

2017

## Reifying the Maker as Humanist

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### Recommended Citation

Hunter, John; Faull, Katherine; and Jakacki, Diane, "Reifying the Maker as Humanist" (2017). *Faculty Contributions to Books*. 141.  
[https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac\\_books/141](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_books/141)

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# MAKING THINGS *and* DRAWING BOUNDARIES

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EXPERIMENTS  
IN THE DIGITAL  
HUMANITIES

Jentery Sayers

EDITOR

DEBATES IN THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES



*University of Minnesota Press*  
*Minneapolis*  
*London*

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## Reifying the Maker as Humanist

JOHN HUNTER, KATHERINE FAULL, AND DIANE JAKACKI

This chapter argues that the success of “making” depends on not only physical space but also the intersections between disciplines that encourage critical humanistic discourse. Rather than reifying the digital humanities (DH) maker as a (usually male, usually white, usually economically and socially advantaged) creator, we argue that the DH maker is uniquely positioned to subvert paradigms of class, race, gender, and ableist privilege.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we assert that as (digital) humanists, we (with our students) have an opportunity and a responsibility to reclaim the centrality of making to the humanities and its histories. Since the humanities is defined by the production of historically situated critique, critical making deserves prominence in the rhetoric of today’s makerspaces. Such prominence could rescue not only DH from residual claims that it is insufficiently “intellectual” but also the humanities from charges that it does not produce anything “useful.”<sup>2</sup> After first undoing the presumed discontinuity between traditional humanist practice and contemporary DH makers, we move to some specific examples from our own experience and end by articulating the transformative potential of the DH maker as an enactment of humanistic thought.

The intellectual relationship between making and analyzing has been contested for centuries, and debates around the status of DH making within the contemporary academy are just its latest incarnation. Aristotle’s assertion in the *Politics* that “it is impossible to engage in virtuous pursuits while living the life of a vulgar craftsman or hired laborer” crystallizes the old and strongly held prejudice against making things with our hands and in favor of contemplative activities (Aristotle 1.5). It has conditioned the Western academy (and society in general) ever since. Against this assertion, however, is Aristotle’s advocacy of “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*) and the benefits of practicing (as opposed to only thinking) virtuous habits (MacIntyre 175–8). A positive concept of a “maker” as a writer and for God as a creator has a pedigree in the English-speaking world dating back to the fourteenth century. A century or so later, “maker” also described a poet (Bawcutt 1–39). At that time,

the emphasis was on rhetoric, understood as the scholar's capacity to *make* as the result of reading, analysis, and self-fashioning. For Erasmus in the sixteenth century, the scholar's task was to study ancient wisdom and "store it in our memory once observed, imitate it once remembered, and by constant employment develop an expertise by which we may call upon it instantly" ("Copia" 302). The purpose was not to confine one's thought to the past, but to use thought to create new knowledge for the future. Erasmus's rhetoric also emphasizes the materiality of both language and writing; language is shaped according to the contexts in which it is needed, and it is in every sense something artificial and crafted, not ethereal and abstract. Aristotle denigrated such workmanlike repetitions (even musicians are "vulgar craftsmen" in his estimation [Aristotle 8.5]), but Erasmus has no qualms about stressing the material labor of academic work. The act of writing was much more laborious prior to the invention of fountain pens, modern paper products, and keyboards (Goldberg 61–169).

This debate about the relative value of disembodied thought and embodied practice persists in today's academy, albeit inflected by a twenty-first century Western context. Why is creating an algorithm perceived as "making something new" when compared with writing an essay? The difference in creativity between the two activities is not empirically obvious. Stephen Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell (2012) note that making a digital tool is not seen as a "scholarly" activity (77–83) in the same way as writing. On the other hand, algorithms may claim what Johanna Drucker (2012) calls "the cultural authority of digital technology" that emanates from scientific and engineering disciplines (85). They also enjoy a great deal more prestige than traditional humanistic scholarship in the contemporary media environment. The ancient and largely unconscious forces that value intellectual labor over manual work coexist with a social environment where digital skills are deemed essential in secondary schools and fundamental to nearly all academic research outside the humanities. As Max Horkheimer commented in 1937 (in language that could have been lifted from an op-ed article today), "In recent periods of contemporary society the so-called human studies (*Geisteswissenschaften*) have had but a fluctuating market value and must try to imitate the more prosperous natural sciences whose practical value is beyond question" (191). In 2004, Edward Said observed that "no matter who is writing or speaking, where, when, or to whom, the humanities always seem to be in deep and usually terminal trouble" (31). One could trace this rhetoric of crisis all the way back to Erasmus, but since 2008 the humanities has witnessed a decline in the number of majors, caused by a toxic combination of economic anxiety, spiraling costs, and media and parental suspicion of the humanities' value in the world.<sup>3</sup> The idea that humanities students should be making real (rather than evanescent) products is a reasonable response to these pressures; it asserts the tangibility of what we do and addresses (in some cases, embraces) the demand to demonstrate "relevance" in our historical moment. However, as history shows, this idea has nothing to do with "making" as something unprecedented or new in humanities

education; ever since humanism existed as a self-conscious entity, its scholarly products have been fabricated (Erasmus, *The Correspondence* 261–68).

So where does this ongoing debate leave DH makers in the contemporary academy? Demonstrating that making is “cool” is certainly easy, precisely because it is associated with science and material creation (just as Horkheimer says).<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Debbie Chachra (2015) trenchantly demonstrates in “Why I Am Not a Maker,” making also risks replicating some unpleasant assumptions of our socioeconomic reality. Some might claim (echoing Aristotle’s denigration of “vulgar craftsmen”) that we are “making a virtue of necessity” and turning to digital tools because university students no longer have the reading and writing skills to “do” traditional scholarship as well as their peers a generation ago. But, as Chachra observes, the alternative to making “is usually not doing *nothing*,” and making cannot exist without an enormous superstructure of other, less well-paid activities. A similar relationship between critic and practitioner existed in traditional humanist scholarship, as Northrop Frye affirmed in the 1950s, observing that (far from being a paradise for artists) a culture without critics (and the institutional superstructure they imply) “brutalizes the arts and loses its cultural memory” (5). Thus, making in DH is not ontologically different from traditional humanistic scholarship, nor are the issues around it unprecedented in the academy.

With this history in mind, the way forward for *making knowledge informed by technology* is to see a makerspace not only in physical terms but also as an intersection of disciplines: an interdisciplinary matrix that provides a (non-)place for critical creativity and combines elements of the arts, humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. This matrix is particularly important in a pedagogical environment or makerspace for undergraduates. In one experiment with a pass/fail course embedded within Bucknell University’s Humanities and Languages and Cultures Residential Colleges (living/learning communities), second-year students meet weekly to experiment with humanistic thinking and DH. These students (of whom 75 percent are women, and one of whom is visually impaired) experiment with cultural-historical spatial thinking, digital media analysis, artifact curation, and music-and performance-computing. For these students, the process of making begins in thought and imagination, in conversation and debate. It is fed by observation and critique. When they are reassured that DH making is a process, one that may face many failures along the way to a “made” product, students are excited to enter our new makerspace. Newly minted on our campus, placed alongside the traditional Craft Center, and equipped with 3-D printers and hardware, this space is a techy parallel to the potter’s wheels and paints of its neighbor.

Rather than being intimidated by the hardware and its operators, these students happily repurpose and remediate skills learned by Engineering and Computer Science majors to create DH projects. For them, applying computer languages and software programs from STEM disciplines to the humanities does not somehow validate the latter through the former. Instead, they see the process as dialectical;

code is open to humanistic critique and critique itself is the product of material forces. This access energizes the students to become the Erasmuses of the twenty-first century. They study and adapt the work of their peers to create new knowledge.

In another example at our institution, two undergraduate student researchers from Computer Science collaborated with a faculty member in Comparative Humanities to produce a searchable database of feature films that is rooted in word forms found within dialogue and paratext. Coding the database and deciding which metadata features were necessary were activities driven by their potential usefulness to scholars. As the collaborators realized very quickly, however, these activities also required making fundamental assumptions about what film research is and what it could be. The acts of programming and knowledge creation converged in processes that encouraged everyone involved to mash-up making and media and to emphasize process as much as product (Hunter, Eyster, and Hartman).

But, in these and other contexts, who are the makers in the humanities? Increasingly, the discourse in global DH revolves around issues of bias in terms of not only gender and race but also language and culture. This dialogue is uncomfortable to a community that has long perceived itself as welcoming and inclusive but in truth has followed the uncritical behaviors of more traditional academic disciplines. And yet, the difficult conversations about inclusivity are leading to responsible policies, many of which are being co-authored by prominent scholar-practitioners in the maker movement.<sup>5</sup> This is a moment when students (and practitioners) in the humanities, as they are reified as makers, are helping scholars and teachers to challenge traditional disciplinary and professional stereotypes within the academy. For example, the international 4Humanities movement (spearheaded by Alan Liu, Geoffrey Rockwell, Melissa Terras, Stéfan Sinclair, and Christine Henseler) presents modes of acting, making, and critiquing in DH that reinforces thinking about the humanities in terms of advocacy. 4Humanities sponsors an advocacy group for students that is founded on empowered peer communication across university campuses.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, questions about student labor, in particular the slippage between coursework and research apprenticeship, are being foregrounded in ways that explode power dynamics hidden in more traditional humanities disciplines.<sup>7</sup> In all areas of DH making, we need to ensure that students who participate in public-facing work (in whatever medium) have their participation properly mentored and acknowledged.

Two aspects of DH that are of particular concern to all humanists, and that present the biggest challenge to making in the humanities, are access to technology and agency in its application. They are especially important to those of us who think about DH in curricular terms, and so we circle back to the making/thinking opposition with which we began this chapter. Increasingly, DH scholars are interrogating methods and approaches that include rather than exclude: among the first to reconstruct our connections to and with DH are those, such as Moya Bailey (2011), in the position of “square pegs that expose the unacknowledged round

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holes” within the discipline (Bailey). Leaders in feminist, queer, and critical race studies, such as Kim Gallon (2016), have demonstrated how DH offers “real meaning and significance in the academic universe” and troubles the “very core of what we have come to know as the humanities by recovering alternate constructions of humanity that have been historically excluded from that concept” (Gallon 43, 44). Scholars of race and media such as Amy Earhart and Toniesha Taylor (2016) are using “DIY” DH to reframe our understanding of personhood in historical print and present-day social media discourse (Earhart and Taylor 255). Feminist collectives such as FemTechNet are exploring the embodiment of data production through research projects like *Vibrant Lives*, led by Jessica Rajko, Eileen Standley, and Jacqueline Wernimont.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, members of the Minimal Computing working group of Global Outlook::Digital Humanities (GO::DH) are implementing new ways for communities without access to large institutional infrastructures to engage in DH knowledge making that, as Alex Gil (2015) describes it, is alert to the “hybrid and global future we see being shaped for the scholarly record: parts digital, parts analog” (Gil). All of this scholarship occurs concurrently with the work that George Williams (2012, 2014), Jennifer Guiliano (2014), Erin Templeton, Amanda Visconti (2014), and others are doing across DH and disability studies, challenging DH makers to act more responsibly by considering principles of assistive technology and universal design.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps this is another watershed moment for the humanities to demonstrate to the world that ours is the proper place to frame discourse about identity, social justice, and even the ineluctable interconnectedness of abstract debates about human rights vis-à-vis technology and the environment. In a recent lecture, Naomi Klein (2016) reminded her audience that confronting issues such as climate change can best be situated in contexts that are familiar to humanists, encouraging us to avoid thinking in terms of isolation and instead complicate the larger “context of austerity and privatisation, of colonialism and militarism, and of the various systems of othering needed to sustain them all” (Klein). Klein’s point about the interconnectedness of modes of thought and modes of action that seem (or are positioned) far apart from each other is vital for all humanists, but especially for DH makers. We should be changing the question from who does or does not have access to digital tools to, echoing Gil, “What do we need? . . . What is enough?” (Gil).

In her investigation into the educational and racial politics of makerspaces, Lauren Britton (2015) argues for the activism of organizations such as Techbridge, DIY Girls, and Project H that work in economically disadvantaged communities to increase the participation of underrepresented groups in the maker movement (“Power, Access, Status”). Without student access to computer hardware, software, and collaborative experimental spaces, our expectations for a digitally enriched humanities curriculum replicate expectations of privilege. For instance, the Coachella Valley, California, school district gave disadvantaged students internet access at

night by parking WiFi-equipped school buses in poor neighborhoods. Although the mainstream media celebrated the action as a creative solution to a genuine social problem (Dobo), Britton wants us to see such situations as an indictment of structural inequalities in America and the ways in which the liberatory potential of the World Wide Web is being subverted; and it is through reflecting about making that her call to action is possible.

The academy is pouring resources into the maker movement. Making is high on university agendas.<sup>10</sup> As we grow maker cultures, we must inflect them with the critical insights of gender, race, disability, and design studies that view agency and access as generative foci for technological and pedagogical innovation, environmental and social justice, and storytelling by those who are muted by hegemonic normativity and institutional power. Within DH, we ignite this spark of activism when we interrogate our past as humanists and use that history of critical making to subvert the dominant paradigm of agency. By refashioning the maker as a critical humanist, we can undo existing hierarchies of knowledge and fabricate alternatives to them.

#### NOTES

1. For an analysis of these issues and the maker movement in general, see Lauren Britton's excellent series of blog posts (2014, 2015). Britton draws a powerful analogy between the growth of makerspaces and fitness gyms. She points to the physical location of both entities in upper middle class and white neighborhoods as a leading cause for the resulting restriction in access to primarily affluent and white populations.

2. For remarks on the relationships between DH, use, instrumentality, and neoliberalism, see Allington, Brouillette, and Golumbia.

3. See, among many others, Jay, Chapter 1.

4. See Horkheimer 194–97.

5. See, for example, the Digital Humanities Summer Institute Statement of Ethics and Inclusion, led by Jacqueline Wernimont and Angel David Nieves, and the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations Conference Code of Conduct.

6. See <http://4humanities.org/category/for-the-public/student-voices>.

7. See, for instance, A Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights.

8. At Digital Humanities Summer Institute 2016, Jessica Rajko, Stjepan Rajko, and Jacqueline Wernimont of the Vibrant Lives project presented an installation featuring a "web" of woven sensors that vibrated in response to the social media connectedness of the audience's WiFi network.

9. See, in particular, Williams's work using the WordPress plug-in Anthologize as a conversion tool from web text to Braille (2014). See also Hendren.

10. See, in particular, the White House celebration of the National Week of Making in 2014.

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