

What is Humanistic about Computers and Writing? Historical Patterns and Contemporary Possibilities for the Field

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Abstract

Given the status of Ellen W. Nold's "Fear and Trembling: The Humanist Approaches the Computer" (1975) as one of the first articles published in computers and writing, it may be said that the relationship between computers and the humanities has organized the field since its inception. In this article, I trace ways in which scholars have described that relationship in answering the implicit question of "what is humanistic about computers and writing?" from 1975 to present. The rhetorical positioning of the field vis-à-vis the question has evolved as shifts toward postmodern and social epistemologies in English studies, coupled with social and cultural trends catalyzed by new technologies, have challenged traditional humanities parameters. The resulting new spaces for humanistic argument have emboldened scholars in computers and writing to claim a more significant role in an emerging production-driven model of the humanities. This model is organized around an emphasis on electronic literacy, which has (1) disrupted the printed book's status as the central object of inquiry within the academy and, (2) importantly and concurrently, gained social and economic currency outside of it. In combination, these changes in social and academic contexts offer computers and writing an opportunity to embrace a more central role in the humanities than at any time in its history.

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In this article, I describe, however incompletely, the evolution of "humanistic" as a concept of significance during the brief history of computers and writing. I begin with this qualified sentence because I would argue that humanistic concerns permeate most computers and writing research, making an effort to isolate such a thread inherently reductive. But I also believe that it is possible to discern trends in our scholarship that are more explicitly concerned with what I call here the "humanistic question": the question of *what*, precisely, is humanistic about computers and writing. Both the lingering presence and shaping influence of the humanistic question testify to its significance to teachers and scholars. And, given Gail E. Hawisher, Paul LeBlanc, Charles Moran, and Cynthia L. Selfe's (1996) recognition of Ellen Nold's "Fear and Trembling: The Humanist Approaches the Computer" (1975) as one of the first articles in the field of computers and writing, one might say that it was the humanistic question that furnished the exigency for computers and writing as a scholarly enterprise (p. 33).¹

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¹ While Nold's article has been recognized as the first—or at least one of the first—explicit treatments of the implementation of computer technology in writing instruction, a handful of precursors dating back to the 1960s dealt with isolated writing traits, style characteristics, and assessment and warrant mention here, including John Engstrom and James Whittaker's "Improving Students' Spelling through Automated Teaching" (1963); Arthur Daigon's "Computer Grading and English Composition" (1966); Jack Hiller, Donald Marcotte, and Timothy Martin's "Opinionation, Vagueness, and Specificity Distinctiveness: Essay Traits Measured by Computer" (1969), and Ellis Page and Dieter Paulus' "The Analysis of Essays by Computer" (1968). Coming out of English studies, Daigon's work is particularly interesting in light of the present discussion, addressing as it did the supposition

That the question has remained vital in the field probably comes as no real surprise, considering that many of the scholars who first described the implementation of computer technologies in the writing classroom and subsequently outlined the scholarly agenda for the field were, of course, themselves trained in humanities fields, primarily literature. In addition, establishing computers and writing as a humanistic enterprise has always been an important part of asserting, characterizing, and affirming a disciplinary relationship to English studies. Such efforts to forge a bond between technology and humanities interests have proved challenging and paralleled initiatives found under various rubrics, including “humanities computing,” “computing in the humanities,” and, more recently, the “digital humanities,” each located, it seems, at the complex point of intersection—or division—between the humanities and technology. For years, scholarly investment in, as Willard McCarty (2005) wrote, “bringing together such unlikely bedfellows [humanities and computers],” meant, in large part, some form of professional marginalization, “either dismissal of any basis for humanities computing, on the grounds either of the irrelevance, imprecision or triviality of its problems or of its lack of identifiable turf” (pp. 9, 3).² Hence, for both computers and writing and humanities computing, merely registering as fields doing humanities work has proved difficult given the relatively high profile of computer technology in each field. But whereas humanities computing as manifested in English studies has historically been, as Jerome J. McGann (2001) has noted, most concerned with taking up new ways of analyzing and accessing belletristic textual artifacts, computers and writing has engaged different questions and textual spaces, facing a sort of double jeopardy due to its affiliation with composition studies, itself marginalized in English (pp. xi–xii).

In this article, I consider the nature of computers and writing’s humanistic arguments as they have evolved over the course of three overlapping phases in the field’s brief history. I trace the ways in which some scholars, many of them leading or founding voices in the field, have directly and indirectly attempted to posit answers to the humanistic question, acknowledging fully that a more comprehensive account of other voices engaged with the question would enrich and complicate this narrative but extend well beyond the scope of this treatment and my purpose here. The sampling presented here, I believe, is sufficient to create a picture of humanistic argument over time that offers insight into the field’s early anxieties, its enduring values, and the evolving politics and conditions that have shaped its humanistic argument. By tracing this quasi-linear history, I hope to shed some light upon a changing disposition in the field through a kind of rhetorical probing of the humanistic question that traces a shift from responsiveness and deference toward literary studies as humanistic arbiter to a site of distinct, differentiated identity that has not previously existed in the field. In its telling, this history offers one way of understanding the convergence between evolving humanistic argument and contemporary shifts in English studies and English-studies-in-society that have positioned the field to stake a new humanistic claim rooted in rhetorical production and action. The maturation of humanistic argument and its ongoing significance validates the belief of many pioneers in the field who first articulated a relationship between rhetoric and writing—arch humanities, in many ways—and machines, often at considerable risk to their own professional well-being.

1. What does it mean to call the field “humanistic”?

To examine computers and writing’s ongoing effort to articulate its humanistic status, I need, first, to offer some general, functional parameters for two abstract terms of significance. First, like Susanmarie Harrington, Michael Day, and Rebecca Rickly (2000), I am defining “computers and writing” as “a subfield in rhetoric and composition,” what Lisa Gerrard called a “coherent subdiscipline with its own identity” that emphasizes scholarly inquiry into the impact of networked computer technologies on reading and composing (broadly construed, including print and multimedia

that technology has no place in grading human essays. To advance his thesis, Daigon seemingly paid homage to this commonplace by asking the rhetorical question, “How indeed can, or dare, a machine compete in this area (language and symbolic processes)?” (1966, p. 46) and reproducing the competition between the cultures of technology and the sciences and the humanities, best described by Snow (1959). Daigon noted, “The fact is that a human being can do anything a computer can do if he has almost unlimited time, energy, and patience” (p. 52).

² Like computers and writing, what we now know to be the “digital humanities” has a longer history characterized by misunderstanding and marginalization. As Jerome McGann noted, “Before 1993 the computerized future of our humanistic inheritance was apparent to a relatively small group of librarians and archival scholars and to very few other people in literary and cultural studies” (2001, p. 1). Indeed, the digital humanities has emerged as a vital, well-funded endeavor, moving from its initial status as a fringe concern of dubious value to a far more central position where it is roundly recognized and validated by most humanities scholars—many readers are likely familiar, for instance, with the National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Humanities Initiative (<http://www.neh.gov/odh/>). Interestingly, computers and writing and humanities computing (or the digital humanities) have led surprisingly separate lives in spite of overlapping interests; George Landow is one prominent example of the relatively few scholars who have achieved status in both fields.

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