Problem/Project Based Learning in the DH Classroom
Situated Learning, Empowerment, and Knowledge Creation

Teaching Digital Humanities (DH) as a subject as well as teaching humanities subjects using DH approaches has the potential to empower students with the skills and competencies required to become producers rather than passive consumers of knowledge (Cocco 2006). Despite the fact that much DH teaching utilises real-world examples, artefacts, and documentary sources, we argue that the full pedagogic potential of experiential learning (Wurdinger 2005) within a DH classroom (or a traditional humanities classroom employing a DH ethos) cannot be realised unless the pedagogy is embedded within a problem/project-based learning (PBL) environment.

PBL constructs a framework through which students engage with authentic challenges (Bell 2010; Herrington & Herrington 2007; Stein 1998) in a student-led, collaborative, engaged, and reflective environment. Teaching this way can be challenging, with student projects potentially collapsing due to a variety of managerial, technological, or interpersonal issues. As Wurdinger (2005, 69) states: 'outcomes of the learning process are varied and often unpredictable'. Yet, despite the potential pitfalls, providing situated and experiential learning opportunities which make students responsible for their own learning (Chapman et al. 1995) has the potential for their weaknesses to become strengths hence improving their practice (Ertmer & Simons 2005).

While DH has embraced the ethos of the Maker Culture, there is little consensus (Whitson 2015) regarding how learning by making and doing can empower students to become critical thinkers and makers (Ratto 2011) through self-reflexivity and problem solving. Creating a collaborative and experiential learning environment, on the other hand, through PBL, in which students work together to complete an end product that materialises their knowledge and understanding (Helle et al. 2006) is designed to achieve this.

Finally, the process of co-creation and the management challenges (above and beyond the technical skills being imparted) that collaborative projects pose, provide students with new mechanisms to critically respond to different situations as well as with the necessary competencies for careers in academia and the private sector (Cain & Cocco 2014).

This paper draws from the authors' experiences in teaching Digital Humanities utilising a PBL approach. The learning situations that will be discussed are ones in which the students undertake the entire project lifecycle, from defining the problem, developing an approach, and delivering the solution, as opposed to having students work on a specific aspect of an ongoing DH project. Using examples from their practice[1] in a number of institutional settings at Masters level, and in teaching a variety of skills and methods (from TEI/XML to 3D imaging), it will be argued that project- and problem-based approaches to learning equip students with a more holistic skill set, as well as the experience and confidence to respond to an increasingly competitive digital and creative economy in academia and beyond.

---

[1] Including The Diary of Mary Martin, The Woodman Diary, 3D Cuneiform Project, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Digital Library, Sterling Family Papers, The Callan Museum Project ,The Littlehales Project, The 1916 Diary of Dorothy Price

References

Bell, S. (2010). Project-based learning for the 21st Century: Skills for the Future. The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 83(2): 39-43.

Cain, K. & Cocco, S. (2014). Leadership Development through Project Based Learning. In Proceedings of the Canadian Engineering Education Association Conference- École Polytechnique de Montréal June 2013.

Chapman, S., McPhee, P., & Proudman, B. (1995). What is Experiential Education?. In Warren, K. (Ed.), The Theory of Experiential Education (pp. 235-248). Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Cocco, S. (2006). Student Leadership Development: The Contribution of project-based learning. Thesis, Royal Roads University, Canada.

Ertmer, P.A. & Simons, K.D. (2005). Scaffolding Teachers' Efforts to Implement Problem-based Learning. International Journal of Learning, 12(4): 319-328.

Helle, L., Tynjälä, P. & Olkinuora, E. (2006). Project-Based Learning in Post-Secondary Education – Theory, Practice and Rubber Sling Shots. Higher Education, 51(2): 287-314.

Herrington, A. J. & Herrington, J. A. (2006). What is an authentic learning environment?. In A. J. Herrington & J. A. Herrington (Eds.), Authentic learning environments in higher education (pp. 1-13). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Ratto, M. (2011). Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life, The Information Society, 27:4, 252-260, https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2011.583819

Stein, D. (1998). Situated learning in adult education.
http://www.ericdigests.org/1998-3/adult-education.html

Whitson, R. (2015). "Critical Making in the Digital Humanities", In J. Wolfreys (Ed). Introducing Criticism in the Twenty-First Century. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 157-177.

Wurdinger, S.D. (2005). Using Experiential Learning in the Classroom. Lanham: ScarecrowEducation