the future of their own institution. As Edward J. Maloney and Joshua Kim describe it, “*Stanford 2025* was impactful because it represents a rare instance of a group within a university (but outside the formal field of education ... in this case the d.school) applying its methodologies and tools to study its own environment” (2019). In the contest over whose voices can shape the future of the university, *Stanford 2025* brings students into the conversation. When given this space, the students in this group offer a utopian vision of the university’s role in the world, ever-present, well-meaning, and preparing students for new careers. The imagined transformations all offer a sense of Stanford as rethinking the limitations of its mission in favor of an educational project that is expansive and inclusive.

Five years later, Stanford released a follow-up to the project entitled, *Uncharted Territory: A Guide to Reimagining Higher Education* (Maloney and Kim 2019). The original *Stanford 2025* project envisioned a distant future, but the second iteration of the project looks to the present, reflecting on how the landscape of higher education had changed in the five years between the two releases. In *Uncharted Territory*, the authors discuss their view of education in 2019 as one of continued disruption and experimentation:

Over the past five years, the higher education landscape has continued to shift and further innovations have spread. Colleges and universities are experimenting with blended online and in-person classes, finding new ways to reduce costs for students and fund the enterprise, and more schools are expanding the definition of a 'student' to include adult, first-gen, part-time, and more. New disruptors have emerged: third-party education providers, funders, education technology companies, and start-up colleges and universities are now part of the sector. (5–6)

Uncharted Territory goes on to offer a series of case studies that they see as the “bold visionaries” currently at work in higher education responding to these disruptive forces. These twelve institutional profiles extend the same vision as outlined in the original *Stanford 2025* project, one in which higher education is becoming more affordable, more inclusive, and less limited by traditional institutional structures.

I previously compared life writing and origin stories to speculative fiction because they impose an illusion of linearity on things that are anything but straightforward. *Uncharted Territory* similarly offers a vision of lifelong education, one graphically represented by loops and curls rather than straightforward lines (see Fig. 11).



Fig. 11 Page 15 of *Uncharted Territory*, which offers a visual representation of the start and end of one's education. Shana Parkes and the Stanford 2025 Team (2019), <https://dschool.stanford.edu/stories/reimagining-higher-education-the-stanford-2025-project>, CC BY.

My point of comparison for the origin stories in *Speaking in Code* was *Tristram Shandy*, a fictional autobiography that challenges the idea that one could ever finish writing one's whole life. The visual representation of lifelong education offered by *Uncharted Territory* vibrates with this connection as well. *Tristram Shandy* offers its own graphic representations for the difficulties of constructing a life, and the resulting illustrations of the life writing process are anything but linear (see Fig. 12).

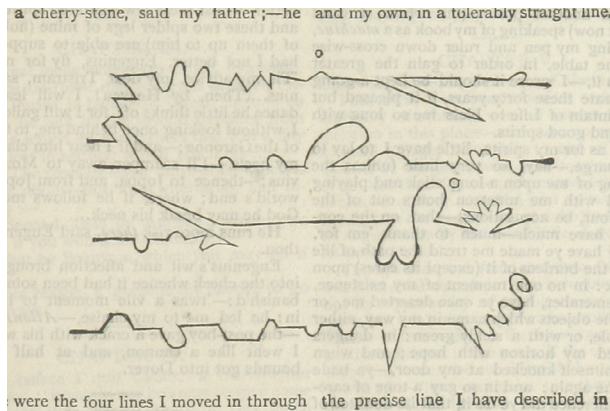


Fig. 12 Plot lines drawn by the narrator of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* to represent the twisted practice of life writing. Photo by the British Library (1884), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/11091967476>, public domain.

Uncharted Territory offers a vision for lifelong education that, like the frustrated narration of *Tristram Shandy*, curls back in upon itself in unexpected ways. Instead of neat, semester-long chunks meted out over the course of four years, transformative learning can happen at any time. Life writing, like a life, is not linear but instead filled with reversals, leaps forward, and arrested development. *Stanford 2025* wisely determines that life is long, and education must be flexible enough to match.

Uncharted Territory frames itself as a travel guide, and the design of the text mimics that of travel documents and immigration materials (see Fig. 13). The publication includes cartoon globes, flight paths, stamps, and other markers of an educational journey that is spatial as well as existential. We start in one place and end up somewhere quite different.

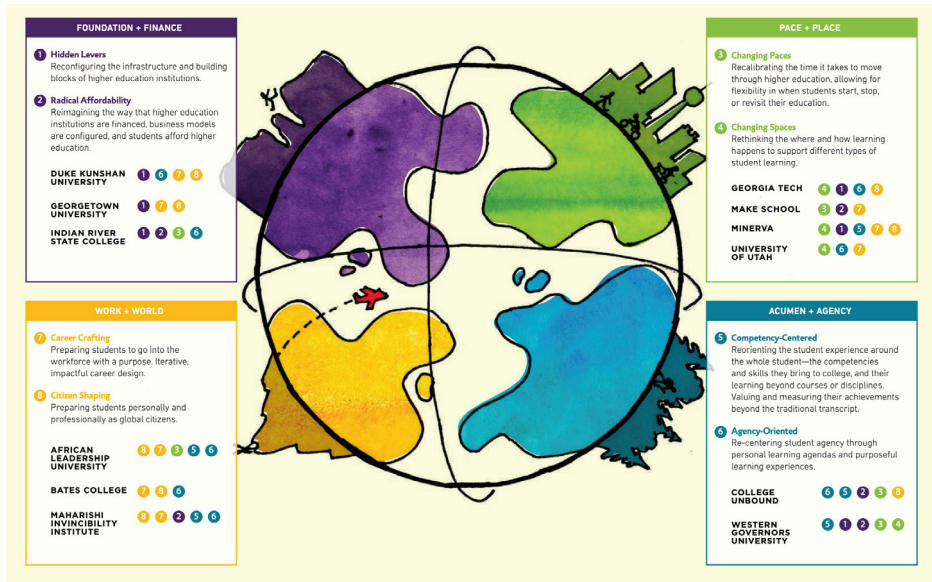


Fig. 13 Page 52–53 of the guidebook, which explores innovation in higher education institutions across the globe by mapping institutions onto eight trends. Shana Parkes and the Stanford 2025 Team (2019), <https://dschool.stanford.edu/stories/reimagining-higher-education-the-stanford-2025-project>, CC BY.

The project links this design choice to the educational power of encountering the unknown: “We often find that our best inspiration comes from encounters with the unfamiliar, like visiting a foreign country. We gain inspiration from analogous situations that bear relationship to our own, but are different enough to provoke new thinking” (9). The design move implies that one would bring back the experiences and lessons learned from travel to the home and enrich the local educational experience. At the same time, it also usefully provides an opening for critiquing the vision offered by the project. After all, not everyone can travel, and the destination remains foreign, only known in a limited way. Even as the project seeks to elevate the work of educational innovators, the design concept keeps them at a remove, embedded in a tourist economy that only permits certain actors to know their work in specific ways. The project centers student imaginations to navigate the relationship between the present and the future, but this vision is still limited by structures of power and economy.

In the actual year 2026, the vision of education's future in *Stanford 2025* has not come to pass. But, as I write this text in the present moment, *Stanford 2025* cannot help but inadvertently draw comparisons to Project 2025, the conservative blueprint for the second Trump administration's plans to dismantle the federal government and reshape American culture. On the one hand, the titular comparison is coincidental and unintended. At the same time, though, *Stanford 2025* does share certain rhetorical similarities with the broader context that gave rise to this conservative agenda. *Stanford 2025* is shot through with words like "innovation," "disruption," and "experimentation"—the very language that Silicon Valley uses to describe its own radical approach to technological intervention to life, to the government, and to teaching and learning. Silicon Valley also has an outsized presence in Project 2025 and the second Trump administration, most notably through Elon Musk's use of the US Digital Service, rebranded as the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), to programmatically cancel contracts, slash programs, and fire civil servants. Furthermore, Peter Thiel, noted anti-college advocate, has a well-documented relationship with Vice President JD Vance. As described by Matthew Kirschenbaum, the rhetoric of Silicon Valley becomes a discursive weapon used to act with impunity: "'AI' has undoubtedly been handed down as an actual talking point, a ready-to-hand response which GOPers can reach for when questioned. Asked about how the public will continue to benefit from important government functions? The answer is AI!" (2025). But this language game has real-world effects for education. DOGE has canceled close to a billion dollars in educational contracts and the group has played a role in the Department of Education's plan to lay off 50% of their staff (Epstein and Hayes 2025).

Let me be clear: *Stanford 2025* is an exceptional and inspiring project. My critiques of it should be handled with care. After all, it was produced substantially by students, and these voices need amplifying now more than ever. All the same, *Stanford 2025* exposes the powerful forces trying to shape the way that teachers and learners imagine their shared futures, forces to which teaching administrators are as vulnerable as the students in our classrooms. As Andrea Baer points out, rhetorical similarities like the ones I point out above have infected the highest reaches of the academic establishment. University leaders themselves discuss a

future for higher education in terms that mirror those of conservative politicians and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs:

What is perhaps more striking is the similarity between the White House's rhetoric and that of many educators in universities and academic libraries. Can the difficulty of distinguishing between the dominant AI rhetoric in higher education and that from political leaders who have explicitly named universities as the enemy be a wake-up call for people in higher education and in libraries, a message that we need to give more weight to the ethical concerns surrounding GenAI technologies? (Baer 2025)

We should be alarmed when academic pronouncements about the future of education cleave so closely to those who would see it destroyed. Technocratic forces so often push agendas that, far from being neutral, reflect far right politics that aim to diminish, censor, and subdue.⁴ We should be chilled when our students reflect this same rhetoric back to us. It is easy to look at such student visions of the future as quaint, to see their failures with the benefit of hindsight, but the truth is that the imagination of *Stanford 2025* is most limited by a feeling of inevitability. The project contends with a present disrupted by technology, but it sees the results as moving inexorably towards a techno-utopian future where technology works to the betterment of teaching and learning.

Bryan Alexander, a self-described Futurist, approaches the question of institutional futures in much the same way as *Stanford 2025*. Alexander looks at patterns in areas like enrollment, technological use, and academic labor and projects them into the coming years, spinning out a range of potential futures for higher education.⁵ This speculative exercise has its uses, as it connects visions of tomorrow to on the ground concerns of today. Alexander's method allows us to consider the practical implications of disruptive forces in our present and how they—and we—might shape the future. At the same time, however, projecting forward purely based on what we can observe now risks approaching the ends of higher education as a foregone conclusion. There is little sense in which the future remains a space open to voices from below,

4 See the suite of executive orders signed by President Trump that aim to “achieve global dominance in artificial intelligence,” “[prevent] woke AI in the federal government,” and “promote the export of the American AI Technology Stack” (National Artificial Intelligence Initiative Office 2025). The vision of the future here is one in which global empire is reinforced by and delivered through technology.

5 See *Academia Next* (2022).

little sense in which the individual educator can intervene in the vision of the future. One can only ride the waves of historical forces that far exceed the powers of any individual actors. DOGE and company are all too happy to agree that the future belongs to them, to overpower those quiet voices struggling to break through and be heard in chorus. In the ideal world of those in power, technological change is here, and we have no choice but to reckon with it and give power over to them.

In reality, the future of higher education is more uncertain than ever, precisely because of technological interventions in teaching and learning, the very framework with which *Stanford 2025* constructs their vision. While it would be easy to take *Stanford 2025*'s failure to predict the effects of its sociopolitical context on the future as an indictment of future projection more generally, it actually shows the need to think more expansively. We need more views of the future, not fewer. We need more ways to re-envision the future of education from below, separate from the powers that would lay claim to that future work as theirs and theirs alone. The future is not fixed, nor is it owned by one actor. Let us teach our way forward.

###

As we are seeing, Musk, DOGE, and other technocrats would design a future that decimates all who stand in their way. In part, they do so by consolidating the power over such forecasting into their own hands, limiting the ability of others to imagine worlds without their influence. Howard Rheingold frames the problem as a kind of ignorance by design: "Are we awake to the world we're building, or are we, as an old Sufi saying goes, merely asleep in life's waiting room?" (2020). For Rheingold, the technological push to create, innovate, and reshape our world casts only an anemic eye to the future; it does not produce the critical mindset with which to understand the nature of the world that is taking shape.

Instead, and as a final counter to institutional narratives around futurity, I propose we look elsewhere for visions of future making, beyond Silicon Valley narratives of technological determinism. Educators must seize on the imaginative power of our labor to enable other voices to speak their dreams into being. We must seek alternative frames for future making and use their inspiration for the classroom. One example comes from Bryan Carter, who brings together DH pedagogy and Afrofuturism to develop

what he calls Digital Africana Studies. His framing “encourages students to question and oppose colonial and hierarchical epistemologies and the privilege of Western European and Anglo-centric knowledge structures” (2022, 61). The infrastructure for the future that Carter describes requires many voices beyond those typically privileged:

Given the complexity of the technical challenges facing humanity, recognizing and understanding the importance of different perspectives is crucial for shaping inclusive future technological solutions and responses. Inclusive here means much more than including minoritized groups in the decision making. This is merely a start. An inclusive future must include all parties in the conceptualizing, planning, funding, implementing, assessing, and revising of any and all future technological solutions affecting humanity. (4)

For Carter, digital pedagogy creates a space in which we work inclusively to design new spaces from the ground up. When tech evangelists frame the future, they do sometimes start with students, but these young people are often self-serving fabrications. For example, while Jay Caspian Kang begins to imagine an educational future for his daughter in a world filled with AI, he quickly pivots to an entirely fabricated teenager:

When my nine-year-old daughter graduates from high school, in 2035, I asked myself, will the landscape of higher education look the way that it does now?

[...]

Would a fifteen-year-old hellbent on a journalism career be best served by working himself to the bone both academically and extracurricularly to get into Harvard, or should he just start a Twitch stream and get to work?

Reasonable people can disagree about that. But I feel certain that most of the ambitious fifteen-year-olds who already know what they want to do these days would choose the self-made option—particularly if they come from families that can’t easily afford college tuition, let alone thousands of dollars in supplemental application prep. (Kang 2026)

Despite describing them as “self-made,” Kang’s hypothetical student has no agency beyond that which Kang gives them. In Kang’s view, a young person cannot help but be buffeted about by technological developments into a world in which higher education has no place in their future (and in which legacy media plays no role in journalism). We must resist the sense of the future as something that we give *to* young people and instead shape one *with* young people. Roopika Risam frames

the problem in similar terms in her theorization of a postcolonial digital pedagogy, which “helps students develop an emancipatory digital cultural literacy—an awareness of how digital knowledge production is imbricated in the politics, power, and neocolonial practices that privilege the epistemologies of the Global North” (2019, 91–2). For Risam, this powerful approach to technological critique and creation allows students to grasp “their role in creating the digital worlds of the twenty-first century” (2019, 89). Just as we saw in Chapter 1 of this book, Risam emphasizes the importance, first, of students knowing the political economy of their current digital worlds before they can go on to make new ones of their own. In these formulations, students can use the classroom to create new knowledge, carving out space within which alternative visions of the future can take shape. Carter and Risam offer counter-visions to the techno-utopian ends pushed by Silicon Valley, which are marked by the exploitative characteristics of capitalism.

As a tool for helping our communities activate their own imaginations about what is to come, I offer a classroom exercise that teachers can use to invite students into conversations about the future of their institutions. “Postcards from Tomorrow” attempts to distill and compress the spirit of *Stanford 2025* into a bite-sized form that can be flexibly adapted to different contexts. With Carter and Risam’s interventions in mind, however, the activity carefully encourages students to critique their received assumptions about how their imaginations might be limited by politics, structures, and power. Students are likely to have strong opinions about what works for them in their educational experiences and what they would like the future to look like, but they might have difficulty expressing them in a concrete form. As such, the activity begins by inviting students to generate new ideas through mind mapping, a technique drawn from design thinking. Mind mapping encourages students to see unexpected connections and provides fertile ground for later discussions about what kinds of imaginative futures they want to see at the university. I then take inspiration from “The Thing from the Future” (The Innovation Studio 2021), an imaginative card game in which players compete to develop hypothetical objects from imagined futures. In “Postcards from Tomorrow,” students imagine themselves as the recipients of a single, speculative postcard from their future selves describing changes they have made to the university they now lead.

"Postcards from Tomorrow"

Duration: (60 minutes)

Pre-work: None

Prompt: "You have just received a postcard in the quantum mail from yourself 50 years in the future. In this timeline, you have been serving as president of your alma mater for a decade. You are happy to report that you solved one major problem that always bugged you about your own education. To commemorate the occasion, you sent a postcard to yourself in the past to show what is possible. This activity asks you to produce this postcard."

Lesson Plan

1. Mind mapping (15 minutes):

- Pass out blank pages and pencils.
- Ask students to take a think quietly:
 - How do you feel about your current education?
 - What works for you?
 - What does not?
- Each student places the phrase "my education" in the center of their blank page.
- Spend five minutes connecting related words and concepts to that first word, growing the map outwards.
- Use the next five minutes to map secondary associations outwards.
- In the last five minutes, students circle the two or three things most important to them.

2. Drawing (15 minutes):

- Students design a postcard to themselves consisting of a hand-drawn image on the front and a 50-word message to their past self on the opposite side. Each should represent their successful intervention in the university.
- Ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - What would you most want to change?
 - What would you most want to hold onto?
 - Fifty years from now, what is the most perfect end-state you can imagine?

- Encourage students not to worry about consequences, limitations, or realistic expectations. The goal is to imagine the world that will be, not to feel constrained by what is.

3. Discussion (30 minutes):

- Students share their postcards with the group.
- Some suggested questions to facilitate conversations:
 - What do your futures look like?
 - What problems have you solved?
 - How did you address your challenges?
 - How do these reflect your own views about power and progress?
 - How do you feel about the future? How do others want you to feel about it?

Like the participatory budgeting exercise in Chapter 1, this activity could be expanded beyond the reach of a single class period. Given space, instructors might include preliminary readings, recordings, or films drawn from the world of speculative fiction to help students stretch their imaginations beyond the present. If used in a specific disciplinary context (e.g., a required English class), teachers might also narrow the opening prompt to make it relevant to the course context by declaring, “you have fixed the one thing about the English major that always bugged you.” Doing so would allow the activity to offer a moment of meta-reflection about their disciplinary studies as well as about the purpose of the university as a whole.

In the discussion phase of “Postcards from Tomorrow,” in particular, instructors can push students beyond the technocratic vision of the world that emerges in *Stanford 2025*. One way to do so is to offer students visions of the future from the outside. Tech CEOs are eager to offer their thoughts on the purpose and future of higher education, even as they encourage listeners to drop out. Sam Altman, for example, posted to X “I think US college education is nearer to collapsing than it appears” (@sama 2022a). After sharing a litany of conservative grievances, including discrimination against Asian-American students and a limited return on investment for college students, Altman calls for a new education system: “What a time to start an alternative to college! The world really needs it” (@sama 2022b). In his later self-published essay on “The Intelligence

Age,” Altman describes his fantasies of a world of exclusively virtual education, before noting that “we expect that this technology can cause a significant change in labor markets (good and bad) in the coming years, [...] and I have no fear that we’ll run out of things to do” (2024). Circulating some of these testimonials midway through the discussion about future postcards can offer a useful pivot towards recognizing the kinds of implied ideologies behind students’ visions of the future. Instructors can then push students to imagine a future wholly separate from one driven by technological innovation.

I share “Postcards from Tomorrow” as an intentional turn towards James M. Lang’s formulation of “small teaching” (2021). For Lang, small teaching is an invitation to incrementally approach growth in our pedagogies. He encourages us to make small changes today, as opposed to waiting until tomorrow for big, curricular transformations. The future of higher education can feel enormous, too big to take on, but leaving it in the hands of others cedes the pedagogical ground to those who are, at best, ill-equipped for that conversation. At worst, these institutional and political actors are hostile to the very project of education. We need not wait for the next syllabus nor the next department curriculum meeting to start re-envisioning our work alongside our students. Even as we work to counteract the theoretical implications of our institutions’ embedded pedagogies, Lang reminds us that small interventions can have profound effects. Get to class five minutes early and ask your students what concerns them about the future and how their education fits into that narrative. Ask them what kind of university they would want to see if they had the power to change it any way that they wanted. Bring a stack of blank cards and ask them to draw it into being.

###

Writing the same year as the release of *Stanford 2025*, Bethany Nowviskie argues for an altogether different vision of DH and the future of higher education by meditating on the fate of the Anthropocene, a capacious concept that roughly corresponds to the current, human era characterized by “our growing sense of responsibility toward and entanglement with the natural world” (2015, i6). Nowviskie’s long glance also sees the present leading to a particular end, but her assessment is more dire. She

observes the accumulated extinction debt and technological wreckage as headed towards the inevitable end of humanity. For Nowviskie, all action in the present must contend with the central problem that “this is an ending of things” (2015, i5). She offers a range of responses to this moment. We can recover lost texts, minimize the computing and environmental costs of research, and amplify voices of those doing community-sustaining work. This vision stands in stark contrast to the techno-utopian futures offered by Silicon Valley, which would delight in disruption no matter the cost. But Nowviskie’s sobering vision contains one conspicuous absence: the classroom. I close this chapter, then, with a call to resituate the power of DH teaching and learning within alternative imaginations of the future and within the current moment.

This book argues for a different view of power, a different assessment of pedagogy and the strength it has to change hostile institutions. In the preceding pages, I have advanced a framework for understanding our work as educators that can transform spaces and communities. In this view, we need not wait for the long arc of history to bend towards a goal outside of our control.⁶ We can do the bending. The embedded pedagogies of learning institutions must be critiqued and countered, in and out of the classroom. Our institutions claim to be knowable, but they alienate teachers and learners and prevent them from knowing the ways these same institutions affect their work. Our institutions aspire to neutrality, but we do not teach in neutral times. Our institutions promote a life of the mind, but they do so at the expense of the lives of those in their communities. Our institutions say that they want to prepare us for the future, but the nature and ownership of that future is contested. We must teach back to these pressures.

In response, I have provided the theoretical and practical framework for educators and administrators to counter the pedagogies embedded around their work. We respond to our opaque universities by teaching transparently, exposing the inner workings of the institutions to our students and giving them the means to change them. When our institutions champion empty neutrality, we articulate and practice a committed set

⁶ Material from this section first appeared on my blog as “Finding Your Lever: DH Pedagogy in a State of Crisis” (2025a). That piece was itself a roundtable response for the publication of “The Futures of Digital Humanities Pedagogy in a Time of Crisis” in *The Digital Futures of Graduate Study in the Humanities* (2024).

of values co-created with our students. The push to frame university spaces as hollowly intellectual can be disrupted with a feminist focus on embodied learning that emboldens labor organizing. And the top-down, deterministic vision of the future put forward by our institutions should be met with a speculative, grassroots view that rejects that inevitability.

Even as we look to the future, we must remain attentive to the urgency of this historical moment. This is not the time for business as usual. The context of our work is not neutral, for teachers or for our students. It is morally and ethically necessary for us to develop a DH pedagogy that engages with the reality of the world in which we find ourselves. It is clear more than ever that the world outside the walls of the classroom impacts the work we do inside them, whether or not we want it to be so. If we want a DH that is *worth* surviving into the future then our work must engage with the present and reclaim our influence over our embedded institutional pedagogies. The most recent and coordinated attacks from the Trump administration on funding and freedom of expression at American institutions of higher education demonstrate the urgency of this call. The current environment, its far-right actors, and the administrators seeking to appease these forces for political expediency unsettle the infrastructure that makes DH teaching and learning possible. We cannot carry on in the classroom as though this is not the case, because there very well could be no classroom in the future.

I have intentionally framed this text around the ways pedagogy can bring about change. In doing so, I build upon the work of scholars like Kathleen Fitzpatrick who call for transforming the university (2024), and I encourage students and teaching administrators of all stripes to seize their roles in making this change happen. It can be all too easy for teaching administrators to feel disempowered, whether it be because we are drowning in teaching assignments or low in the organizational structure of the university. But, as I have argued, this feeling that influence exists elsewhere, practiced by others, is a carefully manufactured tool by which power consolidates itself. This moment calls urgently for teachers to claim the small ways in which change can be seeded from the ground up. We all have something we can do: "We all have methods of soft power; we all have levers we can pull" (McNeil et al. 2020). If you are a DH administrator who has direct control over budgets that you can make more equitable, you can make a difference. If you are a classroom teacher who can engage your students in new assignments in the pursuit

of justice, you can make a difference. If you are a student with something to say, you can make a difference. The time is now for us to find ways to double down on teaching that matters. As Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel put it, “it is urgent that we have teachers”(2018).

This call is both broader than DH pedagogy but also specific in the way it manifests here for us and for our community. DH can bring something distinct to the struggle. I believe, for example, that we have a unique perspective on how education intersects with the infrastructure of the university. It is often very hard for DH teachers to conceive of their work as existing in isolation, closed within the walls of the classroom, simply because it is frequently the work of many people from across the university. DH teachers have no choice but to think about policy that affects the work they are doing. We are also especially well-positioned to frame our work as something that can enact the kind of change we want to see in the infrastructure of the university precisely *because* we cannot escape it. Maybe for you this means organizing a data rescue event, collecting government data before it disappears as a vehicle for teaching data preservation. Maybe it means using DH budgets as a tool for teaching about both administration and the political economy of the university. Maybe for you this means articulating and enacting equitable labor practices in your classroom assignments. Maybe it is about working with your students to build a project that tracks political injustices in ways that intersect with your coursework.

Find your own pedagogical levers, your own ways in which your DH teaching can be meaningful. Because your pedagogy is already subject to politics, is already political, whether you know it or not. It is up to us to try and harness that connection. The spaces of teaching and learning are not closed to the outside world. This has always been true, but we must follow up on this fact before the classroom disappears altogether, even as we fight to protect our ability to teach the way we want in the classroom. I have argued throughout this book that teaching occurs beyond these walls. I close by calling for a DH pedagogy that lives and works in the streets. If we want to have a DH in the future, if we are to have any future at all, we must consider how our DH pedagogy marches on and in the present. We start by seeing the embedded pedagogies of our institutions for what they are, critiquing them, and teaching our ways toward new infrastructures of change in their place.

Coda

When I began writing this book, my main concerns were those internal administrative policies, rules, and practices that structure our institutions. I had imagined my object of critique as being a closed system, where the institution constructs invisible pedagogies that exert their will on educators whether they want them to or not. My consideration of the external forces that might impact these pedagogies was largely confined to a single chapter that concerned neutrality as a smokescreen for conservative politics. In the course of writing the bulk of this material, Donald Trump was elected president for a second term. During the subsequent months, it has become clear that the texture of these embedded institutional pedagogies is as much a result of forces external to the university as it is internal. Even as I wrote these pages, I could not have predicted how directly external forces would impact my own pedagogical experiences at the University of Virginia (UVA). Nor could I have expected how closely my experiences would map onto the framework of my text.

In the first chapter on knowability, I argued that universities have a vested stake in making the inner workings of the institution as complicated as possible, in alienating instructors from the work of teaching to deny them power over their labor. My pedagogical tool for revealing the political economy of the university was the digital humanities (DH) budget, which offers instructors a platform for discussing how finances intersect with values. In the past year, the budget has become one of the main tools by which the federal government attacks the autonomy of the classroom, as the government withholds promised grant funding unless universities make policy concessions. By December 2025, the federal government had terminated \$74 million in grants to UVA

and threatened \$452 million in total (Pauly 2025), an enormous sum with devastating effects on local research projects, industry, and the Charlottesville community (Pitchon 2025b). As destabilizing as any one grant withdrawal might be, however, the government's plan to reduce indirect cost rates for federal grants—the portions of an award meant to subsidize space, resources, and staff administrative salaries—poses an even more fundamental threat to the infrastructure of higher education (Higher Ed Dive 2025). This strategy is no accident. Indirect cost rates are profoundly confusing even to higher education workers, to say nothing of the general public. Even as the policy decision endangers the backbone of the modern university, the obscurity and complexity of the move make it difficult to answer with coherent opposition. Knowability, again, becomes a tool of power. As teachers, we can directly push back against such threats by incorporating pedagogies of transparency into our praxis and working with our students to illuminate those parts of the university that might be intentionally obscured. We must counter such intentional opacity with a teaching practice that makes our institutions more understandable to all of us.

In the second chapter on neutrality, I discussed the ways in which impartiality serves as convenient cover for conservative attempts to dismantle universities. In her assessment of how accusations of discrimination have been weaponized, Judge Allison D. Burroughs similarly determined that the Trump administration's disruption of \$2.6 billion in funding awarded to Harvard was based on flimsy ideological grounds: "In fact, a review of the administrative record makes it difficult to conclude anything other than that Defendants used antisemitism as a smokescreen for a targeted, ideologically-motivated assault on this country's premier universities" (quoted in Patel et al. 2025). In the course of the chapter, I discussed Liz Magill and Claudine Gay, two university presidents who were forced to resign after conservative pressure that they were not neutral enough. At UVA, our own President Jim Ryan was ousted by our Board of Visitors after a campaign by conservative alumni led the Department of Justice to open a number of inquiries into antisemitism on campus. Subsequently, the federal government invited UVA to sign a "Compact for Excellence in Higher Education" that offered preferential treatment regarding

federal funding in exchange for a range of concessions (Hephner 2025). Many of these demands ostensibly appeared neutral, like “equality in admissions and hiring,” but were paired with conservative demands to remake the university by “eliminat[ing] diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in those areas” (Gad 2025). UVA did not ultimately sign this Compact, as Interim President Paul G. Mahoney instead entered into a voluntary agreement with the Trump Department of Justice to close two investigations, suspend five others for now, and provide regular updates to the federal government on UVA’s compliance (Pauly 2025). Just a few months later, UVA’s Board of Visitors replaced Interim President Mahoney with President Scott Beardsley, UVA’s then business school dean, despite vocal opposition from students, faculty, and Virginia legislators (Pitchon 2025a). Three university presidents in half a year—the last of whom has little community trust due to a botched process—hardly provide the stable conditions for transformative teaching and learning. Empty neutrality did not save any of these university leaders, nor did it provide an adequate defense in the face of such governmental overreach. Instead, as I argued in this chapter, our communities must look to each other, finding a core set of beliefs that we will not surrender in exchange for federal funding. Charters offer one such tool for helping teachers and students to develop their own durable principles. The moment calls for a pedagogy of committed values, and we must find our way to these beliefs ourselves. Neutral pedagogies are defenseless ones. Instead of pretending that teaching can be apolitical, we must work with our students to develop committed, actionable principles that guide our educational practices.

In the third chapter, I argued that cultures of intellectualism leave broken bodies in their wake and inculcate toxic cultures of individual achievement in our spaces. The second Trump administration has attempted to exploit this zero-sum view of achievement by offering specific institutions different paths by which to end federal investigations, exploiting individual anxieties, and preventing collective action on the part of institutions of higher learning. The administration is also no friend to teacher wellbeing. White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt, for example, draws a contrast between academia and the “real work” being done outside the ivory tower: “Apprenticeships,

electricians, plumbers—we need more of those in our country, and less LGBTQ graduate majors from Harvard University, and that’s what this administration’s position is” (quoted in Rashid 2025). Leavitt might invoke trade careers typically associated with unionized labor, but the administration has actively worked to undermine teachers’ unions; among other actions, Congressional Republicans introduced legislation to revoke the federal charter of the National Education Association for their attempts to advocate against President Trump’s agenda (Johnson 2025). The alternative to a life of the mind, here, would be a world without educators or the institutions that support them altogether. In contrast, I argue for a pedagogy that centers collective organizing and wellbeing as the central tenets of the classroom. We cannot fix the academy by destroying the abilities of educators to stand up for themselves. Our pedagogies must enable teachers and learners to recover from the effects of an endless academic grind and to co-create resources to build a better educational future. Teachers need advocates, not admonishments. We need rest so that we can fight.

In my final chapter, I claimed that institutional narratives about the future often serve as convenient vehicles for power to consolidate itself in the present. In the process, teachers and learners frequently find their voices excluded from a conversation that tries to cement in place rigid understandings of institutional history. In a similar mode, the Trump administration has prioritized grant projects that celebrate American history and the Founding Fathers in advance of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. One initiative involves creating a “National Garden of American Heroes”:

Under the original order, the list of individuals to be honored spanned a wide range of fields, including sports, pop culture, and civil rights activism but also right-wing politics and settler colonialism. The likenesses of musician Aretha Franklin, athlete Muhammad Ali, chef and author Julia Child, and late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg would stand side-by-side with those of Christopher Columbus, Ronald Reagan, Justice Antonin Scalia, and Samuel Colt, who mass-produced the revolver. (Liscia and Maya 2025)

The administration provided funding for these initiatives by canceling hundreds of millions of dollars in grants that were previously awarded,

eviscerating the infrastructure of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and dismantling much of the federal government. As a part of this devastation, the NEH Office of Digital Humanities was all but eliminated, as the vast majority of staff were fired and over \$427 million¹ in grant funding was rescinded (Pedro 2025). All the imaginative labor of those project directors, all the work of those civil servants to dream new ideas, is now gone, redirected towards a vision supported by those in power that would calcify the past around particular peoples and narratives. Our teaching can meet this moment by refusing to let those in power control the past and shape the future. We must help our students imagine new worlds, new institutions, and new narratives for themselves. By restoring the classroom as a space of possibility we can help our students to create the alternative educational spaces about which they dream.

The events occurring at UVA are taking place at numerous institutions across the country. It is a terrifying time to teach. Our institutions are ready to cave to demands that ask them to abandon their vulnerable community members for the promise of more funding. Educators across the country have found their public statements more surveilled than ever, and we never know what headline tomorrow will bring that will make it harder to do our work. It is all too easy to want to fade into silence, to search for safety by teaching narrowly to the day's lesson plan, to leave the work of the moment to others with more power, more institutional security, or more energy. The increased scrutiny on the classroom can make it feel as though the only way to survive is to teach as invisibly as possible, praying that our students do not record a conversation that could lead one to be fired.

You are not alone in your fears. I share them.

The pace of daily horrors assaulting our teaching can feel relentless and frenetic, an endless parade of injustices small and big. But so, too, has the last year offered instances of inspiring DH scholar practitioners meeting the moment. We must counter every feeling of despair thrust upon us by intentionally looking for those doing the work. I find hope in those working hard to push back, mitigate harm, and fight for justice.

1 This is the total amount of rescinded funding as of April 8th (The Association for Computing in the Humanities 2025). The number in actuality is likely higher.

Hannah Alpert-Abrams, a former Program Specialist at the NEH Office of Digital Humanities who has appeared multiple times in this book, published a workbook, *Taking Action in Higher Ed*, shortly after her time as a civil servant ended. Alpert-Abrams argues that “The moment for action has arrived” (2025, 2) and offers a range of guiding exercises for education workers feeling uncertain about how and when to balance personal risk and the imperative to take part in the struggle. Work like this shows that we can still teach with power and confidence even while struggling with valid fears. I also find inspiration in Roopika Risam, who gave the 2025 keynote to the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations conference just as so much of the national infrastructure that had funded DH in the United States was being destroyed. In her keynote address, she charts a future for DH in a world that is being intentionally dismantled.

The future of digital humanities in our world unmade requires:

Access grounded in accountability.

Repair sustained by care.

Scholarship driven by solidarity.

But that’s not a blueprint. It’s not a center proposal or a five-year plan. It’s a question. What does it mean for you—in your contexts, your institutions, your communities—to take these seriously?

We are not starting from scratch. Even in crisis, we have models to draw from. They are often small, often precarious, often ignored. But they are real. And they are enough. (Risam 2025)

Risam powerfully notes that we have never been alone and we do not rebuild from nothing. The process of finding a way forward is challenging, but models matter. Questions matter. And the answers we give them ourselves matter.

I also draw inspiration from Amanda Wyatt Visconti, who has turned to book arts and handcrafted publishing practices to resist censorship, recenter joy, and advocate for the visibility of trans people. Visconti’s “A Hydroponics of Care” describes the importance of care and nourishing for your community now, as it is: “I want a hydroponics of care: see us, water us as seeds before we’re buried” (See Fig. 14).



Fig. 14 "A Hydroponics of Care." Amanda Wyatt Visconti (2025), <https://wolfproofpress.com/portfolio.html>, CC BY.

Visconti's letterpress print contains an ink overlay made from smashing seeds harvested from a home garden: "It builds on a couplet by queer Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos in the 70s. I was also thinking about encouragements to give people their flowers (praise, recognition, celebration) while they are still alive, particularly Black trans women."² The image powerfully calls for us to honor those living, speak back against injustice, and create art with our communities. Each of these thinkers teaches me what I need now and in this moment. Your points of light will be different, and they may very well be local. It is important that we see these inspirations for the constellations that they are, recognize them, and look to them when we need guidance.

Finally, I find hope in you.

² Message to author, December 12, 2025.

We need you. We need individuals who can teach back to those in power—in and out of the university—and the pedagogies they would impose upon us. We need more voices thinking deeply and richly about the work education can do in the world. If this text leaves you with any lesson, let it be that we are all teachers. All our actions open or foreclose possibilities for transformative education in our universities, even if we do not find ourselves at the front of the classroom. The embedded pedagogies around us can feel powerful, their texture tightly woven by forces with agendas meant to shape our ability to learn. I hope to have given readers the tools to see the threads left loose, those small ways in which teachers and students can stitch their own counter-pedagogies.

After all, a thread can be pulled. I opened this book with an image of me as a fresh-faced graduate assistant, confronted with chairs bolted to the ground. Those desks felt fixed and immovable, put in place by someone far from the classroom who only had one kind of teaching in mind. I still pass those rooms on UVA's campus, but they look different now. Those graffiti-covered desks have long been removed, traded in for modern furniture that can be moved into a variety of arrangements. The bolts gave way to wheels and, with them, a new pedagogy was embedded in that space. The tacit practices and assumptions that govern teaching at our institutions can be torn out, rebuilt, and restructured. But such changes start with one person who looks at a room, asks what it teaches, and imagines something different.

We can be those dreamers. When faced with institutions that do not want to be understood, we can demand transparency. When faced with calls for neutrality, we can stand with our students for values that we believe in. When asked to sacrifice our bodies for a calling, we can believe in a profession that does not leave us broken. And, when confronted with a future that we are told is inevitable, we can dream of something different.

Teaching is imaginative work, the labor of those hoping for something other than what they see. Our institutions are not immovable, and we have the power to change them. When we see embedded pedagogies for what they are, teaching administrators can reshape them into something altogether different. We can teach our way towards a new kind of embedded pedagogy and a new kind of institution. The infrastructure of such change starts with us, with every small act of teaching that we take in the service of something bigger than ourselves.

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This book was peer-reviewed by Danica Savonick, State University of New York at Cortland, and an anonymous referee. Experts in their field, these readers give their time freely to help ensure the academic rigor of our books. We are grateful for their generous and invaluable contributions.

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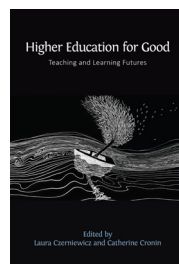
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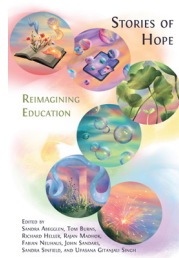


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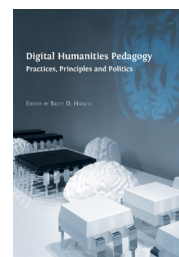


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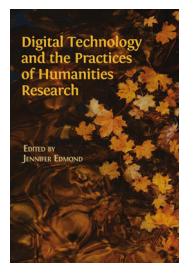
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Focusing on the concept of ‘embedded pedagogies’, the book reveals how institutional norms, such as claims to neutrality, intellectualism, and future-orientation, quietly shape what and how educators can teach. Walsh combines theory with practical insight, using case studies, digital projects, and firsthand reflections to demonstrate how these forces operate and how they can be challenged.

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