Where Credit Is Due: Preconditions for the Evaluation of Collaborative Digital Scholarship

BETHANY NOWVISKIE

We come at these conversations backward. Our instinct—driven by inherited methods and benchmarks for assessing scholars’ readiness for promotion in rank and for tenure—is to evaluate the products of digital scholarship as if they can be mapped neatly to unary objects and established categories, such as journal articles or monographs. As an exploration of the “changing realities of intellectual work” in the 2010 issue of Profession acknowledges, although the value of digital scholarship has begun to be recognized in humanities departments, “discussions have tended to focus primarily on establishing digital work as equivalent to print publications [in order] to make it count instead of considering how digital scholarship might transform knowledge-making practices” (Purdy and Walker 178).

A search for equivalency in product can lead us to overlook those incommensurate collaborative processes by which digital scholarship is created: systems of production that require closer partnership than ever before among individual scholars and the technologists, student and postdoctoral researchers, content creators, designers, faculty colleagues, archivists, and cultural heritage professionals who work collectively to generate, assemble, disseminate, and preserve new knowledge and new scholarly interpretations. We neglect, too, to consider the systems of reception in which digital archives and interpretive works are situated—including, increasingly, the degree to which products of digital methodology are continually...
refactored, remade, and extended by the expert communities that generate and take them up and the manner in which such work can be placed simultaneously in many overlapping production and publication contexts.

The multivalent conditions in which we encounter and create digital scholarship make evident the impoverishment that comes with concentration, by tenure and promotion committees responsible for evaluating the scholarly output of colleagues working in new media, on products of scholarship divorced from their networks of cooperative production and reception. To be sure, there are situations in which digital humanities practitioners work without explicit assistance or collaborative action. But beyond these edge cases and in an era in which the broad value of the humanities is under question, a defensive stance that asserts the uniqueness of a scholar’s output by protecting an outmoded and sometimes patently incorrect vision of solitary authorship is unsupportable (see Ede and Lunsford).

An essential first step to the proper evaluation of work in new media by tenured and tenure-track academics lies in appreciation of collaborative development practices in the digital humanities and in formal recognition of the collective modes of authorship this activity often implies. However, in too many cases, scholars and scholarly teams need to be reminded to negotiate the expression of shared credit at all—credit articulated in legible and regularized forms and acceptable in the differing professions and communities of practice from which close collaborators may be drawn. A tacit notion of scholarly credit as a zero-sum game has inhibited this expression. Yet healthier scholarship may result from generous and full acknowledgment of the contributions of collaborators—especially from more highly legible modes of acknowledgment like those common to the sciences. Might the listing of multiple collaborators as coauthors of electronic resources, scholarly papers, and digital project reports make imaginative presentation, committed preservation, and enthusiastic promotion of work in the humanities a shared enterprise at the personal level? Can we imagine collaborations in which not only faculty members but also named librarians, administrators, non-tenure-track researchers, and technologists begin to feel a private as well as professional stake?

Junior scholars (driven by career anxiety and facing a dearth of models for expressing individual contributions to collaborative projects in the digital humanities) may be reluctant to challenge long-standing systems that locate agency in authorship if that means highlighting the degree to which their contributions are contingent on partnerships in heterogeneous research-and-development collectives. Two poor options present themselves: candidates for tenure or promotion may choose to deemphasize innovative work they fear will not fit their colleagues’ preconception of a
valid or significant scholarly contribution—that is, that the contribution be made by a sole academic—or they may choose to elide, in project descriptions, the instrumental role played by collaborators and cocreators.

Fair evaluation of collaborative digital scholarship can only function within a complex network of responsibilities. Tenure committees are responsible for educating themselves about collaborative scholarly practices and the nature of digital humanities production, so that they may adequately counsel and fairly evaluate early-career scholars. Scholars who offer their work for evaluation are, in turn, responsible for making an honest assessment of that work and its relation to the intellectual labor of others. Digital humanities practitioners outside the ranks of the tenured and tenure-track faculty have a role to play as well. Their assertion (as professionals subject to different but equally consequential mechanisms of assessment) that credit be given where it is due can hasten the regularization of fair and productive evaluative practices among their academic faculty colleagues.

Examples instructive for collaborative online scholarship in modern languages may be found in the field of public (which is often to say digital) history. A 2009–10 Working Group on Evaluating Public History Scholarship, commissioned jointly by the American Historical Association (AHA), the National Council on Public History (NCPH), and the Organization of American Historians (OAH), strongly endorsed the AHA’s Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct, which “defines [public history] scholarship as a process, not a product, an understanding now common in the profession,” differing from traditional work “not in method or in rigor but in the venues in which it is presented and in the collaborative nature of its creation.” The working group addressed reception and review as well:

Public history scholarship, like all good historical scholarship, is peer reviewed, but that review includes a broader and more diverse group of peers, many from outside traditional academic departments, working in museums, historic sites, and other sites of mediation between scholars and the public. (Working Group 2)

Similarly, the MLA’s 1996 report “Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the Fields of Language and Literature” urged a holistic view of evaluation and assessment and acknowledged the “wide range of activities that require faculty members’ professional expertise,” including interdisciplinary, extracurricular, and digital scholarship, “practical action as a context for analyzing and evaluating intellectual work, and activities that require collective and
collaborative knowledge and the dissemination of learning to communities not only inside but also outside the academy” (Making 54; my emphasis).

As we expand our notions of the kinds of work open to assessment, we must also recognize that digital scholarly collaboration requires a different brand of peer review. An assertion of the validity of “collective and collaborative” knowledge production and the acknowledgment that review may include “a broader and more diverse group of peers” are only part of the picture. Digital humanities practitioners understand that collaborative work implies perpetual peer review, such that continual assessment—often of the most pragmatic kind and stemming from diverse quarters—becomes integral to day-to-day scholarly practice. Every collaborative action in the development of a digital project asks a tacit question: Does it work? That is, does this scholarly theoretical underpinning, combined with these methods for gathering, interpreting, and designing information, result in functional and intellectually effective digital instantiations or implementations? Peer review, in the digital humanities, is not a postmortem or end-stage scholarly activity. Instead, evolving representational models and digital content undergo constant review as collaborators—by implementing aligned systems or project components that make special demands of those models and resources—assist in their refinement.

The ethical dimension of shared credit for scholarly work therefore takes on special significance in the digital humanities. How will we figure authorship, regardless of research method or media format, in our most crucial professional conversations—conversations about what counts? One option is to default to a familiar binary relationship, one drawn between authors and their publication service providers, including book designers and copyeditors, on the model of the university or commercial press. Here we can congratulate ourselves on having arrived, through hands-on work in digital scholarship, at a deeper appreciation of technologies of text and media production:

Though authorial choices [in design modalities, technologies, and conventions] . . . have traditionally been more limited in print, recognizing how collaboration allows for more informed decisions and production competencies can make us appreciate more its value in print as well as digital forms.

(Purdy and Walker 186; my emphasis)

But digital humanities practice resists reification of the model, embedded in this passage, of single scholar as authorial decision maker. As we negotiate collaborative relationships and their effect on scholarly communication as a virtuous circle—circling, that is, among products in print and digital venues and among processes involving faculty and nonfaculty
partners—we must not imply that collaboration is merely a means of enhancing a faculty member’s ability to make informed decisions or more sophisticated authorial and directorial choices. This danger is inherent in any discussion that wishes to clarify, when the stakes are high, a solitary academic’s agency and scholarly contribution, for

almost all the routine forms of marking an academic career—CVs, annual faculty activity reports, tenure and promotion reviews—militate against [collaboration] by singling out for merit only . . . moments of individual “productivity.” . . . The structures of academic professionalism, that is, encourage us not to identify with our coworkers but to strive to distinguish ourselves from one another—and, in doing so, to short-circuit attempts to form a sense of our collective interests and identity.

(Harris 51–52)

In this, the AHA encourages its constituents to be “explicit, thorough, and generous in acknowledging . . . intellectual debts” regardless of publication venue, promoting “vigilant self-criticism” and reminding them that “throughout our lives none of us can cease to question the claims to originality that our work makes and the sort of credit it grants to others” (Statement on Standards). A parallel statement issued by the MLA takes a much narrower and more operational view, driving the issue of credit for and acknowledgment of ideas almost exclusively toward the problem of plagiarism, especially in cases where “unpublished scholarly material” is encountered and “lack of a printed text makes originality hard to establish” (Statement of Professional Ethics).

The MLA’s statement is deeply embedded not only in print culture but also in a view of scholarship as the product of solitary, reflective action—something generated by one author, perhaps after discussion with others. To be sure, most essays and monographs in modern languages are produced in this way. But an expansive position like that of the AHA, encouraging ceaseless ethical self-questioning and “explicit, thorough, and generous” acknowledgment, seems more likely to promote the healthy relationships that collaborative digital scholarship increasingly demands.

Among the questions that James Purdy and Joyce Walker encourage us to ask of scholarship, print or digital, are some that mark an important shift: “Who has shared in this production? Can the author(s) or the community responsible for production claim expertise in the subject matter? Do those who shared in the production continue to use and reuse the text to produce knowledge?” (192). This turn is critical because it begins to make plain the truth that credit for knowledge production is not zero-sum. Such self-questioning counters a mind-set in the humanities that
penalizes work done in collaboration—as if by listing many names on a project or publication, its authors diminish the amount of credit available to be claimed by each of them. Evaluative questioning of this sort, if undertaken on an institutional scale and supported by our established systems of academic reward, may instead lead to clear demonstrations of the generative (and not reductive) nature of collaboration. Collective generation of new knowledge and the engagement, across disciplinary and professional boundaries, of new knowledge communities only widen the field of play for any single scholar.

Much remains to be done, particularly by our professional societies, in implementing evaluative practices that support a growing, shared understanding of collaborative digital scholarship. The Association for Computers and the Humanities, arguably best positioned to understand and articulate these matters, has been conspicuously silent. Unfortunately, the excellent statement by the AHA, NCPH, and OAH on public history as collaborative process appears only in the introduction to the report of the tenure and promotion working group and is not manifested in its specific recommendations (Working Group). These recommendations, while generally valuable in arguing for the establishment of best practices in evaluating scholars engaged in the public humanities, are disappointing in that they say nothing about the obligation of committees to take alternative peer groups seriously or about the obligation of scholars to ensure that their collaborators are properly credited. The force of the document is to reify scholarship as product and scholars as solitary creatures. Likewise, the involvement, as scholarly partners, of collaborators beyond the ranks of students and fellow faculty members is wholly absent from the MLA’s ten-year-old Guidelines for Evaluating Work with Digital Media in the Modern Languages. These guidelines state only that candidates for tenure and promotion must be prepared to outline, without specific reference to human networks or cooperative action, “the process underlying the creation of work in digital media (e.g., the creation of infrastructure as well as content)” and to “describe new collaborative relationships with other faculty members and students required by . . . work in digital media” (Statement of Professional Ethics [“Ethical Conduct in Service and Scholarship”]; my emphasis). Professional societies across the disciplines have failed to advise scholars and tenure committees to value the risky and potentially more transformative action of clarifying the difference—rather than the scholarly sameness—of the public and digital humanities. They have elided rather than emphasized the degree to which scholars function with increasing frequency in heterogeneous collaborative networks.
Our tenure and promotion practices do not acknowledge that the orchestration of new, participatory audiences for scholarship and the development of digital work through close, enabling partnerships with professionals beyond the ranks of teaching and research faculty imply a cocreation, at varying levels, of that work. Yet good stewardship of our profession and of its lasting products through administrative systems of quality control demands a standardized means of expressing the contributions of an individual to a collaborative effort and of judging the influence on one scholar’s body of work of activity undertaken in dense and sometimes unfamiliar systems of labor and intellectual partnership.

Our motion in this direction may be driven in equal measure by the informal and collaborative ethos of communities of practice in the digital humanities,² the rise of alternative academic (or “#alt-ac”) professions in humanities labs and centers,¹ and the emergence of research assessment exercises in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (where required reporting of scholarly output may encourage explicit coauthorship in cases where a footnoted acknowledgment once sufficed).⁴ But how, in the most pragmatic sense, to get there?

The MLA’s Advice for Authors, Reviewers, Publishers, and Editors of Literary Scholarship offers one model: “Only persons who have made significant contributions and who share responsibility and accountability should be listed as coauthors of a publication,” and each listed coauthor should be asked to approve the final draft. Alphabetical listings of coauthors indicate equal responsibility for the publication, and where listings appear “out of alphabetical order, then the first person listed is considered the lead author.”

Can the expression of shared credit be so easily and uniformly applied as this recommendation implies? How are “responsibility and accountability” apportioned in contexts where some collaborators have provided content, others a digital and intellectual infrastructure for analysis or publication, and still others presentational and design expertise—all of which are integral to the scholarly argument embodied in a particular electronic resource? Are we ready to list vast numbers of significantly contributing collaborators? What do “final drafts” even mean, anymore? We might better look to practices of acknowledgment not only in scientific publishing but also in scholarly editing (online and off) and in research and development collectives in architecture and the arts.

Apportionment and expression of credit will never be simple or formulaic in digital humanities scholarship, because of the multiple communities and community norms that must be respected and engaged in
any collaborative project. Here we might consider INKE—a large, multi-institutional, international, and interdisciplinary effort geared toward “implementing new knowledge environments” in the context of digital transformations of the book. INKE involves scores of researchers from four countries in four areas of interrelated inquiry. It is notable in the digital humanities community for its self-reflective stance and rigorous analysis of processes of collaboration and project management, serving as a laboratory for measuring the effectiveness of mechanisms like project charters and distributed, online communication.

Appropriate expression and apportionment of shared credit were key issues in the drafting of INKE’s project charter and omnibus administrative document, which “reflected the fact that the larger research team represented diverse disciplinary backgrounds.” Therefore “certain conventions, such as authorship, had to be negotiated in advance” (Siemens and INKE Research Group 4). INKE project participants must acknowledge formal agreement with a set of basic operating procedures for the research collective. These procedures include a model for content reuse and expression of collective credit having “more in common with the sciences . . . than [the] humanities with its focus on the sole author” (7). INKE establishes collective intellectual property provisions, specifying that all research materials generated in the course of the project be deposited in a “research commons” for shared access among team members. Work in the commons is understood to be open to reuse and publication by any INKE collaborator, “with full acknowledgment of that work’s origins.” For “presentations or papers where [INKE itself] is the main topic,” the charter specifies “all team members should be co-authors.” It also defines when, how, and where individuals should be listed for “named co-authorship credit” as active participants and defines situations in which an agreed-on corporate authorship notation (i.e., “INKE Research Group”) is appropriate. Postdoctoral fellows and student assistants are specifically identified as eligible for equal acknowledgment when making “significant contributions to INKE’s research.” Project leaders are instructed to pay special attention to mentorship and to the professional growth of such employees (15–16).

The symbolic dimension of INKE’s charter is vital to the success of the project, as a “negotiated authorship convention that fits the needs of a particular team can also signal the nature of that working relationship” (6). By emphasizing the credit due to the entire research group, collaborators offer “a visible manifestation” of agreed-on relationships: “Any published work and data represent the collaboration of the whole team, past and present, not the work of any sole researcher” (6–7). INKE’s leaders make no claim
to have solved the problem of interdisciplinary, collaborative authorship and communally and individually held intellectual property, but they have offered a documented and specific model that, as the project proceeds, can be tested for effectiveness and for how it influences researchers’ collaborative work and career development.

Anxieties underlie the development of project charters, statements of professional ethics, and other documents meant to address acknowledgment of our collaborators and standards for assessment and review (cf. Ruecker and Radzikowska). Many of these anxieties seem to stem not from uncertainty about our ability to negotiate interpersonal relationships but from the recognition that inequities among collaborators of different employment status are codified in institutional policy. Institutional policies regulate the description and classification of positions, the awarding of research time or sabbaticals, the bases for annual review of non-tenure-track collaborators on research projects, the constitution of work for hire, and especially the ability of staff members to assert ownership over their intellectual property, including the power to release it in open access and open source formats (cf. Kent and Ellis; Nowviskie).

Such concerns motivated a recent NEH-funded workshop on professionalization in digital centers of scholar-programmers and alternative academics—those employees most likely to claim shared credit alongside faculty partners in digital research. A working group charged with the task of paying attention to scholarly collaboration drew on members’ experience administering three prominent and differently organized digital centers to draft a “Collaborators’ Bill of Rights,” which was later endorsed by the full workshop assembly and posted for public comment. This document focuses almost entirely on the need for fair, honest, legible, portable, and prominently displayed crediting mechanisms. It offers a dense description of underlying requirements for healthy collaboration and adequate assessment from the point of view of practicing digital humanists, with special attention to the vulnerabilities of early-career scholars and staff or non-tenure-track faculty members. Along with the emergence of specific project charters and agreements, statements like this one demonstrate the digital humanities community’s increasing preparation to address fundamental matters of collaborative credit leading to fair and accurate assessment of digital scholarship at the grassroots level, and in its own idiom.

But what will resonate in our academic departments and among our disciplinary professional societies? The chief preconditions for the evaluation of tenure or promotion candidates engaged in collaborative digital humanities scholarship are
that tenure and promotion committees understand their obligation to consider not only the products of collaborative work but the processes by which it was (and perhaps continues to be) cocreated.

that scholars, even while they ask to have their critical agency as individuals taken seriously in tenure and promotion cases, act on an ethical obligation to make the most generous and inclusive statements possible about the contributions of others.

that collaborators, regardless of rank or status, be given the authority and responsibility to state their contributions and the nature of their roles in scholarly partnerships.

that professional societies encourage the expression of credit in increasingly standardized forms, legible in a variety of disciplines and communities of practice, to be negotiated at the outset of scholarly collaboration and through open and continuing discussion as projects evolve.

and that institutions evolve fair policies and practices in support of shared assertion of credit, such as those that make collective and individual ownership over intellectual property meaningful and action-oriented.

Above all, faculty members assessed for promotion or tenure on the basis of collaborative digital projects must never be penalized for offering a full and fair catalog of contributions by their fellow scholars and nonfaculty partners. In this disclosure, they do not simply engage in an act of intellectual generosity at a moment when they might be most expected to act in their own self-interest. Formal and regular acknowledgment of collaboration as part of the ritual of assessment and faculty self-governance is strategically productive for our disciplines, both in its educative function and because it will be deeply consequential for policy and praxis in allied information and knowledge professions. It is reasonable to expect that, over time, the cultural shift signified by increasing standardization of collaborative credit will strengthen research-and-development partnerships. The sense of shared ownership these practices promote will result in better design decisions and more enthusiastic preservation of the scholarly interpretations and resources that humanities faculty members and their partners cocreate.

Standardization in practice among the traditional disciplines will also mark a healthy shift in the interdisciplinary digital humanities. While digital scholars are already more likely than their peers to frame work as collaborative (see Spiro, “Collaborative Authorship” and “Examples”), the transition from promotional rhetoric to specific crediting and evaluative benchmarks may moderate an unthinking and largely unproductive celebration, among practitioners of the digital humanities, of collaboration as a force that must inevitably transform scholarship—a trend Timothy Hill describes as “the teleological stream within DH thought—still coursing boldly into the future, as defined in 1998.”
The MLA’s Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion (whose recommendations were published in the 2007 issue of Profession) asserts, in more measured tones, the value of collaboration even in an institutional situation in which “solitary scholarship, the paradigm of one-author–one-work, is deeply embedded in the practices of humanities scholarship, including the processes of evaluation for tenure and promotion,” finding that

opportunities to collaborate should be welcomed rather than treated with suspicion because of traditional prejudices or the difficulty of assigning credit. . . . We need to devise a system of evaluation for collaborative work that is appropriate to research in the humanities and that resolves questions of credit in our discipline as in others. The guiding rule, once again, should be to evaluate the quality of the results. (“Report” 56–57)

This is a clear and unequivocal endorsement of the work for which our preconditions clear ground. But in a retrograde spirit (a return to the theme of coming widdershins at conversations about scholarly vetting) let us move toward an expansive interpretation of “quality of results,” an interpretation that appreciates fluid production, publication, and reception venues in the digital humanities and understands that digital media offer important opportunities for scholars to engage as peers with colleagues in alternative academic roles—who likewise operate in fields of discourse and practice in which their contributions are measured.

By accepting any set of preconditions for proper evaluation of collaborative scholarship, we acknowledge that a great deal of work remains to be done, both at the level of our professional societies that make recommendations and set standards and on the local scene in which individual scholars and committees of faculty peers continually enact our shared values. But this work will be amply rewarded, for in the expansiveness of collaboration strongly endorsed and productively expressed we open ourselves to wholly unexpected digital scholarship of the highest quality (a collectivization of Jerome McGann’s notion of “imagining what you don’t know”) and to broad and consequential engagement with the humanities, happening increasingly, as Kathleen Woodward puts it, “in the present and in public.” This reward will require what digital humanists call nontrivial effort. But to strike out in this way, optimistically, toward a set of desirable outcomes for evaluative practice, is to value our colleagues who might otherwise be driven by outmoded norms to dissemble, to underrate their own good digital work, or to spend their professional lives in solitary splendor. It’s time to decide which professional futures are worth working for—together.
NOTES

1. Note that an important and more inclusive revision of these guidelines is forthcoming in 2011 from the MLA's Committee on Information Technology.

2. See Scheinfeldt; Rosenblum et al. (the Digital Humanities Questions and Answers site embodies the bootstrapping and egalitarian ethos of this field).

3. These alternative professions often demand doctoral-level training in the humanities but generally do not offer tenure-track positions; they balance research, teaching, and service with praxis. See #alt-ac: Alternative Academy, a MediaCommons project (http://mediacommmons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/) and “#alt-ac: alternative academic careers for humanities scholars” (http://nowviskie.org/2010/alt-ac/).

4. To date, most formal studies of the relation of research assessment to collaboration and notions of authorship have focused on the sciences and social sciences, where established citation networks have facilitated quantitative analysis. See Liao; Sheikh; Bhopal et al.; and Klenk et al.

5. “Off the Tracks: Laying New Lines for Digital Humanities Scholars” was held at the University of Maryland in January 2011. The collaboration working group were Matthew Kirschenbaum, Bethany Nowviskie, Doug Reside, and Tom Scheinfeldt, representing the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, the Scholars’ Lab at the University of Virginia Library, and George Mason University’s Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

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