

Modern Language Association Report, 2017

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This year was my first year as a member of the Delegate Assembly (DA), representing the Libraries and Research Forum. I certainly began with a contentious year to begin my understanding of how the MLA works. We had three quite contested resolutions regarding boycotts of Israeli and Palestinian Universities, a dues increase, and an “emergency resolution” to align the organization with the then recent statement released by the AAUP (<https://www.aaup.org/news/higher-education-after-2016-election#.WHZ1XHryxdw>) to consider. To recount five hours in a sentence, the MLA DA voted to recommend that MLA not participate in the boycotts; for a dues increase of 2.5%; and to align the organization with the AAUP statement. I was able to act as a reference librarian when a member wished to add a reference to a non-existent UN document to the emergency resolution and I spoke against her amendment, having verified that the document to which she referred was not what she thought it was.

This year the presidential theme was “Boundary Conditions (<https://www.mla.org/Convention/MLA-2017/2017-Presidential-Theme>)”.

In general, some of the things that I noticed were that, as I track changes that occur in the digital humanities (occasionally “digital scholarship”) and the rest of the “digital” realm, it was notable that, while there were a few panels that addressed how digital practices change scholarship, in general the topic of most interest was “digital pedagogy.” It seems to me that we librarians may find ourselves involved in these sorts of projects – if we’re not already -- and may want to pay close attention to the trend. A session at ACRL or ALA on “digital pedagogy” would be very interesting.

Another important topic was Open Access, which generally focused more on software than on content. However, where questions of content arose, there was a sense that large corporations had simply taken a public good and were using it for profit. I heard one call to “hack” a particular vendor. As librarians with signed licensing agreements with these vendors, I wonder if we will end up in the middle at some point. Regardless, there was not an understanding of the amount of work and expense it takes to digitize and provide metadata for sets of documents or newspapers, either by vendors or by libraries. Is it our role to educate faculty in this way? If so, how?

I was pleased to hear faculty members on occasion invoke information literacy and institutional repositories quite naturally. Compared to the complete lack of understanding I witnessed at my first MLA conference, it would seem that we are making headway on our campuses.

Sessions and topics of interest include the white paper from the Future of the Print record group, “Concerted

Thought, Collaborative Action, and the Future of the Print Record

(<https://printrecord.mla.hcommons.org/concerted-thought-collaborative-action-and-the-future-of-the-print-record/>) ”. I have several thoughts about it and it’s worthy of discussion, especially as the group moves forward.

The program offered by the Libraries & Research Forum was stimulating as the speakers addressed “Acknowledging Boundary Conditions: Opening the Black Box of Creating Access to Digitized Collections.” What in part was interesting as a librarian is that the faculty members speaking had very different perspectives on what constituted access and even called into question our concept of an interface as relying exclusively on screen and optics.

“Open Source Lit, Open Source Crit” included a discussion of the “Gitlit” movement, which uses github to apply version control to the digitization of 50,000 scholarly editions. They also referenced GITenberg (<https://github.com/GITenberg>) , which works with the texts in Project Gutenberg. One of the interesting things to me about this project is that they’re interested in stripping out coding and reducing the text to plain text, whereas we’ve been working for a fair number of years to code text in particular ways. If you’re interested in finding out more about the project or assisting by proofreading a text and submitting changes, you can go to <http://Git-lit.github.io> or <http://github.com/git-lit>. Also at that session DHBox (<http://dhbox.org>) was introduced to me, a sandbox for Digital Humanities, described as a cloud-based, virtual computer with pre-installed DH tools, thus an instant learning environment allowing for fear-free experimentation.

“The Current State of Digital Humanities in Italian Studies” was interesting in part for what it avoided (Dante) and for what it contained (nothing contemporary). Of the projects shown, the most interesting to me were the Orlando Furioso atlas (<http://www.furiosoatlas.com/>) , which raises the question of where you put imaginary places on a “real” map? How do you distinguish between trips that were taken & those imagined? Also, the Petrarch archive (<http://dcl.slis.indiana.edu/petrarch>) at Indiana University, part of which allows for a close reading of a Petrarch ms so that attention can be paid to the arrangement of stanzas and sonnets on the page.

Among the presentations on digital pedagogy that interested me was “Curating Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities,” in which participants brought examples of their uses of digital pedagogy that also raise questions about teaching and using these models. For example, opportunities to share syllabi, allow for national curricula on a particular topic of interest, such as the Brexit syllabus developed across the UK. However, the very openness that permits such sharing also puts students at risk when they post to the web, especially if they use their real names. The open tools that we create and use such as github are free to use; however, they require work to master. We may be comfortable with some chaos as a means to an end, but are our students? What can we ask of them? [A complete & total aside : how does this relate to teaching students about using a library?]

One question raised that continues to nag at me is that we consistently tell students to evaluate websites and be careful of where they put their data while at the same time insisting that they give us their data and put it in our systems – just trust us.

The presidential theme for 2018 is “#States of Insecurity (<https://news.mla.hcommons.org/2016/12/27/2018-presidential-theme-states-of-insecurity>) ”. We shall see what programs and events the theme inspires.

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