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Micro DH: Digital Humanities at the Small Scale

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Micro DH: Digital Humanities at the Small Scale

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Digital humanities practices are often understood in terms of significant scale: *big* data, *large* data sets, digital humanities *centers* (Terras et al. 2016; Kowalczyk et al. 2014; Borgman 2009; Kretzschmar 2009). This emphasis leads to the perception that projects cannot be completed without substantial access to financial resources, data, and labor (Prescott 2016; Hockey 2016; Evans and Rees 2012). While this can be the case, such presumptions serve as a deterrent to the development of an inclusive digital humanities community with representation across academic hierarchies (student, librarian, faculty), types of institutions (public, private, regional), and geographies (Global North, Global South). In response, how can digital humanities scholars find value in work undertaken at a small scale? This question is at the heart of this paper theorizing the practices of micro digital humanities by reporting on initiatives at Salem State University. These practices include the embrace of minimal computing, small data sets, local archives, and freely available platforms for creating small-scale digital humanities projects while working with undergraduate students.

The work of the Minimal Computing Working Group has articulated a vision for minimal forms of digital humanities praxis (Minimal Computing Working Group 2015). Jentery Sayers (2016) has identified key components of minimal computing, including minimal design, maximum justice, and minimal technical language. These principles privilege access and openness for stakeholders across economic and technical barriers. More importantly, they are precepts that envision how digital humanities practices might be available to those who work outside of macro structures that have historically shaped digital humanities. This has been important at Salem State, a regional, public university undergoing an unpre-

cedented budget crisis due to funding cuts from the state legislature. However, we have faculty and librarians who are committed to using digital humanities to cultivate digital and 21st century literacies in our students. As a result, we have conceptualized a micro digital humanities approach inspired by minimal computing. Micro DH validates scholarly output that does not require digital humanities centers, big data, large data sets, and access to high-performance computing. As an intervention in local digital humanities, it places high value on working with available resources, however small.

At Salem State, we have embraced micro digital humanities through our work with undergraduates. This talk explores these practices in depth, as a model for claiming the legitimacy of small-scale digital humanities. It considers how we have drawn on minimal university resources and existing institutional structures to build a digital humanities community.

First, the focus of our work is our university's archives and special collections, a diverse and free but untapped source of material. This choice emphasizes the primacy of local resources in micro digital humanities. Although Salem is known for its history of the Salem Witch Trials and literature of Nathaniel Hawthorne, our archives focus on the common person's experience in Salem from the mid-19th century to present. This includes a rich history of immigration and activism. It exemplifies the power of micro digital humanities for the diversifying the historical record by giving voice to the ordinary and everyday. Through our work, we shed light on the hidden histories that shape Salem today.

We undertake this work in service of our undergraduate students. Micro digital humanities is an approach that cuts across hierarchies in academic labor, bringing faculty, librarians, and students together to create small projects. Salem State is the most diverse state university in Massachusetts (35% students of color, 40% first-generation college students) and draws a primarily regional, working-class student population. Both the students and the university have few resources, but we work with what we have. To serve this population, we developed the Digital Scholars Program, piloted through a small grant from the university. We designed the program to answer the call of the university's strategic plan to foster student success through research opportunities. Students apply to become Digital Scholars, and those who are selected are mentored through the process of creating a small-scale digital humanities project over the course of a semester.

Because they receive course credit rather than payment, we do not believe that we can, ethically, ask students to work on projects for us. Instead, the program is student-centered and student-led through a scaled down approach emphasizing the creation of micro projects. We select collections for the students to explore related to the history of Salem State then lead them through the experience of creating a digital humanities project from start to stopping point. The process includes making discoveries in the archives, identifying research questions that suit their interests, curating materials, envisioning project design, selecting platforms, and creating a final product - and all the iterative dimensions this process entails. Students also have access to professional development workshops and opportunities to engage with guest speakers who are themselves digital humanities practitioners. Projects our students have undertaken include recovering the history of LGBTQ activism at the university, revealing the colonialist gaze of Salem residents who traveled to India in the 1920s, creating historical models of the university's oldest campus building, and connecting contemporary student activism around Black Lives Matter to the history of anti-racist activism at the university in the 1970s. These projects have helped students engage in a range of practices: digitizing texts, TEI, Omeka, 3D modeling, quantitative textual analysis, data visualization, and oral history. In the spirit of micro digital humanities, we only use freely available resources or open source software we can host ourselves. This is a response to our lack of financial resources but is also a result of our focus on students; we do not want to force them to use proprietary technologies they may not be able to afford to access outside of a university or on their own.

We situate this work as a practice of micro digital humanities, cutting across hierarchies to shift students from the position of consumer of digital media and technologies to the role of producer. This requires setting aside our preferences for what projects based on the collections should look like and recognizing that students will be working at a small scale. However, we view these small projects as pieces of a bigger puzzle that illuminates life in Salem. To bring these projects together, we developed an umbrella digital humanities project called *Digital Salem*, a portal that aggregates student projects by collection. Users visiting *Digital Salem* are offered multiple ports of entry into the history, culture, and literature of Salem. There, the small student projects add up as they contribute to a rich, varied resource on Salem. This experience

has suggested how a micro digital humanities can be designed with emphasis connecting small projects as modular pieces that work together to form a bigger picture.

These micro digital humanities practices have been the foundation of the digital humanities community at the university. They have brought together faculty, librarians, and students to facilitate student research at a teaching-intensive university. Further, they offer a model for developing digital humanities at scales appropriate to institutional contexts and strategic planning. Perhaps more importantly, they offer a vision of digital humanities with learning curves and barriers to entry that do not require affiliation with centers, access to expensive technologies, or substantial resources. This, we argue, is essential to the development of an inclusive digital humanities community.

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