

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research informing New Yorkers and the world. Last month, the National Endowment for Humanities gave nearly \$500,000 to support the Graduate Center, Digital Initiatives also known as GCDI. For more than a decade, GCDI has helped students and faculty at the Graduate Center and throughout CUNY use of digital technology to enhance their teaching, research, and service. The grant will allow GCDI to bolster its fellowship programs, workshops, and outreach. The support comes at a pivotal time, as the Graduate Center is currently constructing a center for digital scholarship and data visualization that will serve all of CUNY and is expected to open in 2022.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today on the Thought Project to talk about these exciting developments are Matthew Gold and Lisa Rhody, who led the Graduate Center Digital Initiatives. Matt is an associate professor of English and digital humanities at the Graduate Center, director of the Graduate Center's master's programs in Digital Humanities and Data Analysis and Visualization, and founding director of the Graduate Center Digital Scholarship Lab. He is also co-editor of Debates in the Humanities book series, and co-founder of Manifold, an open-source web-based publishing platform.

Tanya Domi:

Lisa is the deputy director of the Graduate Center Digital Initiatives. In that role, she leads the Graduate Center Digital Fellows, Social Media Fellows, and Videography Fellows Program's. She directs the NEH Supported Digital Humanities Research Institute. She has faculty appointments in the Graduate Centers, master's programs in Liberal Studies, Digital humanities, and Data Visualization. In the Interactive Technology and Pedagogy Certificate Programs, she is currently co-editing a book titled Feminist Digital Humanities. Welcome to the Thought Project, Lisa and Matt. It is great to have you here.

Tanya Domi:

We are also joined today by Bonnie Eissner, my colleague, who is director of communications at the Graduate Center and who has covered your work for our news feeds. Matt and Lisa, you are both acknowledged leaders in digital humanities, which is an especially dynamic area in higher education today. It's a relatively new area though and one that's not so easy to define. For the benefit of our listeners who may not know much about the digital humanities. How would you describe them say in an elevator pitch, Matt?

Matthew Gold:

Sure. Well first thank you, Tanya and Bonnie for having us here today. It's really exciting to be speaking with you, and also to talk about the digital humanities. Which is a term that many people are unfamiliar with. I would say that DH involves the use of technology to explore questions and concerns in the humanities and areas such as literary studies, history, philosophy, the arts and the humanistic social sciences. But generally, I think the digital humanities is broadly a bunch of people who have been trained in all of those fields who have started using computers in their work. That's how I'd define it.

Tanya Domi:

Lisa?

Lisa Rhody:

Hi, and thanks so much for having us. When I talk to people about the digital humanities, generally, what I say is that humanities scholars have had some of the same challenges for a very long period of time, dating almost back to the Renaissance. We wanted to be able to tell stories about space and place, for example. Doing that in language alone is challenging. So, we've struggled with ways of representing, for example, migration, or contest, or political unrest in a space-based way. Advances in emerging technologies and evolutions in the sort of technologies of print production have made it more possible to be able to make these arguments and do research in new ways. So, I like to think of it as not really revolutionizing the humanities but using emerging technologies as a new way of addressing longstanding problems that researchers have faced in both doing research and in communicating that research to public audiences.

Bonnie Eissner:

You know, that's so interesting. I know that Matt, you started a Graduate Center Digital Initiatives over a decade ago when this area was still so new. Lisa, you joined in 2015. Today the initiatives encompass everything from workshops and institutes to master's degrees, digital publishing student fellowships. The student fellowships are especially interesting as they have so many benefits for Graduate Center students, developing as scholars and professionals and getting paid. With the new NEH funds, you'll both be restoring and growing these fellowships. Lisa, as you'll oversee the fellowships, I was thinking you could fill us in more on what the new students will be doing and how the fellowships have benefited students so far.

Lisa Rhody:

So, there are three different components in terms of the funding for graduate students. We have a postdoc position that'll be able to offer for 12 months. We are adding four 12-month digital fellow positions. These are fellowship positions for current doctoral students and then funding eight of our existing fellows for the January break and for funding over the summer. So, bringing together the activities of those three different groups of staff, we're going to increase the number of workshops that we're offering. We'll be able to offer more seats to those students and faculty who want to participate in the January Digital Research Institute. We'll increase the number of consultations that we do with students and faculty. We have working groups with students who will be able to sort of explore different kinds of technologies in a more informal way, and we'll be able to increase the number of blog posts, tutorials, and resources that we're producing.

Lisa Rhody:

So, there are all kinds of work on the Tagging the Tower blog that includes resource guides and tutorials on how to make use of different technologies, and we'll be able to grow a lot of that as well. In terms of how students have benefited, I mean, there's the immediate benefit to those students who receive employment and funding, but there's also the added sort of scalable benefit to graduate students and faculty and staff across the Graduate Center in terms of what we're providing. So just as an example, the Digital Research Institute invites about 35 to this year... potentially 40 to 45 students and faculty, to learn about foundational concepts in digital research skills. Everything from how to work directly with your computer, using the command line, through how to data storage and management through

working with both R and Python. So, we have two different paths, R being a bit more data science focused this year, and Python being a bit more sort of app development and web development focused.

Lisa Rhody:

We've had students in the past who have come to the Digital Research Institute, have around new ways forward with their dissertation research. They have, for example, Carly Batist, who is a student in biological anthropology, was working with another student from art history, and discovered that they both experienced challenges in image recognition and analysis. It turns out that Carly working in a scientific field benefited from learning about technologies that were developed for art history in order to do analysis of images of lemurs in Madagascar.

Lisa Rhody:

We have Manny Garcia, for example, who works in psychology. Who was able to go to a conference and because he had participated in a number of the workshops and then also created a project plan, was able to communicate his project and win funding for his work. So, we see lots and lots of examples of these and we're just delighted to be able to offer it for more students.

Bonnie Eissner:

That's so great. It sounds, it really gets to that essence of sort of interdisciplinarity, which I think is a hallmark of the Graduate Center. You mentioned something that piqued my interest, which was a reference to Python. I know in a story that ran previously on the Graduate Center website, one of your former digital fellows an English PhD alumnus talked about learning Python during his digital fellowship. He described it as a watershed moment, when all of a sudden, he could tell the computer what he wanted it to do. So Matt, I'm curious, what is it about Python that makes it so powerful for academics? And how do you help scholars build their coding skills?

Matthew Gold:

That's such a great question. I think it gets to the heart of a major part of graduate school which involves very deep study, lots of reading, lots of reflective thought, lots of writing. Which is an amazing process, but which can also be a kind of a lonely one. One where it's kind of hard to see results at times. There's something really powerful, a kind of dose of adrenaline when you write a line of code and see it produce some effect on the screen. I think students, anyone really, faculty feels a newfound sense of control when they learn about how the computer works. When they learn how to use the command line for instance. This machine that so many of us use and that for so many of us is a little bit mystified. When we gain better understanding of how we can turn it towards our own research projects, I think it's just a really exciting moment, a kind of sense of autonomy, a kind of a sense of exploration and play.

Matthew Gold:

I kind of think of it a little bit, it's getting graduate students and faculty to learn a new skill, to learn how to tinker a little bit, to play with something. You create something you try and see if it can work. Maybe it doesn't work exactly the way you want to, so you change the model a little bit, you change a line of code. You realize you left out a quotation mark, and that's why your entire script failed. But when you finally get it right, that moment is really incredible. When you don't get it right. There's a lot of frustration. I think that's why our approach is really centered on building community, among people who are trying to learn how to code or how to use any kind of element of the computer.

Matthew Gold:

We really focus on building what we call communities of practice, groups of people who are learning something together and learning from each other. That's really at the core of what we do. I mean, in some ways you could say that what we are doing is not even as much about technology as it is about building out the support networks. So that students and faculty can turn to each other when they have difficulty. Because look, there are a million online boot camps out there that you can go and just try and learn a piece of code. But what makes the learning vibrant? What makes it meaningful, what makes you feel supportive is when you're doing it within a group of fellow travelers who kind of can help you along the way, who can give you tips, and strategies help you work through difficulties.

Tanya Domi:

That sounds really exciting for graduate students and learning, that's very exciting. I personally have never experienced it, but I want to know that I hear you both talking about it. So, what are some of the other ways that Graduate Center students and faculty stand to benefit from this new NEH funding for the graduate Digital Initiatives? We go with you first, Matt.

Matthew Gold:

So, I would say a couple things, first of all, we're incredibly grateful to the NEH and the NEH Office of Digital Humanities for this grant. Which comes out of the American Rescue Plan funding, which is really meant to help institutions for us. We're a public institution. We've been hit by of the pandemic like so many others. So, this funding is going to allow us to offer things that we've had to cut back a little bit on. For instance, our provost Digital Innovation Grants, which Lisa mentioned. These are grants that have been used by students to do a whole range of activities. For instance, there's a project called the Abolition Science Radio Podcast, where two students have created an incredible podcast that's really focused on bringing diversity, and decolonial methods to science and the teaching of science and the understanding of science.

Matthew Gold:

We're going to be able to support those kinds of projects, much more strongly through this funding. We're also really excited about a publishing institute that we're going to be running next summer with these funds, that will help grad center students and faculty and staff learn how to use tools like the CUNY Academic Commons and Manifold to publish their work in interactive ways. So, this again is it's building on a lot of the things we do where we're bringing people together, sometimes through an institute like this publishing Institute, but also through working groups like our Python Working Group, or our user's group or GIS Working group, Archives Working Group, Sound Studies and more.

Tanya Domi:

Lisa?

Lisa Rhody:

To follow up on Matt talking about the Provost Digital Innovation Grants. We're fortunate that the funding will reinstate those and provide us with eight \$500 stipends for external training that you can't get at the Graduate Center for students to go out and get additional training. There will be six, \$2,000 awards for students to begin a Digital Humanities Project, and four \$6,000 awards for students already working on a Digital Humanities Project to be able to extend and potentially complete their work. That

last category was really important to us exactly for the reasons that Matt just mentioned and that this American Rescue plan funding is designed to fill in places where students have lost funding due to COVID and COVID related budget exigencies. What we're able to do is actually provide replacement funds for students for perhaps a class that they weren't able to teach this year as an adjunct, so there's that.

Lisa Rhody:

The other opportunity is funding for a program that I'm very excited about. it's called Data for the Public Good. We've been offering this in conjunction with the library. Steve Weibel partners with us on this and on so many other things. We're excited this year to be able to offer \$1,000 stipends to 10 students. Last year, we collaborated with the COVID Tracking Project and students worked as a part of that Public Data Science Project to do really vital data collection and analysis. This year we're looking forward to working with another partner to make publicly available data sets more recognizable and understandable and useful to a public audience.

Tanya Domi:

Over to you, Bonnie.

Bonnie Eissner:

Sure thing. You mentioned some great public initiatives, Lisa, with the Data Science for the Public Good. I was wondering if there are any additional sort of community focused initiatives that you are involved in through GCDI? Maybe Matt, you could fill us in on any favorites you have?

Matthew Gold:

Sure. Well, I mentioned briefly the CUNY academic comments in Manifold, which are two of the platforms that CUNY either or co-built on the CUNY Academic Commons. This is a project that started in 2009 and is really meant to connect the entire CUNY system, all 25 campuses. We now have over 33,000 members on it. It's being increasingly used for teaching. It's the kind of asynchronous space that we use for our work working groups to bring people together. What's just impressive about it is how many people are using it for different things. It's really providing a space for faculty to publish their research. There's research like the New York Slavery Database. That is an incredible research project drawing together, historical records of slavery in the state. But it's also used by faculty to teach classes and students to publish their portfolios, to share their work. So, it's really creating connections across, not just the GC, but the system.

Matthew Gold:

Similarly, Manifold, which is a project that is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation, and which has been created by the Graduate Center with our partners, the University of Minnesota Press, and Cast-Iron Coding, is a publishing platform that is enabling scholarship to be shared in new ways. It's enabling scholars to interact with scholarship in different ways so that people can comment on works, they can create reading groups. We're seeing that used as a space for teaching and also as a space for the publishing of open educational resources. So, faculty are increasingly using that platform to publish work in an open way so that students don't have to spend money on textbooks and can really save money that way.

Bonnie Eissner:

Great. Thank you. And Lisa, anything additional for you in terms of favorite community focused initiatives?

Lisa Rhody:

Sure. The work that I've been doing for the past few months have really built off of a model that we created here at the Graduate Center for the GC Digital Research Institute. That opportunity was made possible for us through a CUNY wide Strategic Investment Initiative Grant for the very first time that we ran it. I'd like to think that what we've done has created a really effective way for us to take grant money and to make it valuable and useful for not just CUNY students, but for a much larger digital humanities-wide community as well. This past year, we received our second grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, for the Digital Humanities Research Institute. We received a supplemental award to be able to make the curriculum that we created accessible through an online curriculum guide, because we weren't able to meet face-to-face.

Lisa Rhody:

The students now have the experience of having produced these resource guides, things that can become public locations on their CVs. This past summer, we had 32 visiting scholars from 16 different institutions across the United States, ranging from community colleges and HBCUs and Research-1 institutions, and liberal arts colleges. The faculty all learned the same sort of foundational series skills that students here at the Graduate Center do. During the course of the year, they're actually going to run a similar Institute at their own colleges and universities and libraries and archives. And that expands the work that we do here at the Graduate Center all the way across the United States. So that by the end of these hundreds of faculty and librarians and staff have received the same kind of training that we offer to our students.

Lisa Rhody:

And all based on sort of taking the monies that we have the opportunity to win through awards and then making that manifold across multiple institutions. I think that just speaks really towards the kind of external facing ethos of the Graduate Center that we take, what we are given the privileges that we have, and really try to make it as widely accessible to as many people as possible and I just love that about working here.

Bonnie Eissner:

It really comes through in all the things you do. I mean, it's very public facing. I love that we're seating sort of digital humanities across the country, and we've been doing it for so long and so well. We're always reinventing. So, the Graduate Center is now constructing in our basement, a very cool sounding center for digital scholarship and data visualization. Matt, I know you've been involved in the project since the beginning. It will contain interactive touch screens, and Makerspace, labs, study space, even a classroom. It sounds like it's really going to become the new nerve center for the Graduate Center Digital Initiatives, and a resource for people, both at the Graduate Center and beyond. Matt, maybe you could start off. Then Lisa, about what excites you the most about this new center and its potential impact?

Matthew Gold:

Yeah, it's so exciting. Everything we've been talking about today, building community gathering collaborators to work together, kind of helping one another with projects. This space is going to really

enable that to be possible right now we're kind of located in different labs around the Graduate Center. But as you say, this will be a kind of a nerve center for all of this digital work and these digital projects. I think it's going to be a beautiful space like a kind of... I mean, look, it's not that often that one gets a chance to have new construction. I mean it's such an amazing moment to be building towards where we're going to be able to unveil this new center that will have some exciting design elements in the data visualization studio, kind of wall-to-wall interactive touch screens, where we'll be able to share our projects.

Matthew Gold:

We really think and hope that it will be a place where when we can gather in-person more and more, that students will gather there, that they can work with one another and learn from each other. I also think it's exciting because it's really given us the ability to form strong partnerships with a number of institutions in New York and outside of it. Our rationale for building the center involves building on New York's identity as a cultural capital really of the world. Our argument was that so much work in the area of big data focuses on business data, economic data. What we really wanted to do was to focus in part on some of the thornier questions that are put forward by data related to the arts and cultural history.

Matthew Gold:

So, we're working with various partners. In our initial proposal, we had partnerships with the Museum of Modern Art, and [Risom 00:24:17], and Cooper Hewitt and many other institutions. We're really looking forward to building with these partners to gather data sets that our students can use to explore the world around them, to explore the New York City as a cultural center. So, we're currently still in construction, but we're really hoping that when we're able to unveil the new center, which we hope will be soon, that this will really galvanize all of the work that we've been building up to for over a decade.

Bonnie Eissner:

And Lisa?

Lisa Rhody:

I'm just trying to wrap my head around the idea of being back in the space safely and with people again. I think that that's, thinking about the opening of the center it provides something that isn't very common around the Graduate Center right now. Which is a big open, safe space for people to meet with six feet between one another, and with lots of wall space to display, and to really show off the work that's being done. I think that's a challenge that we've faced as we've been a growing program over the past 10 years or so, is that there's a lot of really impressive, innovative, thoughtful work being done by students, and by staff and by faculty. But we don't always have places to really show it off so that other people can come and see and be inspired by that work.

Lisa Rhody:

I think that that's something that we're going to have an opportunity to do. We'll be able to put up displays and exhibits. We'll be able to show off student work. We'll be able to have informal gatherings that are in a much more sort of publicly exposed venue and area. So that I think people will be eager and willing to join in and to participate. It's hard when you don't see... If we're in all these different locations that Matt mentioned, things seem to happen behind closed doors. I'm really excited to see everything kind of come out in the open and come together and be a much more welcoming sort of environment. It seems to coincide; I hope with our ability to return safely to the building. Wouldn't that just be great?

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Tanya Domi:

Thank you both for joining us on the Thought Project, it's really been a pleasure talking to you about the digital life and the history of that digital life at the Graduate Center. Congratulations on this latest NEH Grant and many successes that you've all accomplished. I want to also tell our audience about where you can find out more about the Digital Initiatives at the Graduate Center, by going to our website, gc.cuny.edu. With that, thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest Professor Matt Gold and Professor Lisa Rhody of the Digital Humanities Team at the CUNY Graduate Center. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY-TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.