

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *College & Undergraduate Libraries* on 03 Feb 2017, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10691316.2017.1279455>

It's just a sled: Explanations from Librarian Kane

## **DH on the Fringe**

### Part I: On Getting Schooled

Charles Dickens lured me into the world of digital humanities. A Tweeted call for volunteer editors to correct OCR errors was my introduction to crowdsourcing work. I spent a number of hours gleefully adhering to intricately detailed rules structuring the *Dickens Journals Online* project, as I peered at numerous pages of original text side by side with its oftentimes-mangled OCR counterpart, deciphering text and punctuation mistakes. From my exposure to DJO, I found related sources on Twitter to follow. Other crowdsourced transcription projects were easy to find, and it wasn't a grand leap to sources discussing text analysis and data mining. I started bookmarking a flurry of sites, and suddenly had too many leads to chase down.

At the time, I was working at a very small private liberal arts college as the Head of Technical Services, generally understood then as a position managing acquisitions, cataloging, and serials, though as is often the case in liberal arts environments, library jobs are beyond flexible. My boss performed the dual role of library director and CIO, and I was lucky to have his support to push the boundaries of my position. I say "support," but what I really mean is: 1.) He refused to let me

burrow into the staid coziness of my comfort zone; 2.) I eventually got used to that; 3.) I eventually started taking advantage of that. Well done, boss. I see what you did there.

Once I caught on to what was out there in DH-land, I started pestering said boss. CAN I, CAN I, CAN I? Our school was in the midst of a strategic plan push toward a version of digital literacy, and I was hoping that DH would soon be part of the platform. I wanted the library to be a major part of making that happen, as it seemed to be at other institutions. In short order, I had a plan in place to get funding through our faculty grants program as part of my long-term multi-part sabbatical, and my first phase included as much DH schooling as I could cram into my brains.

In the summer of 2013, I attended my first DH course. I swanned off to Digital Humanities at Oxford Summer School (DH@OXSS) and took “How to do Digital Humanities: Discovery, Analysis, and Collaboration.” I was woefully unimpressed. With the exception of a day spent with the delightful Lou Burnard learning TEI, the weeklong workshop seemed largely wasted and frustrating. I wanted something tangible: a hands-on, how-to-do, get-in-get-dirty-have-takeaways kind of thing. We had a lot of graduate student presentations and not a lot else. After private venting to librarians in the know, I learned about other DH institutes and followed up. In between 2013-2014, I found myself attending a Rails Girls DH workshop (amazing!), THATCamp Virginia, my first Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) and Humanities Learning and Teaching (HILT).

While I have since spent more time at DHSI for reasons I’ll explore later, HILT was an incredibly intense and worthwhile experience, one that I would highly

recommend. Since I had a **teensy** bit of coding experience under my belt, thanks to Rails Girls DH and a bit of sabbatical time spent banging my head against a wall with Codecademy's Python course (I never finished. I am duly ashamed), I decided to swing for the fences and take Large Scale Text Analysis with R, revealing that I am a big, big dum-dum. No, I joke. A little. It was a lot to handle, but it wasn't impossible. I understand, though, that I am **not** made for coding. In any way. I don't intrinsically understand working in the command line. I'm a little bit slow, generally, at computer things and I'd like everyone to just slow down a little bit and maybe stop scrolling so fast. Is there a medium speed? Can we all just go at medium for a minute? In any case, the R class was breathtaking. I held on by my fingernails and probably didn't actually unclench a single muscle for the entire week, but it was phenomenal and my mind was on fire. That **was** the experience I wanted. I came away with so much, and years later, I think I could do some of it if I needed to, although though I haven't trotted it out in quite a while. I used those skills a year or so after the workshop in my English master's thesis (though I mostly screwed up what I was trying to do). My screwup was mortifyingly beautiful, and led me to new questions to pursue with alternate methods. HILT did that for me in a week.

While I was taking time away to learn DH skills, I was still operating in the role of a more or less fully traditional librarian. Having a full-time job with responsibilities outside of DH means that time away for training **in** DH is both precious and frustrating. Any week-long immersive DH institute is an exceptional way to learn a skill or new set of concepts or methodologies. It's an invaluable source of networking and – perhaps most importantly – a catalyst for creative

collaboration. It's simultaneously an intellectual stimulus and a treasured slice of time that is just not quite enough for those of us with full-time jobs that don't involve a regular component of DH work.

When we go back to our day jobs and we're not practicing what we just learned, we lose steam. Our grasp may slip on the thing we were passionate about learning, or mastering, or researching. This is the point at which inspiration can turn into frustration. It is easy to lose heart when we realize that in the span of a year, while we wait for the next DH institute to roll around and the next single course we may [have the good fortune and funding to be able to] take, vast advances have been made in the field. Entire swaths of knowledge and practice have passed us by. Those who are living and working immersed in the field are so far ahead; it may seem futile to keep plugging away at continuing education in fits and starts.

Sometimes we will take on added job duties for the sake of looping in our interests and new skills, without sloughing off any existing responsibilities. This can be a fast road to burnout if supervisors and/or administrators either aren't aware of these situations or take advantage of our willingness to add on for the sake of stimulation. Having time and space to incorporate skills and interests into research projects (or other outlets – teaching is especially appropriate) helps to both reinforce what was learned and to validate continuing education. “Use it or lose it” is a frustratingly true cliché, especially as we age – and there is nothing quite so rewarding as putting new skills to use on your own away from a workshop and instructor, with the training wheels off. Crash and burn though you may, your wobbly path is yours to make.

## Part II: Being Involved in DH on the Fringe

For those of us who remain in traditional library positions, but have interests that extend tentacle-like into DH, there are ways to stay involved that keep us from being eaten alive from the inside. The DH world needn't be an all-or-nothing equation, though it can sometimes feel that way to a visitor, a newbie, a lurker. I've found a wide range of people in DH-land, from the very welcoming to the snoots. The hostiles are fairly easy to identify and disregard, though they like to stake their claim to the land and attempt to bump out all they deem unworthy. Stick to the friendlies. There are plenty of welcoming people who believe in opening doors and educating all who want to learn.

Being involved in DH can take almost any form; mold it to suit your working style and time constraints. In 2015 I took a position at a school that already had an active and healthy DH initiative; the metadata librarian in the library had just been converted into a digital humanities librarian, and they had landed a Mellon Foundation grant for DH for the coming four years. It was exceptionally exciting, but I knew that my role as it applied to DH would be tangential at best for the immediate future. I was no longer the center, especially not the sole instigator, of the DH program, at an institution. While that's a seismic shift in position, it's also a great pressure relieved. My attention is focused on my (again, traditional) role, with DH on the side. The background I had in pursuing DH education was a factor in my hiring, and I have been supported with continuing education with the

understanding that in coming years, I will play a more prominent role. At the moment, though, other needs are more pressing. Balancing traditional librarianship with keeping my skills sharp and DH on the horizon is something that takes some attention.

Keeping DH as a part of my professional life means taking advantage of outside opportunities that come my way. I make use of happenstance. Friends know of my interests and education in DH; those friends are also in academia. I've since been invited to consult and give workshops at a local college interested in getting started in DH, and it has been intensely rewarding. By chance, I met grants officers from the NEH while at HILT; years later, I had the opportunity to serve on a review panel for the Office of Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants. That was a truly phenomenal service experience, and immensely educational for me in terms of learning how federal grants programs function. I have volunteered to serve on review panels for DLF Forum and most recently, ADHO's DH 2017 conference. I served as a coach for the Institute of Liberal Arts Digital Scholarship (ILiADS), an invaluable experience for liberal arts DH teams of faculty and students. Gradually, over time, I've been gaining experience and confidence in my ability to lend a credible voice in specific arenas.

Managing an inclination towards volunteerism, though, is something to keep an eye on before it spins out of control. While being involved in DH on the fringe is fine, it isn't fine to overburden yourself with committee appointments or outside workloads. I have been lucky to have a director who checks in with how overflowing my plate may be, especially when I update him on what new commitment I'm about

to accept, balancing my traditional professional volunteer roles with those in the DH world. Both are important to me, but minding the level of each is critically important.

Learning how to manage that balance is especially necessary when your DH lifeline is also your sanity escape-hatch. That escape-hatch is sometimes the reason why living with DH on the fringe isn't a terrible thing at all; it makes DH feel more like a treat than a job. While my professional life requires a consistent drive and focus on details and practicalities, my intellectual life hungers for occasional forays into the uncertain. I need the as yet unknown (to me), in order to keep my mind on the level. I don't labor under the delusion that I'm at all unique. The number of librarians, alt-acs and academics ranging from fields of all sorts working full-time that are pulled to digital humanities mirror my experience.

### Part III: What's this Graduate Certificate stuff all about?

At the time of this writing, intending to double-check current application and program guidelines, I was surprised to find that all mention of University of Victoria's Graduate Certificate in Digital Humanities offering had been wiped from the DHSI website. Searching instead on the University of Victoria site, I found that the graduate certificate in DH has been suspended. As of December 29, 2016: "The Graduate Certificate in Digital Humanities is suspended until further notice. Applications to the Certificate program are not being accepted at present. However, current students will be able to complete the Certificate." Given that the program

only began in 2015, suspension of the Certificate a year after launch seems premature, though I have no concrete details on the suspension. In a talk at the DLF Liberal Arts Colleges pre-conference this year, I couched my discussion of the certificate with the caveat that it is brand-new and as such, going through necessary growing pains. Anything I discuss from my experience is likely to change; I hadn't anticipated a program suspension. Perhaps this suspension speaks more to the breakneck speed at which the field changes, the speed at which demands in education change. What follows here is based on the program as it stood from 2015 through 2016, and may or may not be helpful if and when the program is revived. I write here about it with the understanding that though it has been suspended, my advice is entirely based on how it existed, and as though it still/will exist in roughly the same format. It's not an ideal scenario, but neither is waxing both philosophical and practical about a surprise-suspended program.

While all of the week-long institutes give a certificate of completion at the end of a finished course, none of these are any kind of recognized credential, and a graduate certificate, while not a degree, is a nod from an institution that a certain level of achievement has been reached. When it was first announced, I mulled it over. I tossed it around with my then-boss, and my then-dean. We talked about the longer-term goals for DH at the institution at that time.

A conversation I had early on in this process keeps coming back to me, because I find it incredibly important for anyone facing this decision to consider the profile of the institution. Although I hold the widely accepted terminal degree in my field (M.S. LIS or MLS) and I was about to complete a second subject master's degree



in English, my administration told me that I would need the credential in DH in order to do any teaching at my extremely small institution. Not because of accreditation policy or stringent hiring regulations, (as a librarian I was already considered faculty), but because faculty culture wouldn't allow it. Other faculty wouldn't allow it.

Conversely, when I arrived at my current institution, librarians (also faculty) had already been successfully team-teaching and solo teaching DH courses. I arrived midway through completion of the DH graduate certificate, and while my institution appreciated and supported completion of the certificate, it was never addressed as a requirement before I could enter a classroom.

Every institution's environment is of course entirely unique, and I wouldn't have pegged either of these accurately based on an outside assessment. My advice in this arena to anyone considering the graduate certificate is this: explore your administration's perception of the credential, and explore your feelings about your institution. There are a lot of variables in play here; if your administrators are leaning heavily on the belief that attainment of the certificate equates to mastery of *all aspects of digital humanities*, run. Run far and run fast. This may mean that you'll carry an impossible expectation of "doing DH" at your institution, and you'll inevitably take the blame when it fails to live up to the expectations of what they're doing over at X University. It should also serve as a red flag that you wouldn't have support for continuing education in DH beyond the certificate, because you'll be considered an expert in everything once you've completed it. Be very, very wary of this attitude toward this credential. If you can educate your administrators about

what the certificate entails before taking the dive, do – ensure enough understanding on all sides going in so that there won't be a broken relationship on the other side of it, and everyone will be better served.

Weigh your investment in the institution, and the institution's investment in you. Is there a chance that this won't be your last job, and the certificate could serve you well in another capacity at another institution? If you have support for funding for the certificate and are willing to put in the extra time, that might be enough of a consideration to make it worthwhile, with the other considerations in mind (up next). Completing the certificate isn't quite as simple as attending five DHSI courses, or a total of five DHSI/DH@OXSS/HILT courses and coming out with a credential. It's a bit more complex. Let's dig into that.

First of all, there is a normal graduate application process through the University of Victoria. Whether starting from scratch or intending to transfer in the two allowed courses (previous DHSI attendance or sister institutes like HILT or DH@OXSS), at the very least, a minimum of three courses will need to be completed under the graduate umbrella of UVic. This will also involve getting a waiver for the introductory course; otherwise, the coursework can run to four (with two transfers) to six (without).

Since the graduate program is run through UVic but via DHSI, the structure is disjointed – the two entities are entirely separate, which is problematic at best – and the fee structure seems exorbitant. You will pay your course fees to DHSI (with a tuition discount for being a grad student, thanks!), but you'll also need to pay UVic graduate tuition, which is fairly steep per course. Depending on how the dollar is

faring in Canada, the charge can fluctuate, and the University doesn't take credit cards. The full amount has to be wired, and a large international bank wire can be tricky. A lot of home institutions might reimburse you for your expense, but refuse to directly handle the transaction in that format, and you'll be handling your tuition expense out of pocket for a while. The fact that UVic won't handle payment by credit card, check or invoice takes its toll. Taking more than one course in a summer can be an enormous personal financial hit if external funding is uncertain. Aside from the financial commitment, the timeline for enrolling in courses doesn't always align with discovering which courses fit into the graduate requirement. DHSI courses fill up insanely fast, (registration usually opens in early fall for the following summer) but the UVic course alignments didn't always come out at the same time. The fact that the two entities were completely separate was a source of repeated frustration -- one that I'm certain was felt not just by students.

One of the most beneficial things about the grad certificate program was also one of its greatest hurdles: a one-size-fits-all set of requirements to be fulfilled for all courses. To get graded credit for the graduate certificate, once you had accomplished the feat of dual enrollment (enroll in your DHSI course/enroll via UVic and apply corresponding course enrollment code to the current semester...wait for head to explode) and made it to DHSI, no matter the course, the workload was the same. While an admirable goal for assessment, in reality this doesn't make a lot of sense. It also wasn't developed in conjunction with the curriculum. Remember: the two entities are completely separate. We were reminded at nearly every turn that

approaching our DHSI teachers about the graduate program wouldn't do us any good, because they likely didn't know anything about it.

While DHSI coursework unto itself can keep you busy all day long, graduate certificate coursework keeps you busy the entire **week** long, and beyond. Homework every night ensures that the traditional DHSI experience is altered. Ruined, in a sense, if you take the time and effort to really put everything into it and treat it like a true graduate program. Those invaluable networking, socializing, opportunities for creative collaboration that I mentioned earlier? Out the window.

There are daily homework requirements, a presentation at the end of the week to the rest of the graduate cohort, a digital object to be turned in a week later (for those of us staying in another course the following week, time management skills were **important**), and a white paper to be submitted accompanying the digital object. For the most part, all of that sounds reasonable for a one-week course. When your course is entirely analog, however, you go into some mental gymnastics to create your digital object, and it's clear that one size fits some better than others.

Course requirements for the certificate fell along five categories, one course in each, which means that the end result was one of breadth and not depth. By the time I was finishing the certificate, this became a cause of consternation. At the beginning, I didn't pay a lot of attention to how my distributions fell, except to note that what I had transferred in were spread across these two, and that what I wanted to take fell into a new one, so that worked well for me. By the time I came to the final two, though, I was stymied. I wanted to follow up a course I had taken in 2015 that had very much piqued my interest, and, thanks to the graduate coursework

requirements, set me on a research project path. I was working on something that interested me, and I wanted to delve into deeper knowledge. The requirements of the program prevented me from doing so, and I found that flatly unacceptable. I was forced away from developing expertise into two other courses that I plainly had far less interest in; further, I was spending quite a lot of money on these courses when I would far rather be deepening my learning in another course.

I made it through my last two courses, and ended up thoroughly enjoying one of them quite unexpectedly. I still hold seething resentment for the other, paired with a wistful longing for the course I was prevented from taking by UVic's bureaucratic red tape, certain that I could be a whipsmart TEI expert by now **if only**. A personal note on expenses and funding: I was immensely lucky throughout my certificate experience not to have to foot the tuition bills myself. In my first year, I was awarded a bursary so that I could attend; my acceptance followed so closely on the heels of the attempted closure of Sweet Briar that everything was in upheaval, and those running the program pulled amazing strings to help me attend. I will forever be grateful for their help and generosity. In my second year, I applied for and was awarded a fellowship from my alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, in order to complete the certificate. I had support from my home institution for the rest.

My criticisms may come off as a denigration of the program, but that is never my intent. Overall, I'm glad I completed the certificate, and I have (for the most part) delighted in my DHSI courses. I tend to want to caution people I overhear mistaking the program as just a series of DHSI courses, or getting retroactive credit for what they've already attended. This involves serious work; it is more and it may be less

than you think; there are labor issues involved that desperately need to be addressed. There is much beyond my reach, but I have a lot of love for the people who do their best to educate, as we all should be doing. I can only speak from my experience, and I hope I'm not the last one to have the chance at something resembling that experience, flawed as it may have been. I intend to continue my DH education at either DHSI or HILT; both if I can. I'll continue to enjoy my life on the fringe and find paths to my escape-hatch when I'm able. I aim for contentment with understanding that I'll never catch up, but I'll learn what I can. Life in the middle is quite pleasant when you find that balance.