3-2014

The Professional Turn

Adrienne P. Lamberti
University of Northern Iowa

The Professional Turn

Part of the journal section "Forum: The Digital Turn: A Roundtable"

Adrienne P. Lamberti, "The Professional Turn"

I've spent the past two decades of my professional life immersed in technology, not because I first chose to do so, but rather because doing so was my responsibility. No good scholar and teacher in professional communication—and indeed, no good scholar in rhetoric who also lives in the 21st century—should participate in the luxury of dismissing technology as a central aspect of her work.

Over time this tech-centric approach has informed my professional identity and a larger understanding of my discipline's mission; meanwhile, as a member of a discipline that (at UNI) is classified as one of the English field's subdisciplines, I find myself implicated in the current anxiety over the state of the humanities.

A Summer 2013 *New York Times* piece, for example, offered a eulogy that assumed "The Decline and Fall of the English Major" already was a given (Klinkenborg, 2013). An even more recent piece from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* featured a lengthy, eloquent homage to the English major—but the entirety of the piece seemed as it had been written as an attempt to stiff-arm this anxiety, rather than an unprompted expression of what a humanities education can offer.

My position within this perceived identity crisis accordingly felt like a false-binary tightrope walk between the emphasis on technology that must always be a part of my professional work, and the disciplinary discussions that worry about the apparent endangerment of the human species by way of the death of the humanities.

Enter the *digital humanities.* Although "humanities technology" as a topic of inquiry has existed for over twenty years (CNI, 2008), it would seem as if the larger academic world has suddenly, recently decided to take up the topic. For months now, I have not opened an email digest from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that doesn't somehow include a reference to technology, humanities, and/or MOOCs especially. For me, what the growing focus on "digital humanities" has done is offer not a safety net under my tightrope, but a way off the rope entirely.

Here's how it happened: When Professor Kate Pullinger visited our campus in October as the first guest in the 2013-14 Meryl Norton Hearst Lecture Series, she initiated her presentation on "the digital turn" with a comment that showed me the route off the rope. Pullinger stated,

The first thing you need to say when thinking about … the digital transformation of certain aspects of culture is that there [are] certain aspects that will never change[... O]ne of those key aspects … is the human urge to communicate via stories, to tell each other's stories…. [T]hat urge … to learn about the world through stories is something that will be with us always[. I]t's what makes us human in a very profound way. The digital age offers us new ways to think about stories, to think about communicating the things we want to tell. (2013)

Pullinger's comment was, in its way, a "digital turn" for me, because it helped me to *turn around* how I've been working with technological and humanities topics. In short, I realized that instead of focusing first on the *digital* in humanities technology, I should focus on the *human* in humanities technology.

This turn occurred for me only a few short months ago (during Pullinger's visit), so at this time I am only in the embryonic stage of navigating a tightrope-less existence—but I nonetheless have responses to the anxiety about the death of the humanities and/or the English major. The *New York Times* piece opined that "the humanities often do a bad job of explaining why the humanities matter" (Klinkenborg, 2013), so in reply I offer that within the academic house, the humanities matter, at least within the English room, because one of the ways in which we teach, research, and perform humane texts is via narrative production, dissemination and consumption specifically. This is what we in the English discipline and its sister fields *do*, not necessarily better than, but uniquely, differently, from other fields.

Narrative, as Pullinger pointed out, is one of the most powerful calibrators of human relationships. Meanwhile, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s piece defines "the English major" as "someone who has decided, against all kinds of pious, prudent advice and all kinds of fears and resistances, to major, quite simply, in becoming a person" (Edmundson, 2013). As I keep moving with my "turned" professional perspective, my challenge consequently will be to determine methods by which I can privilege a human-first approach in my scholarship on technology issues, and by infusing, cultivating and honoring *narrative* components in my Professional Writing curricula.

For instance, as a client-based project assignment in my Fall 2013 Technical Communication course, a team of students created website content for the UNI Center for Holocaust and Genocide Education. The students had been expressing difficulty in finding a way to visually design the site for users who support the Center's mission, but who otherwise generally do not have personal connections to victims of the Holocaust and acts of genocide. By taking a human-first, narrative approach, I was able to brainstorm digital design ideas with my students, and as a result they crafted website visuals that told *stories* not about the victims, but about the Center— how it came to be, its relocation to Bartlett Hall, etc.

This solution was not meant in any way to minimize the tragedies of Holocaust and genocide victims, but instead to support the Center's focus on these populations by creating a web

presence that resonates with the site's typical user audience, and in doing so facilitates continued support of the Center's work.

My experience with the students' project is one instance of how I've been energized as a teacher, and I hope to do the same for my students as learners and digital communicators. It is my goal, as the currently loud chatter about digital humanities inevitably, eventually fades in lieu of the next topic of interest in higher education, that I will remain professionally "turned."

References

CNI Podcast: Digital Humanities Centers- An Interview with Mark Kornbluh, Director of MATRIX (2008). *EDUcause*. **http://www.educause.edu/blogs/gbayne/cni-podcast-digital-humanities-centers-interview-mark-kornbluh-director-matrix**. Accessed November 14, 2013.

Edmundson, M. (2013, July 29). The ideal English major. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. **http://chronicle.com/article/The-Ideal-English-Major/140553/**. Accessed October 30, 2013.

Klinkenborg (2013, June 22). The decline and fall of the English major. *The New York Times.* **www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/opinion/sunday/the-decline-and-fall-of-the-english-major.html**. Accessed October 30, 2013.

Pullinger, K. (2013, October 24). The digital turn. Meryl Norton Hearst Lecture Series. Cedar Falls, IA