Imagining the Future of Digital Humanities Pedagogy

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Outline

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- Purpose and Goals of our Study
- About Our Study
- DH Instructor Interviews
- Student Survey Results
- Practical Tips & Advice
- Continuing our Study

DH Research vs. DH Pedagogy

- “Pedagogy is not totally ignored by DH’s growing cadre of practitioners; rather, teaching and learning are something of an afterthought for many DH-ers,” (Stephen Brier, “Where's the Pedagogy?: The Role of Teaching and Learning in the Digital Humanities,” *Debates in the Digital Humanities*).

- “There are very little formal expectations that you improve pedagogy. Your promotion, tenure is based on research. You are not expected to go to workshops to improve pedagogy. DH suffers the way any subject suffers.” - Amanda Gailey, UNL

- “Out of a corpus of 297,399 words in *Blackwell's Companion to Digital Humanities* and *Companion to Digital Literary Studies* ‘research’ occurs 504 times, whereas ‘teaching’ and ‘pedagogy’ occur 66 and 8 times respectively.” The word “learners” occurs 3 times, while “learner” occurs once. (Brett Hirsch, *Digital Humanities Pedagogy*). **The word “student(s)" was nonexistent.**

Purpose and Goals of our Study

Discover:

- What do students want from DH courses?
- Are students gaining what they need through DH courses (according to students and instructors)?
- What pedagogical practices in DH courses best enable students to achieve their goals?

Provide:

- Mutual understanding and greater dialogue between instructors and students
- Practical tips for improving course design and meeting learning objectives

About our Study

Current snapshot of DH educational landscape:

- Interviews with 10 DH instructors
- 75 DH student surveys collected from multiple institutions and listservs
- Analysis of current literature and conference presentations on DH Pedagogy

DH Instructor Interviews

Questions we asked:

- How does your definition of DH influence your pedagogy practice?
- What is the ratio of technical lab work to theory?
- Do you feel like your students were prepared for a DH course?
- What readings and activities did and didn’t work?
- How did you develop your learning objectives?
- What is most needed to improve pedagogy in DH as a whole?

Digital Humanities: an “Umbrella Term”

- “The term has power to gain attention, but as a scholar I don’t use that term. I guess I would say I am a Literature Scholar who applies empirical computational tools to study to creative output.” - Matthew Jockers, UNL

- “DH becomes a term that means more institutionally and it gives you utility. I don’t see my class as a Digital Humanities course. I’m more interested in looking at how to use digital tools in text studies. It means more about the community, a network of people working on projects.” - Amanda Gailey, UNL

- “There is simply no way to describe the digital humanities as anything like a discipline. Just think of the curricular requirements of such a field!” - Rafael Alvarado, “The Digital Humanities Situation”

Technology Skills

- Strong belief among professors in the importance of understanding how technology works since communication through digital media is pervasive.

- Most professors do not consider students “digital natives.”

- Most did not believe that there should be technology prerequisites, though having these skills would be ideal.
  - Previous programming coursework preferred.

What worked according to instructors

- Final humanities research project with a specific technology application that reflects real working conditions as closely as possible
- Allowing students to re-submit their programming exercises until the concept is mastered
- One-on-one feedback and mentorship from faculty.
- Collaboration, group discussion and experimentation (requires small class size).
- Computer lab exercises balanced with class discussion and feedback from instructor.

What didn’t work according to instructors

- Undergraduate and graduate student collaboration could be challenging
- Undergraduate students not concerned with defining DH and were less engaged with DH Theory and advanced criticism.
- Programming and technology training requires constant practice and repetition--more time than a one semester course can afford.

“Digital Humanities is such an over-extended term--there is not a general understanding of what we are preparing students for. Are we preparing students for digital humanities center work or technology jobs? There might be an identity crisis on what a Digital Humanities class is and what it is going to do for students. Students don’t know what to expect or what it is going to do for them. We don’t want to limit intellectual diversity for the sake of predictability.”

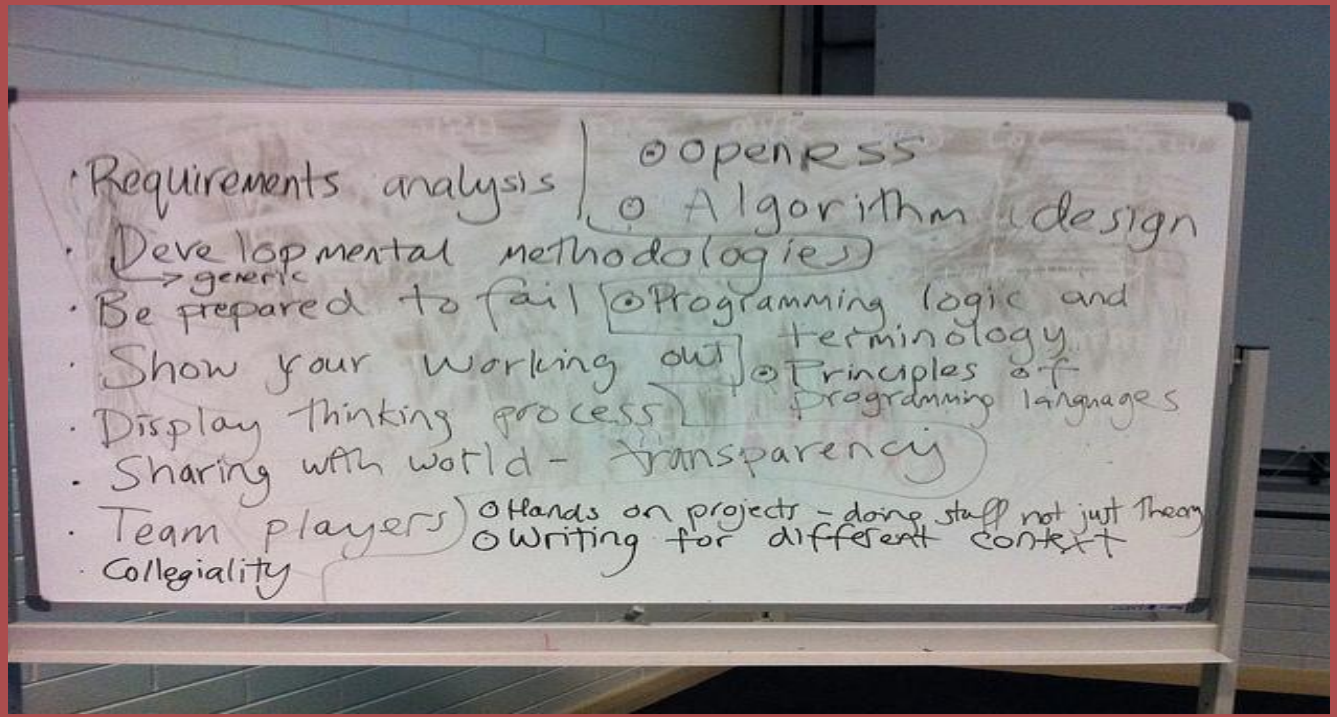
- Amanda Gailey, UNL

DH Student Surveys

Questions we asked:

- What was your experience with DH before this class?
- How would you describe your technology skills? How comfortable are you with learning new technology?
- What technologies did you use? How did you use them?
- What were the best and worst things about the course?
- What advice would you give the instructor?

Student Survey Responses



"What skills do digital humanities students need?" Thatcamp Camberra, 2011

theoretical
interesting
science
interested
topic-focused
theory
modeling
programming
new
clouds
week
languages
practice
humanities
skills
graduate
outside
technical
word
twitter
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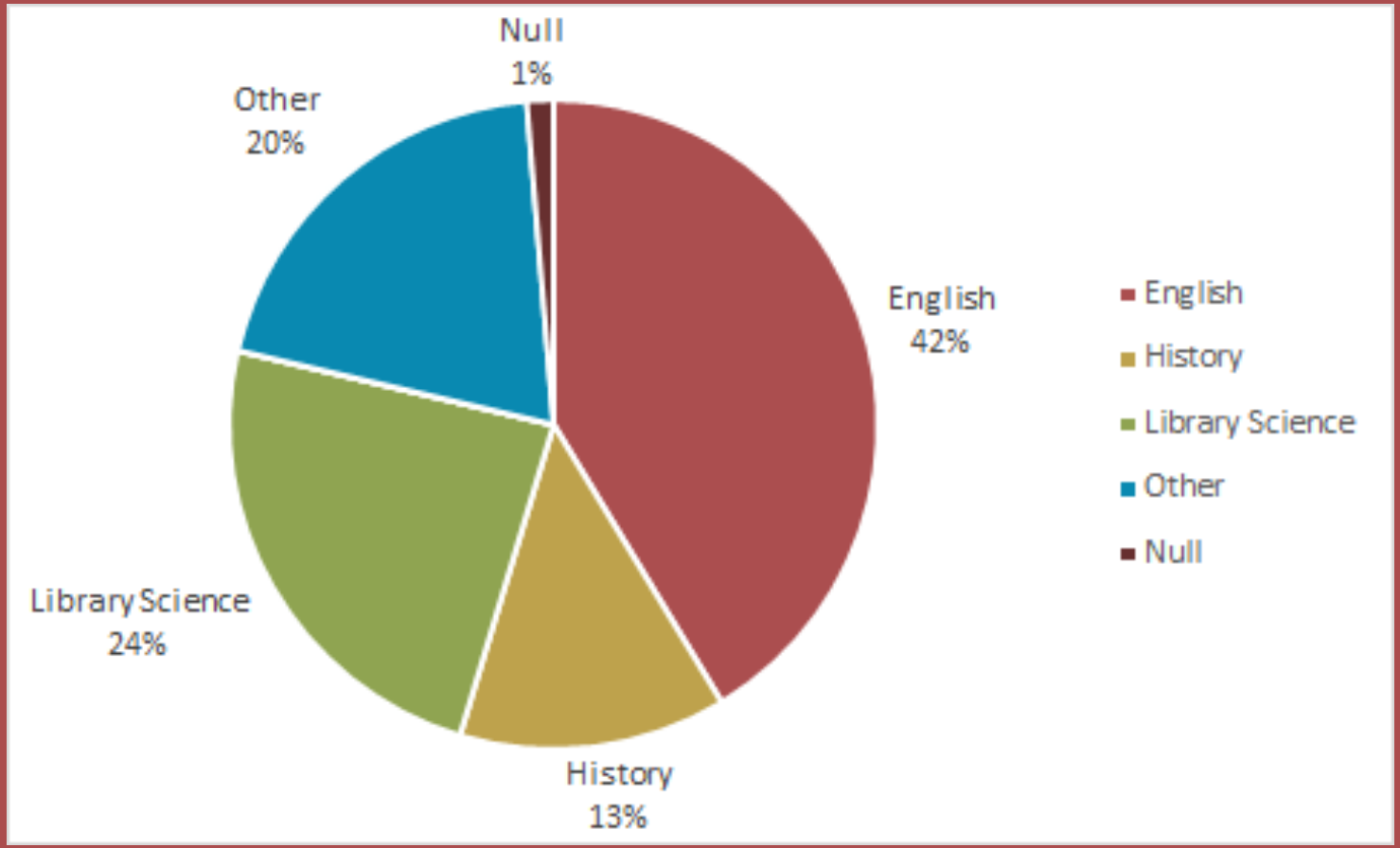
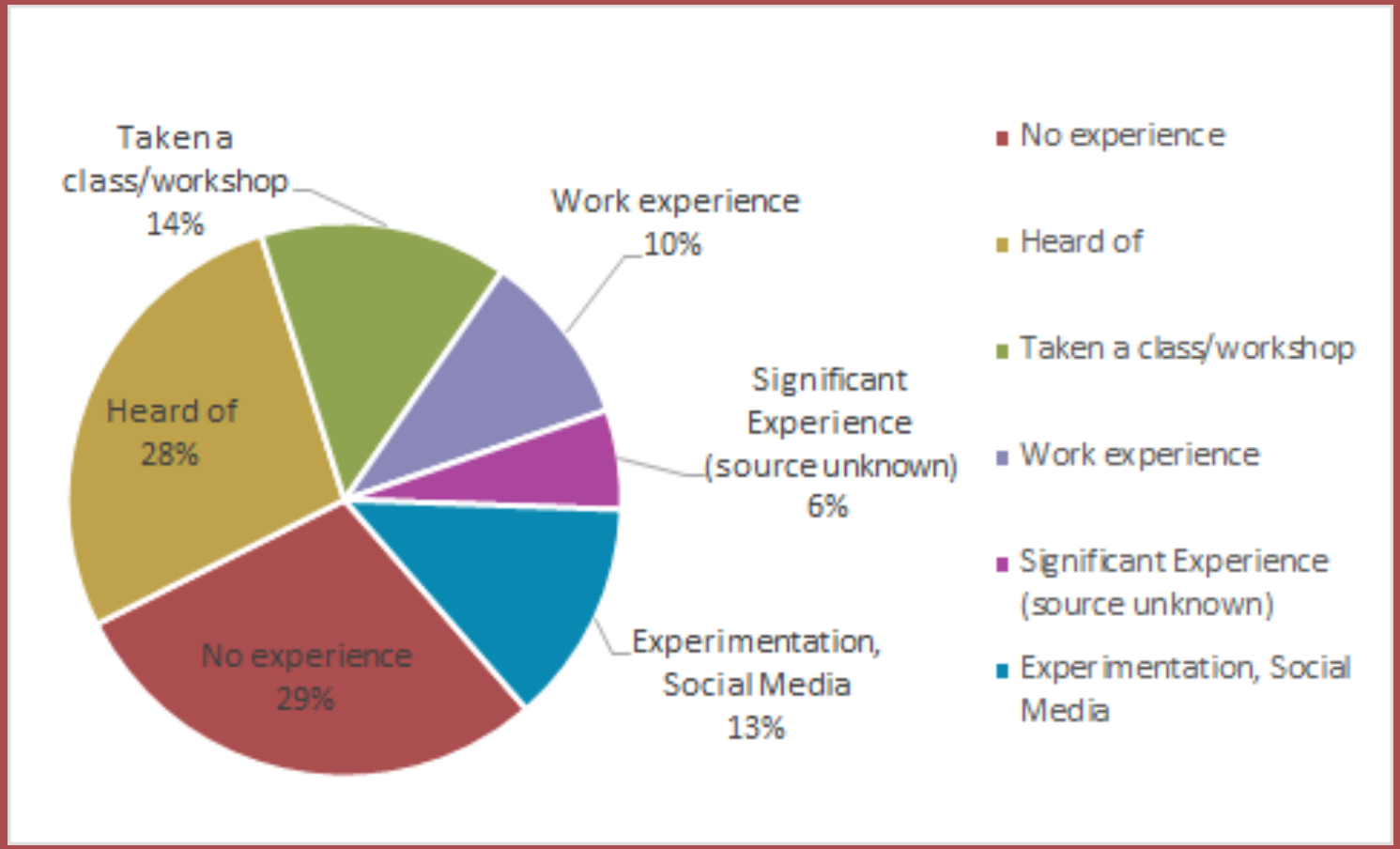
Which department was your class affiliated with?

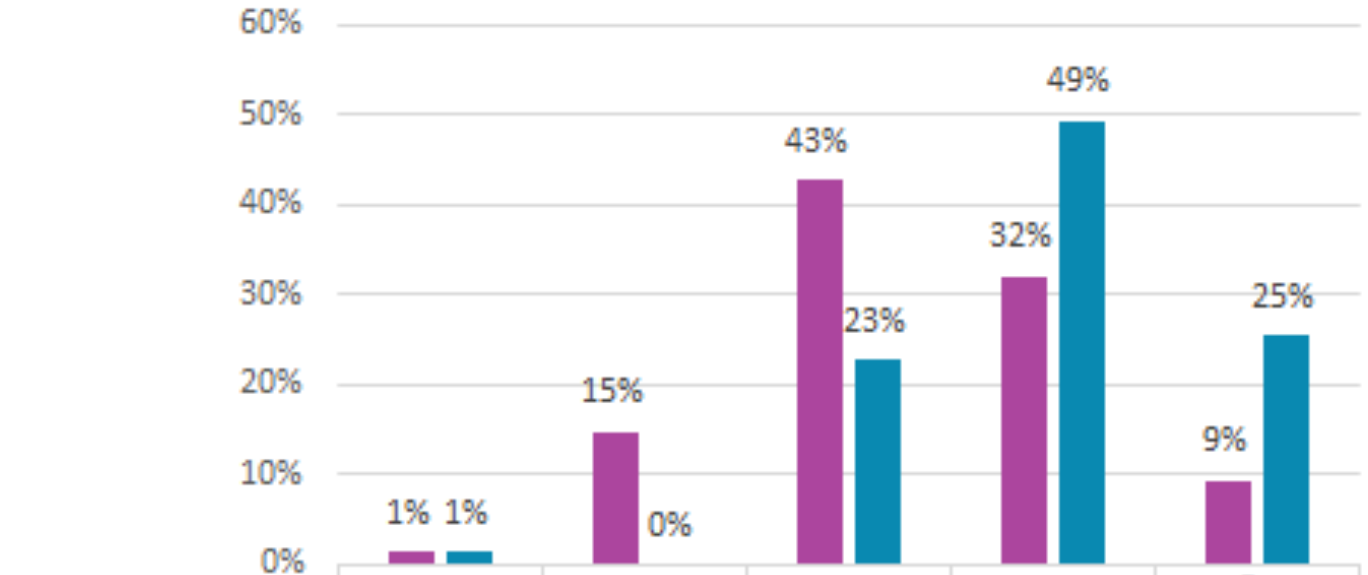


Previous DH Experience



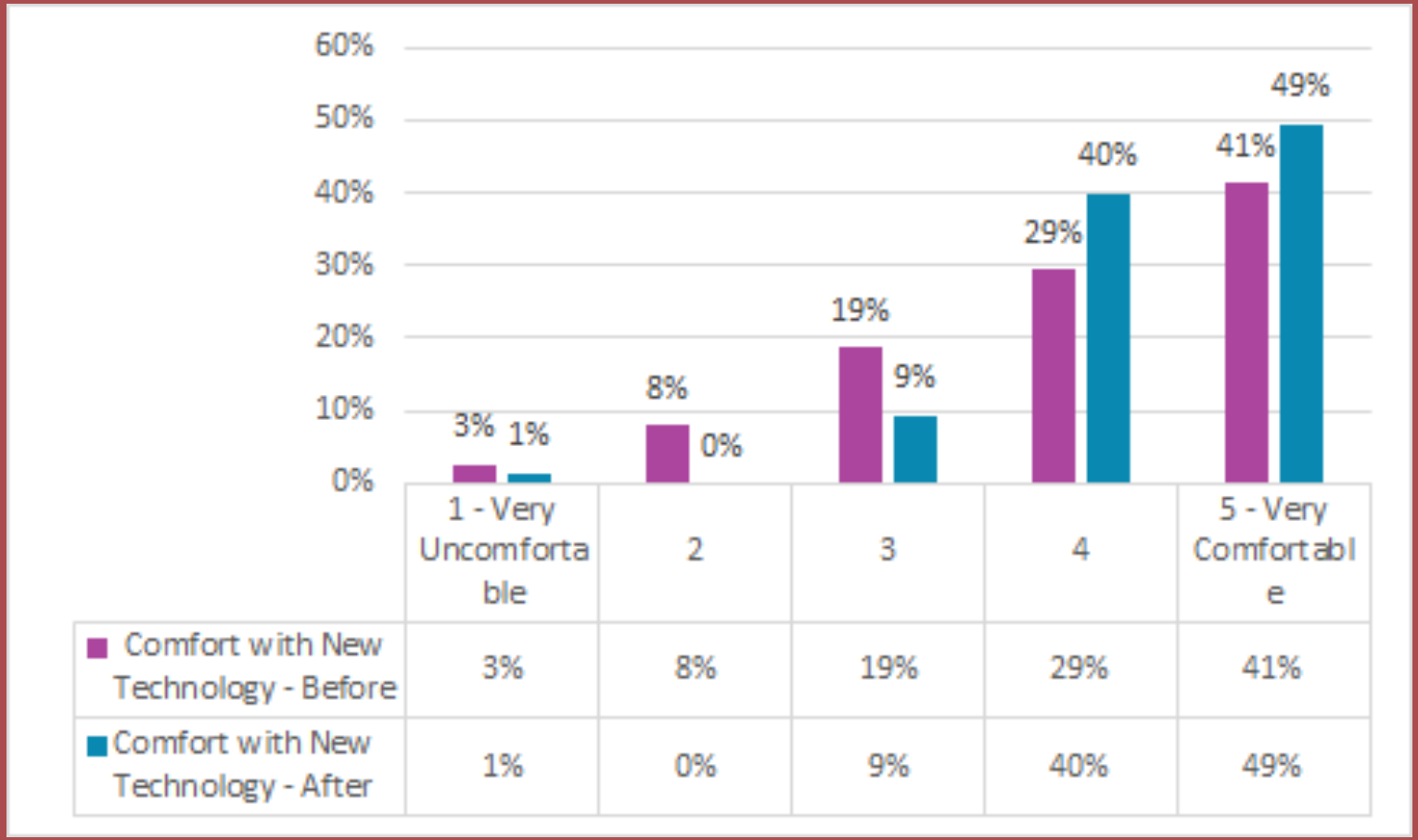
“I was aware that the thing called "digital humanities" was "trendy" and therefore a wise career move, but hadn't encountered any DH research that seemed compelling.”

Technology Skills: Before & After



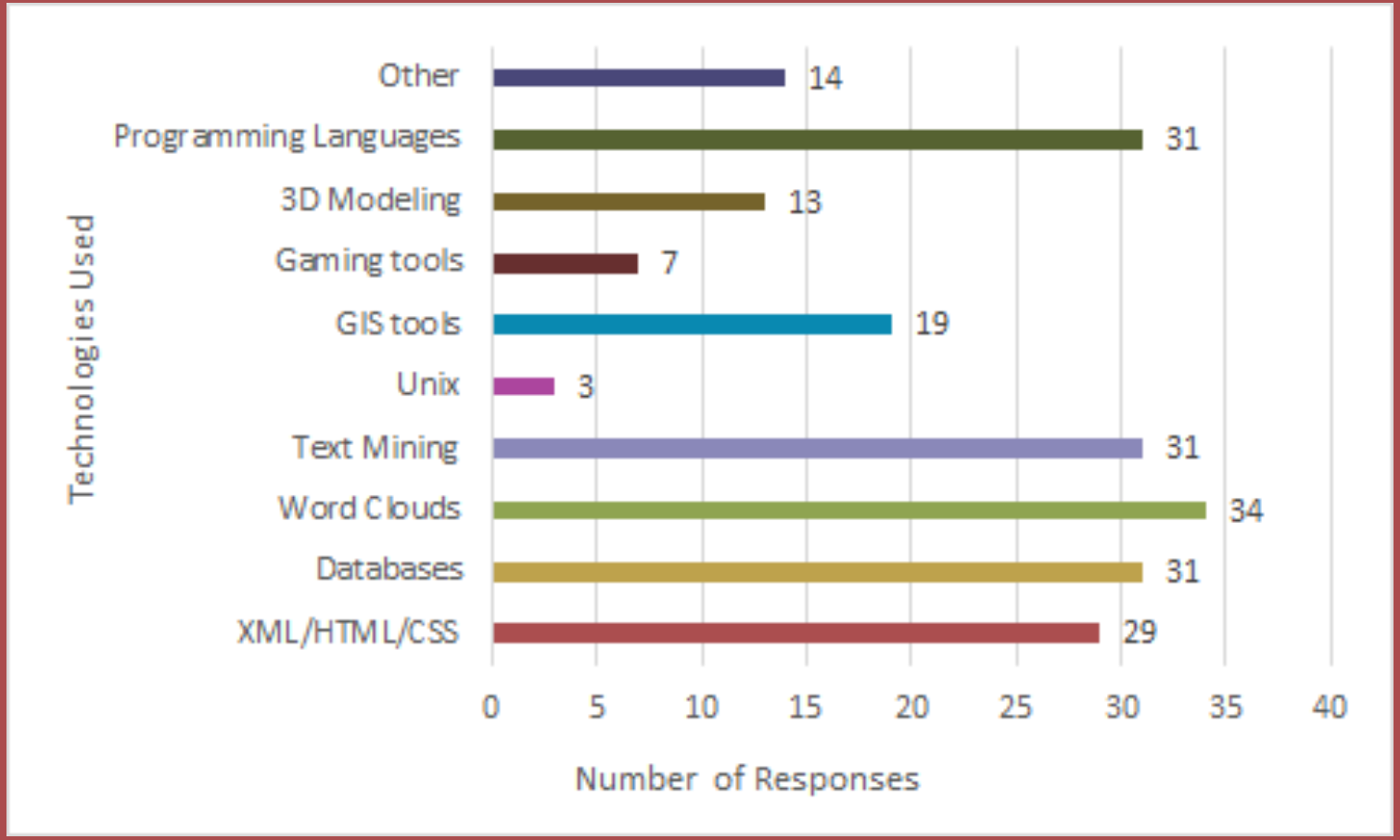
	1 - Basic	2	3	4	5 - Advanced
Tech Skills - Before	1%	15%	43%	32%	9%
Tech Skills - After	1%	0%	23%	49%	25%

Comfort with New Technology: Before and After

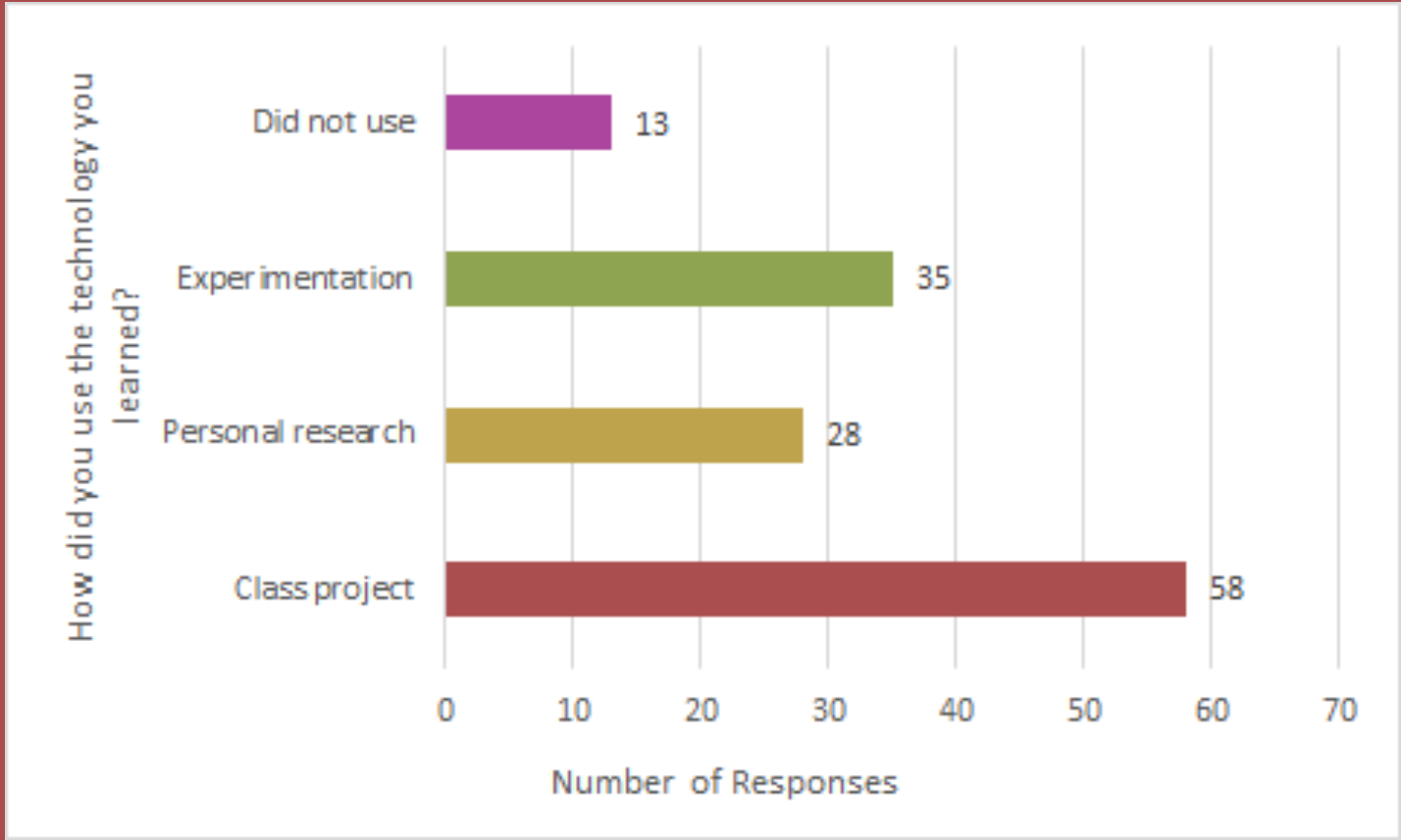


	1 - Very Uncomfortable	2	3	4	5 - Very Comfortable
Comfort with New Technology - Before	3%	8%	19%	29%	41%
Comfort with New Technology - After	1%	0%	9%	40%	49%

What Technologies Did You Use?



How did you use these technologies?



What worked for the students

- Building a classroom community
  - Journaling and blogging
  - Collaboration and discussion
- Professorial engagement
  - Relaxed teaching style, student-directed inquiry
  - Feedback and concrete expectations
- Engagement with the community
  - Learning how technologies are used in the field
  - Guest lectures from DHers
- Allowing students to explore their interests
  - Projects with a purpose
  - Student presentations

What didn’t work for the students

- Not enough time to learn the technologies required
- Trying to learn too many technology tools in one semester course
- Not enough context for the application of DH tools
- Over-emphasis on DH Theory and a lack of focus on the practical and creative application of DH tools.
- Open-ended project guidelines without specifications.
- DH survey courses that cover a broad spectrum of disciplines.
- Essay writing was not conducive to this type of class environment. DH is not a traditional humanities course, so students felt essay writing should not be the main focus of the course.

Conclusions

Student-centered Practical Tips & Advice

- Focus on developing professional skills to be competitive in the job market (within and outside the academy).
- Collaboration among peers to build project management skills and work with students of different skill levels and areas of interest.
- Final class projects based on specific research interests and professional goals.
- Less critical theory and more practical applications of technology tools.
- Guest lectures and time to network with DH scholars in the field.
- Concrete goals and clearly defined expectations for the course.

Instructor-centered Practical Tips & Advice

- Build a series of courses with DH components
  - Each course focus on one or two technologies.
  - Include practicum-style courses that allow real-world projects.
  - Combine theory with examinations of existing DH projects, concrete class projects.
- Devote more time to DH classes
  - Add extra credit hours (for lab time)
  - Consider classes that span multiple semesters (language)
- Structure, Sign and Play

Future Areas of Exploration

- More student surveys
- Analyze Instructor surveys
- Text mining of DH syllabi - comparison to Lisa Spiro's "Knowing and Doing: Understanding the Digital Humanities Curriculum" from 2011

Instructor survey link: http://goo.gl/6DqciN

Student survey link: http://goo.gl/voephZ