

On Co-Teaching and Digital Humanities

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For me, co-teaching is the ultimate teaching experience. I've been fortunate to find several opportunities for it over the years. During graduate school, I co-taught a number of short courses, several DH classes, and a couple workshops. Here at W&L I've been able to teach alongside faculty from the history department and the Library. Each experience has been deeply rewarding. These days I'm spending more time thinking about digital humanities from a curricular and pedagogical standpoint, so I wanted to offer a few quick notes on how co-teaching might play a role in those discussions.

I'm sympathetic to arguments against putting two or more people at the front of the classroom. It's expensive to use two faculty members to teach a single course when one might do, so I can understand how, in a certain logic, the format seems profoundly inefficient. You have a set number of courses that need to be taught, and you need people to teach them. And I have also heard people say that co-teaching is a lot more work than teaching a course solo. I understand these objections. But I wanted to offer just a few notes on the benefits of co-teaching - why you might want to consider it as a path for growing your digital humanities program even in the face of such hesitations. I've found that the co-teaching experience fully complements the work that we do as digital humanists for a number of reasons. I think of co-teaching as a way to make the teaching of digital humanities more fully reflect the ways we tend to practice it.

Co-teaching allows for more interdisciplinary courses.

Interdisciplinarity is hard. By its very nature, it assumes research, thinking, and teaching that lie at the intersections of *at least* two fields, usually more. In the case of digital humanities, this is exacerbated because the methodologies of the combined fields often seem to be so distinct from one another. Literary criticism and statistical methods, archival research and computer science, literary theory and web design. These binaries are flawed, of course, and these fields have a lot to say to and about each other. But, in the context of teaching digital humanities, sometimes bringing these fields together requires expertise that one teacher alone might not possess. A second instructor makes it easier to bridge perceived gaps in skills or training. And those skills, if they are meant to be taught, require time and energy from the instructors. On a more practical level, it can be profoundly helpful to have one instructor float in the classroom to offer technical assistance while the other leads discussion so as to prevent troubleshooting from breaking up the class. It is not enough to say that interdisciplinary courses need a second instructor. They often require additional hands on deck.

Co-teaching models collaboration for students.

Digital humanities work often requires multiple people to work together, but I'd wager that students often expect there to be a single person in charge of a class. Students might come

into the class expecting a lecture model. Or, at the very least, they might expect the teacher to be an expert on the material. Or, they might expect the instructor to lead discussion. These formats are all well and good, and many instructors thrive on these models. I prefer to position my students as equal collaborators with me in the material of the course. We explore the material together, and, even if I might serve as a guiding hand, their observations are just as important as my own. I try to give my students space to assert themselves as experts, as real collaborators in the course. Co-teaching helps to set the stage for this kind of approach, because the baseline assumption is that no one person knows everything. If that were the case, you would not need a second instructor. There is always a second voice in the room. By unsettling the top-down hierarchy of the classroom, co-teaching helps to disperse authority out into other parts of the group. The co-teacher not in charge on a particular day might even be seated alongside the students, learning with them. This approach to teaching works especially well as a vehicle for digital humanities. After all, most digital humanities projects have many collaborators, each of whom brings a different set of skills to the table. No person operates as an expert in all parts of a collaborative project - not even the project manager. Digital humanities work is, by its nature, collaborative. Students should know this, see this, and feel this, and it can start at the front of the classroom.

Co-teaching transfers skills from one instructor to another.

Digital humanities faculty and staff are often brought in to support courses and projects by teaching particular methods or tools. This kind of training can sometimes happen in one-off workshops or in external labs, but the co-teaching model can offer a deeper, more immersive mentoring experience. Co-teaching can be as much for the instruction of the students as it is for the professional development of the teachers. For the willing faculty member, a semester-long engagement with material that stretches their own technical abilities can set them up to teach the material by themselves in the future. They can learn alongside the students and expand their portfolio of skills. At W&L we have had successes in a number of disciplines with this approach - faculty in history, journalism, and French have expanded their skills with text analysis, multimedia design and storytelling, and textual encoding all while developing and teaching new courses. We've even managed, at times, to document this process so that we have [demonstrable, professionally legible evidence](#) of the kinds of work possible when two people work together. When both instructors share course time for the entire semester it can help to expand the capacity of a digital humanities program by spreading expertise among many collaborators. Of course, all of this requires a lot of buy-in, both from the faculty teaching together and from the administration overseeing the development of such courses. You need a lot of people ready to see the value in this process. The particulars of your campus might provide their own limitations or opportunities. Putting together collaborations like these takes time and energy, but it's worth it. I think of co-teaching as an investment - in the future of the program, the students, and the instructors. What requires two instructors today might, with the right preparation and participation, only require one tomorrow.

In case you want to read more, here are some other pieces on co-teaching from myself and past collaborators (happy to be pointed to others!):

- Sarah Storti - [On Co-Teaching and Gratitude](#)
- Ed Triplett - [One Teach, One Drift](#)
- Here is another blip from me - [Washington and Lee Trip](#)
- And some of my syllabi and materials can be found [here](#) and [here](#)