Collaborative Approaches to the Digital in English Studies

CHAPTER	Introduction
TITLE	English Studies in the Digital Age: The Call to Collaborate
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OVERVIEW	The introduction to the collection argues that forming collaborative partnerships is often the most productive way—if not the only way—to address research, professionalization, teaching, program development, and other challenges that arise as the field responds to digitality. In addition to providing a theoretical context for the collection as a whole, the introduction describes the contributors' chapters.
TAGS	collaborative, collaboration, digital, English, English studies, humanities, partnerships, pedagogy, profession, professionalization, research, teaching, technology, writing
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INTRODUCTION

English Studies in the Digital Age: The Call to Collaborate

Laura McGrath

As a field concerned with the production, consumption, and analysis of texts, English studies[1] is also necessarily and uniquely tied to the technologies that support those activities. Since we first brought personal computers into our offices and learning environments, digital technologies have demanded our attention. As those technologies evolve, the field evolves new research and teaching practices and new ways of using and thinking about digital tools. No longer the sole purview of a handful of specialists, digital texts (multimedia, Web content, digitized material, etc.), tools (software and hardware), and user practices (how readers and writers interact with, read, compose, analyze, share, and remix digital texts) pervade the field, from literary studies to writing studies and beyond. Although many English studies professionals have assimilated, investigated, and experimented with digital tools and associated practices on their own, such work is often facilitated by strategic collaborations. In fact, as this collection's chapters demonstrate, forming collaborative partnerships is often the most productive way—if not the only way—to address research, professionalization, teaching, program development, and other challenges that arise as the field responds to digitality.

In my research for this collection, I came across a number of examples of collaborative work offered as counterpoints to "the prevalent notion that humanities scholars work alone" (Palmer, 2004, p. 356; see also Unsworth, 2003; Bass, 2004; Norcia, 2007; Siemens, 2009). When it comes to technology and English studies, long-standing stereotypes about the lone humanities scholar are problematic and outdated. Like other compelling discussions of collaboration and technology in the humanities (e.g., Inman, Reed, & Sands, 2004; the body of literature on collaborative digital humanities projects; the sources listed in the previous citation), the content of *Collaborative Approaches to the Digital in English Studies* illustrates the fallacy of the suggestion that "humanists communicate with each other rather than collaborate, since collaboration implies working together—building—and the humanists' work is all about deconstructing ideas and dissecting texts" (Toms and O'Brien 2008, p. 126). This misleading statement fails to recognize newer paradigms, some adapted from the sciences or team-based working environments like software development, that are influencing the truly collaborative

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[1] In *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline* (2006), Bruce McComiskey uses *English studies* as an umbrella term under which he includes the "constituent disciplines" of "linguistics and discourse analysis," "rhetoric and composition," "creative writing," "literature and literary criticism," "critical theory and cultural studies," and "English education." While I recognize that this terminology is not entirely unproblematic, I believe it provides the collection with both the flexibility and the cohesiveness its content demands.

ways that humanists are working together to build knowledge about digital tools, texts, and user practices.

In context, what does *collaboration* mean and what gives rise to the call to collaborate? Simply put, *collaboration* means "working together" (Lunsford & Bruce, 2001, p. 52). In some cases, collaboration is associated with "big humanities" research (e.g., Davidson, 2008). The term "big humanities" suggests an adaptation of the working methods typical of "big science." The Stanford Humanities Lab[2] offered an example of what this adaptation might mean. The Lab's "About" page communicated a commitment to a "Big Humanities/Big Arts approach to humanistic inquiry and artistic practice, modeled along the lines of Big Science: large-scale, long-term, team-based projects that build big pictures out of the tesserae of expert knowledge." Within the *Collaborative Approaches* collection, "big humanities" research is represented, but it is only part of the picture. Here, *collaboration* refers to partnerships of various sizes and durations that bring individuals together around teaching, research, or scholarly projects; intellectual problems; or questions of shared interest, with the objective of producing an end product, such as a new pedagogical approach, a digital archive, or some other deliverable. Such collaborations may involve formal methods as well as informal approaches, such as play or "tinkering" (see Chapters 1, 5, and 10).

Motivations for pursuing collaborative approaches to research and teaching vary. Most often, collaboration responds to a need for diverse expertise or to staffing requirements associated with the scale of a project. As Tari Fanderclai (2004) has argued, "many of the research problems currently facing us . . . are simply too large, the changes too rapid for researchers working alone to make much headway" (p. 315). Working together makes sense when it comes to research and teaching projects that involve digital texts, tools, and user practices because such work so often calls for a variety of perspectives and technical proficiencies. Further, collaborative partnerships can bring multiple stakeholders together around technology-related topics in mutually beneficial ways.

As the chapters in the current collection reveal, productive collaborations can result from partnerships among a few (Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9) or among many individuals (Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4); among disciplinary colleagues (Chapters 4 and 5) or among individuals from different disciplines (Chapters 7, 8, and 9); and between academics and community/public stakeholders (Chapters 1, 2, and 4). Margaret Willard-Traub (2008) writes, "collaboration in research among faculty—within and across disciplinary boundaries—is viewed as increasingly necessary in order to address adequately the web of social, scientific, technical, and humanistic intellectual concerns relevant to a global, twenty-first-century context" (p. 437).

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[2] A former director reports that the lab is no longer operating, though some of its projects are ongoing.

Collaborative work involves complex interactions and negotiations, and it is associated with challenges that deserve consideration. As Amy Friedlander (2009) explains, "collaboration is a social as well as an intellectual process and can be difficult for many reasons, some of them having to do with institutional and disciplinary cultures, language and terminology, mental models about the research process, trust, appropriate credit, and a sensible allocation of tasks" (p. 6). Other scholars draw attention to the relationship between collaborative work, disciplinary structures, and the standards, policies, and politics of departments and institutions. "Collaborative work," notes Randall Bass (2004), "always runs the risk of being outside the norms of community practice" (p. 336; see also Cantor & Lavine, 2006, on public scholarship). The *Collaborative Approaches* chapters provide additional perspectives on the complexity of and the challenges associated with collaborative work.

Cross-disciplinarity is a hallmark of a number of collaborations that include English studies professionals. As one researcher explains,

> Just about every discipline now on a campus is investing more of its time, resources, and faculty in research pursuits in digital technologies of different sorts. So there's beginning to be a sort of shared base of interest in new media and there's also an increasing need for the specializations of other departments and programs to create projects. (Alan Liu, personal communication, October 16, 2007)

In recognizing and responding to this "increasing need," it is important to remember that complexity tends to increase when projects involve collaborators from multiple disciplines. "Chaos," one cross-disciplinary research team member comments, "seems to be one of the defining characteristics of interdisciplinary collaboration" (Freeman, 2004, p. 340). On the one hand, this chaos can be productive; on the other hand, being "outside the norms" can pose particular challenges for cross-disciplinary collaborators, and methodological and epistemological differences can make cross-disciplinary work messy at first. Some of the unique challenges associated with cross-disciplinarity are taken up in Chapters 2, 6, and 9.

Collaborative Approaches to the Digital in English Studies joins the ongoing conversation about collaborative work in the humanities. Instead of focusing exclusively on the digital humanities or emphasizing only the large-scale computational analysis or archival projects typical of that field of study, the collection focuses on a variety of projects led by or involving English studies professionals—from writing studies to literary scholars—in particular. In doing so, the collection demonstrates growing interest in and diverse application of collaborative methods within the field and provides examples of the exigencies that have prompted a move away from the stereotypical lone-scholar model of scholarly work toward collaborative endeavors. The first aim of the collection is

to present readers with compelling examples of how English studies professionals are employing collaborative approaches to the digital, thereby providing an up-to-date perspective on the nature of the work colleagues are doing as they come together around technology-related research and teaching questions. The second aim is to provide readers with concepts and models they can use in their own work as educators, researchers, and administrators. In sum, *Collaborative Approaches* offers readers a theoretical framework for thinking about collaboration and digitality as well as concrete examples of methods and approaches that they can adapt for their own purposes.

The keyword visualization in Figure 1 provides a sense of the topics associated with collaborative approaches to the digital in English studies, topics that are emphasized in the collection's chapters. As that visualization reveals, significant emphasis is placed on *students* and *research*, suggesting that collaborative approaches to scholarly inquiry and to teaching are well represented. In particular, *Collaborative Approaches* draws attention to collaborative work undertaken by graduate students. The way we prepare future colleagues for research and knowledge work says something about our values, goals, and vision for the field in the twenty-first century. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 9 demonstrate some of the ways graduate students are shaping and being shaped by collaborative, technology-focused projects.
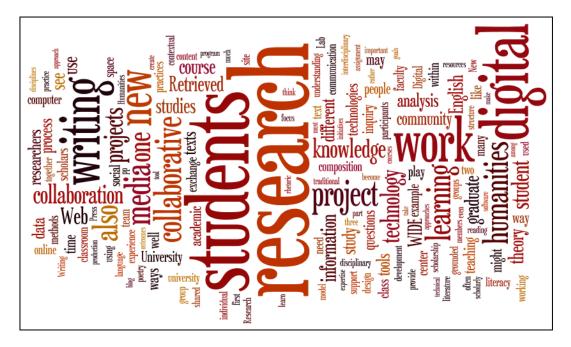

Figure 1. Keyword visualization created by importing *Collaborative Approaches* manuscript into Wordle.

What follows is a brief overview of the collection's chapters.

PART I: SCHOLARSHIP, RESEARCH, AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Chapter 1, Joyce Neff, Liza Potts, & Carl Whithaus's **"Collaborative Methodologies for New Media Research: Using Grounded Theory and Contextual Inquiry,"** examines grounded theory and contextual inquiry as methods for collaborative research into new media writing. Both grounded theory and contextual inquiry encourage multiple types of data collection and analysis; support cross-disciplinary and collaborative perspectives; and produce empirical, theoretical, and applied outcomes. By looking at how grounded theory and contextual inquiry were used to study the impact of writing technologies in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms, in a management writing course, and in a small hospital, this chapter demonstrates eight features that these methods offer team-based, cross-disciplinary projects.

In Chapter 2, **"Computing and Communicating Knowledge: Collaborative Approaches to Digital Humanities Projects,"** Lisa Spiro examines HyperCities, the Tibetan and Himalayan Library, the Orlando Project, and The Mind Is a Metaphor. Within English studies, digital humanities projects have been associated primarily with the study of texts (text encoding, stylistic analysis, text mining, hypertext, digital archives and editions) and a relatively small group of researchers. A key message of Spiro's chapter, however, is that digital humanities projects—literary and otherwise—have much to teach scholars in all English studies disciplines about participatory, collaborative, and interdisciplinary work. This work matters because digital texts, tools, and methods open up innovative ways of both producing and communicating knowledge, as Spiro's chapter illustrates. Spiro's research, which includes interviews with key figures from the projects mentioned, reveals important information about why researchers collaborate, how "participatory humanities" work happens, and how such work can be facilitated. "Ultimately," Spiro explains, "this chapter addresses how modes of knowledge production and dissemination are changing as information becomes networked and digital and as humanities scholars envision new ways of doing their work" (p. 49).

In Chapter 3, **"Technology-Focused Collaborative Research Initiatives in English Studies: The Possibilities of Team-Based Approaches,"** I present the results of research into collaborative, team-based initiatives that served as the catalyst for this collection. This research involved visiting three sites—the Writing in Digital Environments Research Center (WIDE), the Digital Writing and Research Lab (DWRL), and the University of California, Santa Barbara, English department—where collaborative, team-based initiatives were taking place. While there, I conducted interviews, observed and photographed workspaces, and attended meetings. As I note in the chapter, "my field research provides a starting point for thinking about the ways in

which . . . collaborative research initiatives in English studies challenge us to rethink fundamental aspects of our professional work" (p. 84).

The last two chapters of Part I present perspectives from two of the initiatives discussed in Chapter 3—WIDE and the DWRL. Chapter 4, **"Collaboration and Graduate Student Professionalization in a Digital Humanities Research Center,"** by Jim Ridolfo, Martine Courant Rife, Kendall Leon, Amy Diehl, Jeff Grabill, Douglas Walls, and Stacey Pigg, and Chapter 5, **"Playful Affinity: A Case Study of the Digital Writing and Research Lab as a Collaborative Graduate Student Research Network"** by Sean McCarthy and Lauren Mitchell Nahas, describe productive approaches to collaborative research that also professionalize graduate students in uniquely valuable ways. Ridolfo and co-authors "explore how the work of a digital humanities research center relates to graduate student professionalization" and provide first-hand accounts of their work on "community-driven research projects" (pp. 113-114). McCarthy and Nahas describe "play as a structuring principle . . . that guides collaborative research practices in digital rhetoric" and present a research group as a case study of "graduate research and professionalization that may be useful to those thinking about the relationship between graduate education, collaboration, and new media" (p. 142).

PART II: TEACHING AND LEARNING

Chapter 6, Matt Barton and Kevin Moberly's "**Across Disciplines: Establishing a New Media Program,"** focuses attention on the spaces in which learning happens and on creating environments in which students can learn about and faculty can teach and research the "inherently interdisciplinary subject" of new media. "The interdisciplinary nature of new media," Barton and Moberly explain, "can pose significant challenges to the contemporary university, requiring scholars to collaborate with each other across disciplinary boundaries, and, to some degree, against disciplinary expectations" (p. 164).

In Chapter 7, Magnus Gustafsson, Donna Reiss, Art Young, and Linda Bradley's **"From Local Seminars to International Teaching and Learning Exchanges: The Cross-Cultural Collaborations Project,"** collaboration at a distance is modeled by faculty and their students in a cross-cultural exchange involving participants from two American universities and from Chalmers University of Technology in Göteborg, Sweden. As the authors explain, "The Cross-Cultural Collaborations project—a poetry-focused electronic discussion activity that we have used in our courses for over five years— offers a representative example of an international teaching partnership and an evolving cross-cultural, collaborative, and multimodal learning environment" (p. 182). The project also involved cross-disciplinary collaborations: Swedish technical university students enrolled in a "Poetry for Engineers" course interacted with American students specializing in English or education. Gustafsson and colleagues adapted available

technologies to meet their pedagogical needs and to support learning outcomes, treating technology (discussion fora and then a blog) as a facilitative tool rather than a focal point. As Karen Lunsford and Bertram Bruce (2001) note, "A single collaborative tool is always part of an activity system" (p. 53), and so, understanding a collaborative teaching-and-learning enterprise like the Cross-Cultural Collaborations Project requires attention to all of the negotiations, pedagogical decisions, and expertise sharing that shape the endeavor. Gustafsson and co-authors discuss those elements in detail and "emphasize the importance of establishing a shared teaching culture among . . . facilitators, selecting a flexible and comfortable genre through which students will communicate, and carefully choosing prompts and setting up groups" (p. 184).

In a *Pedagogy* article, Megan Norcia (2007) writes, "By reaching across disciplinary lines to forge knowledge partnerships with special collections librarians, administrators, digital librarians, technology professionals, and a cadre of interdisciplinary faculty, we can improve and enhance the opportunities for student learning in the digital age" (pp. 91-92). Though Norcia's essay focuses on literary studies and digital archives, her point about the educational benefit of cross-disciplinary "knowledge partnerships" is illustrated within the context of an information and digital literacy course by Caroline Cason Barratt, Jill Parrott, and Erin Presley's **"The Polyphonic Classroom: A Collaborative Pedagogical Approach to Information Literacy and Digital Composition."** In Chapter 8, Barratt, Parrott, and Presley demonstrate the advantages of pedagogical collaboration between rhetoric and composition specialists and librarians in an information and digital literacy course that emphasizes digital composition and facilitates students' academic use of available technologies. When collaboration, multiple literacies, and digital technology combine to form a model for blending information and digital literacy instruction, the authors suggest, students are provided not only with new skills but also with a way to think differently about their roles as information creators and consumers. Further, Barratt and co-authors argue, employing librarians as co-instructors fosters an increase in both breadth and depth of research skill development while embedding critical thinking skills into the curriculum, creating a more sophisticated academic environment for students.

The final two chapters of Part II demonstrate innovative pedagogical methods that call to mind recent conversations about educational change. A July 2010 American Association of State Colleges and Universities/EDUCAUSE leadership summit offered "an opportunity to explore new models of teaching and learning and the disruptive nature of technology to consider the ways that they are fundamentally changing learning environments" ("2010 Leadership Summit"). A pre-institute reading, George Mehaffy's "The Red Balloon Project: Re-Imagining Undergraduate Education," asked the following key questions,

1. How are our universities going to use these new models of knowledge acquisition and application to change the way teachers teach and students learn?
2. How are we helping prepare students to be creators, disseminators, and strategic users of this new knowledge in what is now a deeply networked environment?
3. At the most important level, how are we beginning to deal with the challenge presented by new technologies to traditional, top-down notions of expertise and authority? How can we use the new technologies, and the ways of knowing embedded in them, to challenge and reshape—even reinvent— universities at every level? What long-held assumptions about teaching, learning, and about the role of the professor still have resonance in this age of the Internet? And which assumptions regarding the academic enterprise must be discarded? (pp. 13-14)

Although all of the Part II chapters address these questions to some extent, Chapter 9, Monica Bulger, Jessica Murphy, Jeff Scheible, and Elizabeth Lagresa's **"Interdisciplinary Knowledge Work: Digital Textual Analysis Tools and Their Collaboration Affordances" (with a response from Alan Liu),** and Chapter 10, Jentery Sayers's **"Tinker-Centric Pedagogy in Literature and Language Classrooms,"** discuss particularly thought-provoking pedagogies. Bulger and co-authors describe the work they did as graduate students and collaborators in an experimental "Literature+: Cross-Disciplinary Models of Literary Interpretation" course. The authors also address the main goals of their collaboration, as they emerged through the group's work together: to explore implications of using digital textual analysis methods on a variety of texts; to uncover possibilities in datasets through experimentation with different tools; and to recognize the possibility for cross-disciplinary use of the methods tested. The chapter is followed by a response by Alan Liu, who developed and taught the "Literature+" course.

In Chapter 10, Sayers argues that "embracing tinkering's inexpert, tactical, and situational experimentation lends itself well to introducing students of literature and language to otherwise unfamiliar modes of learning" (p. 279). In addition to providing background information about tinkering and noting that educational environments are growing "increasingly collaborative and digital in character," Chapter 10 also presents classroom examples of "tinkering" as a learning method. After identifying five elements of what he calls a "tinker-centric pedagogy," Sayers demonstrates how he has incorporated each into "prompts, workshops, and exercises" (p. 284).

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