

**Spar: A Grays Harbor County K-12 & Higher Education Partnership**

**The Project**

Spar connects high schools in Grays Harbor County to colleges and universities in our state. The project has two goals. First, it works with teachers to design and test curriculum based on new academic research. Second, it starts conversations with students about their post-high school aspirations.

The history of our county is based in large part on logging and the stewardship of forested lands. The name of this project honors that history. The “spar” was the tree used to anchor logging operations in the Pacific Northwest during the early 20th century. This tree was the highest and most stable point; everything else depended on it. One worker, called a “high climber,” made his way to the top of it to begin construction of the site. These images resonate deeply in our shared cultural memory. As we look forward, we can find new starting points. This project helps teachers find the spar trees in the economic landscape of today, and encourages students to climb as high as they can.

**Contact**

Spar is a project designed by Rachel Arteaga, a graduate of Elma High School, who is committed to applying her doctoral training in the humanities at the University of Washington to projects that support educational equity and excellence in our state, region, and nation. She can be reached at rarteaga@uw.edu.

**Digital Humanities**

**Defining the Digital Humanities (DH)**

When we talk about “the humanities” on college campuses, we are describing the study of subjects like language, literature, philosophy, religion, and history. High school classes in the humanities, such as English, History, and foreign languages, prepare you for college-level courses in these areas. Most colleges will require you to take courses in the humanities in order to earn a four-year degree. For example, the University of Washington values these kinds of classes because they “allow us to understand and communicate the range and diversity of human cultural achievement,” a very important understanding for all students to acquire “as the world becomes more connected and interdependent.”

One reason, of course, that the world can be described as becoming more and more connected is the development of digital technologies. The many forms of technology we think of when we think of the word “digital” — from computers to smartphones to the internet — have changed the shape of our daily lives. In many ways, they have also changed the way that we study the world. “Scholarly work across the humanities, as in all academic fields, is increasingly being done digitally.” But what is scholarly work? And what do you get when you put “the humanities” and “the digital” together?
First, we have to acknowledge that the digital humanities (DH, for short) vary by subject. So, DH will look different in the study of history than it might in literature. Spar works with English teachers, so the examples given here will consider the ways that digital technologies shape how we read and write. Secondly, we can ask the experts how they would describe the digital humanities. Here are three definitions of DH written by professors who study it:

- DH uses the computer “as tool for modeling humanities data and our understanding of it” (Unsworth).
- DH recognizes that “digital tools, techniques, and media have altered” the sharing of knowledge (Presner).
- DH uses computers to ask humanities questions and asks these questions about technology itself (Fitzpatrick).

These definitions navigate us to the intersection of the digital and the humanities. Now that we are here, what can we actually do?

Traditional Academic Work and the Digital Humanities

People who specialize in a subject are often called scholars, academics, or experts. Sometimes, they work as professors in colleges and universities. Always, they are responsible for learning new things about their subjects and communicating this knowledge to others. This is called academic research, or scholarship. Scholarly work has changed dramatically as digital technologies have become more advanced and accessible, but the goal is generally the same: to create and share knowledge. Here is an example of how scholarly work has been done traditionally, and how the digital humanities are contributing to that tradition.

Case Study: Aphra Behn and the Women Writers Project

Aphra Behn was one of the first female writers to gain recognition in English literature. She is perhaps most famous for her 1688 novel Oroonoko; Or, The Royal Slave. In 1962, a scholar named Ruth T. Sheffey published an article about Behn’s novel in an academic journal called Studies in Philology. By publishing this article, the editors of the journal promoted and shared the knowledge that Sheffey had discovered about the novel, which was that Behn had relied upon specific sources of information for her descriptions of the main character. This was a major contribution to our shared knowledge about Behn’s work.

Recently, using a variety of digital humanities tools, scholars at the Women Writers Project also studied Aphra Behn, but in a very different way. Having already transferred one of the writer’s plays from print to digital format, using a highly developed text format called TEI, the scholars were able to run a program that counted how many times men and women spoke in the play. They produced a chart to visualize the answer. They discovered that while men speak more words overall in this play, they only speak at all in four out of the twenty-four total scenes. This information, and the visualization of gender roles in the play, can help us to better understand Aphra Behn’s representation of male and female voices in her work. This is an example of how digital humanities contributes to traditions of scholarly work in new ways.
Adapting the Digital Humanities to the High School Classroom

High school teachers are already using technology in creative and engaging ways to support student learning, and many districts have written successful grants to expand student access to hardware such as tablets and laptops. What is the difference between teaching with technology and teaching with the digital humanities? The shortest answer is that when teaching with DH, technology changes the kinds of questions we can ask about reading and writing, and also the answers we can find. This means that it opens new possibilities for curriculum alongside the approaches teachers are already taking. By imagining the digital humanities as a specialized toolkit, an academic community, and a distinct conversation, we can both briefly review the ways that DH has been used in research and teaching at the college level and begin to adapt it to the high school classroom.

DH is a Toolkit

While it is true that there are too many digital research tools to mention here, it is useful to look at concrete examples of available resources. One task of the digital humanities has been to thoughtfully compile, digitize, and edit printed texts. The Women Writers Project, Walt Whitman Archive, and Rossetti Archive are three excellent examples of electronic textual editing projects. With so many digital files, scholars are also able to run programs that analyze and visualize data. The Stanford Literary Lab has done exceptional work in this area. Another way to engage the digital humanities is through mapping texts. This helps us to see novels differently, for example, by tracing the movements of characters. “Walking Ulysses” and “A Sentimental Journey” are two examples of innovation in bringing geography and literature together. Some scholars are connecting their work to the design, prototyping, and analysis of material objects as they relate to the humanities. The Maker Lab at the University of Victoria is breaking new ground in this area of study. Spar uses the parts of the DH toolkit that are most relevant to the goals of participating high school teachers.

DH is a Community

Although the digital humanities have been almost entirely developed in large research universities, it would be a mistake to think that DH is kept behind closed doors. Many scholars describe DH as welcoming and collaborative. If one of the core values of the digital humanities is to build things, another is to share them. Because so many DH tools and resources are available to the public, they can be used far beyond their starting points in research centers. Spar expands the digital humanities community to include K-12 teachers and their students, and benefits from the openness of DH scholars who have decided to make their original work publicly accessible.

DH is a Conversation

Just like when you read a book and discuss it in your English class, the digital humanities spark conversations. Because so many of the scholars involved in DH work online in openly accessible formats like social media and blogs, you can overhear and even participate in their ongoing discussions. What are some of the topics that often come up? To take just a few examples, you will see that people who think about digital humanities ask each other critical questions about technology and knowledge in society. They tell stories about the way the printed book was developed, and connect those stories to the digital technologies of today. Often, they discuss what it means to read and write, and how those activities are
changing. Spar poses a new question: what can the digital humanities contribute to, and learn from, the high school classroom?

**Curriculum**

Our curriculum draws from the research and teaching practices of the university, is aligned with [Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts](https://www.corestandards.org/), and is designed around the texts selected by and learning goals set by participating teachers. Lesson plans reflect the distinct technology access of each participating school district. Materials are posted here under a Creative Commons license. All are welcome to adapt and share these materials.

In developing lesson plans for the high school context, I have consulted syllabi designed by Brian Croxall, Matthew Jockers, Lauren Klein, Anouk Lang, and Jentery Sayers for the undergraduate college classroom. By adapting the methods and findings of the digital humanities so effectively for their students, and by sharing their teaching practices online, these scholars have helped me to conceptualize how DH can be productively extended to K-12 education.

**Lesson Plans**

All lesson plans can be accessed in one simple download [here](https://modernlanguageassociation.org/humanities-commons/), on the Modern Language Association’s Humanities Commons site. In that PDF, you will find materials that support student learning using the technologies below.

- Narrative Mapping ([StoryMap](https://storymap.org/))
- Sentiment Analysis ([Stanford NLP](https://nlp.stanford.edu/))
- Text Database ([Google Ngram](https://books.google.com/ngrams/))
- Word Cloud ([Wordle](https://wordle.net/))

**Scholarship**

We think that the curriculum we’ve designed and the things we’ve learned together are important. That’s why we’re sharing our classroom materials and new ideas with others. Our digital humanities lesson plans and handouts are available on our site for anyone to use. And we’ve also been updating people who work in colleges and universities on the project.

This [article](https://newamericannotes.org/2014/07/01/BagleyFieldNotes/) published in *New American Notes Online*, an interdisciplinary academic journal at the New York City College of Technology in July of 2014, gives an overview of the initial plans for the project and talks about the county and its history for readers who may not be familiar with our region.

This [poster](https://www.gwu.edu/~jcompe/pdfs/BagleyFieldNotes.pdf) was first presented at the University of Washington’s Center for Teaching and Learning Annual Symposium. It was then presented in a colloquium at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI), an intensive workshop and conference hosted annually by the University of Victoria, in British Columbia.
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