In the spring of 2018, I taught "East Asian Digital Humanities" at the University of Pennsylvania. As you would expect, this was a seminar focused DH research and projects dealing with East Asian content. One challenge I confronted dictated the format of the seminar: "East Asian studies" is not a discipline in itself but an umbrella over various humanities and social science fields, involving at least three languages and geographies, from prehistory to contemporary issues. Here, I will address the question of engaging students from very different disciplinary backgrounds with these varying topical and language concentrations, at different levels (ranging from a senior to PhD candidates). On top of this, they had no familiarity with computational methods, or the history and state of DH as a field in the West or elsewhere.

This seminar proved unique in several respects among institutions in North America. First of all, it was focused exclusively on an East Asian context, and offered in the East Asian Languages & Civilizations department rather than English, History, Computer Science / Engineering, or another Anglo-centric administrative home. This isn't completely unknown, as Dr. Donald Sturgeon has been offering Chinese DH and East Asian DH courses at Harvard for several semesters already, but his are the only others I know about. My seminar also had a language requirement of intermediate to advanced Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, targeting it specifically to students of East Asia. Yet all course content had to be in English, due to the varying language expertise of the students as well as myself, the instructor. Finally, I was a full-time staff librarian teaching a graduate seminar as adjunct faculty, not really a common occurrence at Penn.
Today, I want to focus mostly on the format of the seminar, because it was so informed by the demographic I was teaching. I haven't really encountered it in looking at others' syllabi and articles, or in talking about teaching experiences with them. What seems to unite DH education at both the undergrad and grad level is hands-on teaching of a more limited set of methodologies (or even just one), through the lens of a certain topic. For example, methods I have commonly seen covered in DH courses are text mining or network analysis. Students learn software, tools, and maybe some basic programming to implement the methods for practice and also often to work on their own, perhaps trivial, projects based in their or the instructor's research interests. This necessitates an instructor comfortable teaching both a humanities topic as well as programming to students who may be total beginners at one or the other.

In my case, there was no way I could restrict my course to a single method or a small set of them and still retain any significant enrollment. Rather than having a classroom of literature majors, or modern historians, I had 10 students with a huge range of topics, time periods, and methodologies; moreover, none of them had any technical skill with DH-related software, let alone with programming. (Just getting familiar with and trying to create plain-text UTF-8 files stymied them mid-semester.) Six were from the History department and ranged from Imperial China to 20th-century Japan. Some had documents to work with, while others lamented that they had only numbers of garrisons and soldiers on the frontier, with almost no written records available. Even the EALC students couldn't be lumped together: one studied classical Chinese literature and hoped to become an e-resource entrepreneur; another was interested in East and Central Asian folk music; the third grad student works with the intersection of disability and religion in 21st-century Japan; and the EALC senior had a double major in Political Science and focused on contemporary China.
In other words, if I had gone with one or two popular methodologies—text mining and network analysis, just for example—I couldn't have retained more than one or two students of the bunch. In fact, those two were the least popular topics I covered! Instead, I took a survey approach, and the course resembled a traditional humanities graduate seminar more than your typical DH class. Each week we covered a different method or concept, with students reading research papers, looking at online projects or software, and watching lecture videos from often unpublished scholars in preparation for the 3-hour class discussion. They followed this up with a short, written response due the next evening. Topics included everything from mapping to metadata, network analysis, text analysis, the workings of APIs, and putting projects or portfolios online and thinking about licenses for one's work. Because I am certainly not an expert in such a range of topics and methods, I invited others both from Penn and other institutions to talk about their own work as examples of implementation and answer students' questions. The guests were largely librarians of all stripes, but also included a tech-oriented MA student from the South Asian Studies department. My intent was partly to inspire the class by showing that DH expertise is held by a variety of people, and that they can learn from their peers as well as professionals in all kinds of roles. In addition, many of the researchers whose papers or videos we covered were very junior scholars just starting their careers.

The only non-participation assignment was a final paper that took the form of an elaborate project pitch. I chose this format both because I wanted students to come up with something original, rather than just analyze what we covered throughout the semester, but also couldn't expect them to create a significant or personally meaningful project with the limited skills they brought to the seminar. Instead, I wanted to give them practice in selling a research idea to an audience such as a dissertation advisor or funding agency, and also the opportunity to
"dream big," as I encouraged them, about a project they could imagine enhancing their research with. I asked them to, no matter the scale of the project, identify exactly what they'd need to accomplish it, in terms of technology, money, time, skills, or any other factors they could think of.

So in addition to a review of existing research both in their own fields and related to their topics in the DH world, I asked them to show me what is new and exciting about their idea as well as the practical side of how to implement it in the real world. To give you a sense of the variety of the projects proposed, they ranged from a crowdsourced map of accessible spaces in Tokyo running up to the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics (based on an existing project at Penn headed by that student); an idea for a $100,000 grant to improve OCR for and then topic model cooking magazines from early 20th-century Japan held at the food giant Ajinomoto's corporate archives; and a digital museum of Central and East Asian musical instruments including 3D facsimiles and sound samples. The undergrad senior, meanwhile, looked at sentiment analysis research of China's Weibo microblogging platform in his literature review.

As an aside, I forced them to do 5-minute lightning talks about their projects a couple of weeks before the papers were due, to give them the opportunity for feedback from classmates. I say "forced" because they absolutely hated this! Many students complained that they will "never" have to give a talk of less than 20 minutes at a conference. But just as with the project pitch, they will be expected, in the real DH world (and beyond), to be concise and persuasive. This was practice I never had in college or grad school and I hope this gave them a chance to consider building skills that they will need going forward in their careers.

Through the course format and content, I attempted to give my students the context and questions they will need to pursue their interests in the future, and focused both discussions and
assignments on taking what they've learned in class in their own directions. Because "East Asian Studies" is not united by any content or methodology apart from an arbitrary geography and set of languages, and students typically focus on just one part of that linguistic geography anyway, it was a struggle to find the best way to present to them what "East Asian DH" could be. This was especially difficult given that the field that is only beginning to take shape, especially in English.

I also had to contend with the limitations of my own knowledge of the extremely varied methodologies and content of the research we covered, raising the question of the qualifications required to teach DH, however we define it. Does the instructor have to be an expert in everything, to the point where they can teach students how to actually implement a project in Python, or show them advanced use of Gephi or ArcGIS? I would respond with "no." It's equally productive for students to see an instructor who is honest with their own knowledge as well as limitations, and who demonstrates how to collaborate with and rely upon those who can provide their own expertise, as well as encourage them to be realistic about what they still need to learn going forward. No one person can ever be an expert in all of the varied topics, methods, and fields that make up "DH," just as no one person is ever an expert in "East Asian Studies" either.

This also raises the question of my role in the classroom, especially as a librarian rather than standing faculty. I have frequently heard librarians described as "facilitators," but here (and often in other contexts) I couldn't disagree more. Rather than connecting students with experts in other areas, I led the class with a good amount of knowledge of over half of the topics covered. I further, and perhaps just as significantly, acted as a knowledge producer in creating a public-domain syllabus that serves as an overview of the field that did not yet exist before I prepared the course. I gave the students and others a birds-eye view of "East Asian DH" as I defined it and led the class as an expert in the state of the discipline.
Because of this birds-eye approach, in class discussions we perhaps inevitably gravitated toward big picture questions about DH and its implications. At the end of the semester one student told me, "I see DH everywhere now!" I hoped to achieve that goal for all of them by encouraging them to explore everything they could, together and on their own, in class and after the semester ended. While there is little that united all of them in topic or methods, they will potentially all be seen as part of an Other in DH just by being East Asianists—a group of students who work with languages and data sets very different from those typical in the Western DH realm. In the end, based on the final projects and informal feedback it felt like I had been successful in inspiring them to think about the possibilities of DH within their own fields, and in offering at least one topic that appealed to each student, daunting as that had seemed. And as I emphasized at the end of the seminar, they are the vanguard of the evolving field (or un-field) of East Asian DH, and it is up to them to define and orient it going forward, with their very own research forming the core of what will be that nascent field now and in the future.