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The Diversity Excuse: Why Intersectionality Should Be The Focus in Digital Humanities

When the default setting in society is that of a straight, white male perspective, any amount of diversity may be perceived as ‘enough.’ However, within the field of Digital Humanities, we are beginning to see the consequences of this mentality. To begin with, let us evaluate the meaning of intersectionality. It is often confused with the concept of diversity, but it is far beyond this. Intersectional projects might include a South African Black woman who identifies as queer and that is creating projects surrounding the concept of transgender acceptance in rural communities in varying countries. Diversity would say that because she is a woman, adding her to a panel is enough. However, that would mean that we are equating her and her experiences to that of a middle-class, white American woman who solely focuses on canonical literary works. Diversifying spaces, while at its core is an important discussion and aspect of academia, is no longer enough. It is an excuse to avoid digging deeper into prejudices present in academic spaces. As we go forward, we must consider the ways in which the digital humanities fails the test of intersectionality and how it might correct these issues before it is pigeonholed as yet another inaccessible space within academia.

First let us consider the research conducted by Barbara Bordalejo. A controversial article was published about the equal opportunities found within the DH community, to which women DH scholars responded with a contradictory opinion (321). In order to develop a more conclusive outlook on the situation, Bordalejo and colleagues conducted a study regarding who was accepted to a well-known DH conference and what their background consisted of. They attempted to keep the categories as broad as possible, including age, race, gender identity, sexual

orientation, country of origin, job title, etc (Bordalejo 335). The results concluded that the DH space was pretty evenly split between male- and female-identifying scholars. However, when looking at the data from an intersectional perspective, the field is heavily saturated with “binary, white, affluent, and Anglophone” scholars (334). So while the study set out to evaluate the gender disparity in DH, its conclusions were actually incredibly more important. And Bordalejo was not the only individual to discover this disparity. In his studies on available projects to the public, Simon Mahoney found that

As one might surmise, with a lack of intersectionality among the authors of DH projects, it also creates a disparity among the types of projects and work done within the field. According to scholar Christina Boyles, the advent of the Digital Humanities in its earliest years was used as an outlet for those attempting to escape the wave of Feminist influence in the world of academia in order to continue their work in canonical literature (94). As most would understand, traditional canonical works are most often authored by white men. In present spaces, the question of funding is the driving force behind the lack of DH projects including intersectional subject matter (Boyles 96). Simon Mahoney found that the majority of projects available that he was able to discover were centered around Anglo-American individuals, making up 65% of the studied projects (380). According to Mahoney, “The field of digital humanities has arguably been built on openness and a sense of community but has historically excluded much of the world by its anglophone preponderance and focus on text-based scholarship” (383). Suffice to say, the research has come to prove otherwise.

So what? What does intersectionality have an effect on in the long run? Let us consider those under college age. Classrooms that are low-income and predominantly non-white have historically had fewer academic role models than their middle-class and white counterparts.

Genevieve Carpo considers the ways in which the digital humanities could potentially help to close the gap in learning representation through access to intersectional DH projects and technology study (1). If that old adage that “children are our future” does indeed prove true, then many of the issues currently faced in DH and academia as a whole could be done away with by doing the intersectional work now in order to provide for a more intersectional future later.

Works Cited

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