Review of: "Project-Based Learning for Graduate Students in Digital Humanities"

Cengiz Gunay

Potential competing interests: The author(s) declared that no potential competing interests exist.

This paper verbosely describes the results of a 5-year study on applying a project-based learning (PBL) strategy in summer internships to a total of 50 humanities graduate students at New York University (NYU), where students learned to use digital tools for research. Computer science (CS) PBL concepts were employed and found to successfully advance research of humanities students, who are otherwise not exposed to these technologies within coursework in their majors. As computational tools become pervasive across disciplines, it makes this humanities internship program more valuable for student development. As opposed to courses or workshops, summer internships allowed students work on projects with a mentor. Internships were funded by external grants to pay for $5,000 for 300 student-hours. Faculty from English and CS departments were recruited for mentoring. Students attended lunch workshops every 2 weeks to learn specific technical skills - but bulk of their knowledge was acquired through one-on-one mentor interactions and self-learning during project development. Projects served to advance faculty-led, grant-funded research, some of which ended up being displayed in museums and other public outlets.

The paper gives a good background on the PBL approach and cites many important past studies. It then explains in detail some of the projects that became successful through the program, whose topics range from web to geographical information systems (GIS). Paper also identifies and expands upon gold standards of PBL. They explain in detail how the internship program operated and how faculty and students were chosen for the process. Self reflection was identified one of the mechanisms through which feedback was received and students were kept engaged. All projects included making some information public, which provided an excellent public service. Workshops offered to students did not encompass full programming help, but were more practical and included to-the-point tutorials on accomplishing specific tasks (e.g. building a WordPress site). Some programming was done by humanities students, thanks to Python scripts initially authored by mentors. Students found it much easier to adjust existing scripts than to build from scratch.

Other success stories include peer mentoring and encouragement needed specific to humanities students as they were not computer savvy. An emphasis was made on ease of use in the software tools that were chosen for the projects. Iterative nature of project development (as in Agile methodologies) was successful in lowering the chance that humanities students may make mistakes to disrupt research. Other good outcomes listed included data analysis skills acquired and specific languages like SQL and GIS terminology. Overall, they emphasize that humanities students benefited greatly from the internship program and it increased their employability in both academia and industry.

I recommend this paper to both those in CS employing PBL and to those in humanities who are interested in advancing their students digital skills. I included typos or difficult parts I encountered during my reading of the manuscript as an attached PDF file.