Transcript

Derek Bruff: [00:05] Welcome to "Leading Lines," a podcast for Vanderbilt University. I'm your host, Derek Bruff, Director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching. In this podcast, we explore creative, intentional and effective uses of technology to enhance student learning — uses that point the way to the future of educational technology in college and university settings.

[00:23] In this episode, my Center for Teaching colleague, Stacey Johnson, interviews William Pannapacker, DuMez Professor of English and senior director of the Mellon Grand Challenges Presidential Initiative at Hope College in Michigan.

[00:34] Pannapacker is a Walt Whitman scholar and someone I would say is active in the digital humanities field. I met him back in 2012 when he spoke at Vanderbilt's THATCamp event, a digital humanities un-conference.

[00:46] However, as you'll hear in this interview, Pannapacker pushes back on the term digital humanities, in part because he's done a lot of work at Hope and other liberal arts colleges to frame the idea of the digital liberal arts.

[00:57] In the interview, he talks about that work and the program-building he's done at Hope to enable more faculty to teach with technology.

[01:04] He also talks about his own career and the surprisingly limited role technology plays in his own teaching. Stacey begins the interview by asking Pannapacker about the term "digital liberal arts."

Stacey Johnson: [01:16] Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me today.

Bill Pannapacker: [01:20] My pleasure.

Stacey: [01:21] I wanted to ask you about a term that's in some way become associated with you, which is the digital liberal arts. I was familiar before I met you with the digital humanities, but you brought me into the fold of the digital liberal arts. I was hoping you could tell everyone a little bit more about that concept.

Bill: [01:42] The digital liberal arts started I think at colleges like Hamilton and Occidental, although they may not have used that term. I think we may have coined that in the context of Hope College and the Mellon Scholars program.

[01:55] It was primarily tactical. It was to make the case that what we were doing with what had commonly been called digital humanities was applicable to the full range of disciplines, not even limited to the humanities but also the arts, the sciences and social sciences. It was meant to create an even larger tent for participation by faculty members throughout the institution.

[02:22] I think it was also to address the concerns of administrators that the investments that we were making in faculty development, in student engagement, were not something that was just limited to one division but was something that was tied to the overall mission of the college.

[02:42] Digital liberal arts enabled us to do that in the context of the liberal arts college in ways that digital humanities, though it was an important intervention at the beginning, did not do.

Stacey: [02:53] How has the digital liberal arts played out at Hope College? What does it look like here?

Bill: [02:59] It means a lot of different things. I think the most tangible manifestation of that is the Mellon Scholars program, which can be found online.

[03:08] It involves asking students to bring their work to a wider audience than would normally be the case in a course in which one writes a paper and gives it to the professor and gets a grade and then that's the end of it.

[03:23] In this case, we're asking students to see their work as something that will continue, that has a life of its own, that engages with the broader community, that reaches out to

scholars but also the general public, and that in some ways is at the service of the world, rather than simply at the service, as important as it is, of their own education.

Stacey: [03:47] You mentioned that you're bringing the social sciences and the natural sciences into the fold. Are there any examples you can think of, besides maybe papers, that are more of a humanities-oriented assessment? What kinds of things might they doing in these other fields?

Bill: [04:05] I would say at this point we're seeing more like spore from the sciences. Things like biological illustration or studies of the environment that involve a depth of technical knowledge that we don't often see in humanities students. Students who are pre-med, but also care about narratives of illness and recovery.

[04:31] Those are typical early projects, but we're about to move into another project that will enable even more in-depth engagement across the divisions.

Stacey: [04:42] Can you tell me anymore about that?

Bill: [04:44] Yeah, this one is…It builds on a lot of what we've done in the Mellon Scholars with regard to faculty-student collaborative research, project-building, engagement with the digital, public-facing scholarship. But in this case it's under the banner of what's called grand challenges.

[05:03] The major issues that are going to be faced by our students in their lives and work moving forward in this century, and of course these things have long histories too. Things like racial reconciliation, climate change, religious coexistence.

[05:23] The projects that we're working on in the humanities are ways to show the importance of humanities fields. In STEM, in some ways there are affinities between this and the STEAM movement.

[05:38] That's not accidental, but it also connects to things like the AAC and New Pathways concept of enabling students to transcend well worn disciplinary configurations. For roots that enable them to take interest in topics across disciplinary and divisional boundaries.

Stacey: [05:59] That is actually one of my favorite things about the more traditional,

residential liberal arts experiences, is the integrated nature of the learning that happens. What students are learning in the sciences is really complimented by what they're learning in the humanities and they're able to generate interesting ideas and potential solutions to problems.

Bill: [06:21] What is it about the residential situation that's special…I guess one because we thought about liberal arts colleges as learning communities and that the students are working together and cross-fertilizing their disciplinary experiences through interaction in the dorms and co-curricular activities.

[06:43] Digital Liberal Arts is just one more way in which that kind of intellectual cross-fertilization is going to take place.

[06:50] We're bringing into the classroom what was already taking place in the context of the liberal arts campus. I don't know if that exhausts the topic.

[07:00] [laughter]

Stacey: [07:01] I wonder if…the undergraduate programs at Vanderbilt definitely fall into a traditional residential model of the liberal arts experience and I wonder if a place like Vanderbilt would need to foresee making some changes to that experience. Anticipating, adjusting that experience to make room for the digital.

Bill: [07:24] I'm trying to figure out how in the sense that it doesn't…In many ways, digital liberal arts was not meant to be a transformative intervention so much as an enhancement of the defining features of the liberal arts college experience.

[07:43] It's not entirely a new thing, it's an enabling of things that we've always wanted to do. Maybe the transformative potential comes from making the liberal arts experience more open, transparent and accessible to a wider community.

[07:59] So that they're not just interacting with each other or across divisions and disciplines, as important as that is, but they're interacting with students at other liberal arts colleges and public institutions of all sorts and with communities of interests relating to the things that those students are exploring, so that liberal arts education becomes more transparent and engaged with the broader community.

[08:25] I just finished a two-year stint as the Faculty Director of the Digital Liberal Arts Initiative for the 13 member institutions of the Great Lakes Colleges Association. That's Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Western Pennsylvania.

[08:43] The challenges are multiple and complex in building collaborations across those institutional lines. Part of it is geography, getting people together across those distances. Especially if the collaborations are...They don't necessarily form by proximity.

[09:00] Somebody in Western Pennsylvania might want to work with somebody in Southern Indiana. Proximity is enabling in lots of ways so the barriers often can be overcome between say, Albion and Hope College, even if the disciplinary engagement is not quite such a good match as somebody between Hope and Allegheny.

[09:19] Geography is impediment even with the digital because the personal interaction, enabled by geographical proximities, still is very important.

[09:29] Often you have to find a common meeting place. It parallels the formation of state capitals. You have to find the place that's easiest to get to for the majority of people involved and yet that's going to privilege some people and disadvantage some other people inevitably.

[09:47] Added to that is the complication of the unequal resourcing of institutions and individuals within those institutions. Within the GLCA there are some colleges that have very large endowments and others that have very modest endowments. Some that are very highly ranked and others that are struggling in some way with their position in the overall hierarchy of US institutions.

[10:11] For that reason, they have different motivations in wanting to collaborate with each other that complicate existing challenges regarding discipline and proximity.

[10:22] The hardest thing to do, really, of all the things that I think you can do with grant money is to bring about cross-institutional collaborations.

[10:30] It seems like they largely happen and survive on the basis of a deep level of engagement on the part of the faculty members involved. They might do it with no support because they're so committed to that. If you can find those kinds of relationships and then

resource them, so much the better.

[10:48] It seems like in many cases, no amounts of resources that are realistically obtainable are going to motivate these partnerships that don't have the essential organic foundations that are needed to make them thrive.

Stacey: [11:03] You mentioned in 2008, you went to a digital humanities seminar?

Bill: [11:06] Digital Humanities Summer Institute at the University of Victoria, which is the ground zero for the creation of probably the majority of digital humanities careers in the Western hemisphere.

Stacey: [11:20] Were you interested in digital before that? What led you to go to the Summer Institute?

Bill: [11:27] I've been interested in digital probably, in an academic context related to my discipline, going back maybe now 15 years or more because I think, it started with the Walt Whitman Archive. I'm a nineteenth-century Americanist with a special interest in Whitman. The Whitman Archives might have even started in the mid-90s, so more than 20 years ago.

Stacey: [11:56] Before we knew to call it digital humanities?

Bill: [11:58] Before we did, but I think the digital humanities people were calling it academic computing or computational humanities. They had lots of names for it.

[12:07] Every time I talk about digital humanities as an emerging field, I get angry mail saying, "Well, you know, back in the 1930s, Father Roberto Busa was working on it and actually Herman Hollerith was working on it back in the 1860s," or whenever. This goes all the way back to the beginning of human history.

Stacey: [12:26] I would actually like to read that letter because that seems like an interesting mix of technologies they must have been using.

Bill: [12:32] Yeah. If you read, "Debates in the Digital Humanities" or the Blackwell introduction to digital humanities, those books will chart the deep history that goes back, essentially, to the beginning of time.

[12:48] We're just late arrivals at this thing. They get upset. They were upset in that community when I said it was the next big thing, which I meant in a sincere way, with only a mild undercurrent of humor.

[13:03] But they took it as meaning transient, although I think there is a certain transience in the hype wave.

[13:11] I think the hype wave has passed now and we're at that period of difficult program discipline formation and we'll be in that for a long time. This is still becoming established as something that everybody has to be engaged with at some level.

Stacey: [13:31] That's how sort of the hype that's overblown and predicts both glory and doom sort of becomes stable, actually, in the program development. Once we have programs on the ground that are funded and are working, then we see what's really possible.

Bill: [13:46] I think that night be what I'm known for, if anything, a long time from now will be that somehow I set the match to the beginning of the hype wave with a piece that I wrote about the MLA conference, saying it was the next big thing.

[14:00] That's the most quoted thing I've ever written and it seems like every other essay begins with that now, on digital humanities that's meant for a broader audience. Maybe that initiated the hype wave.

[14:14] Now we're finally coming down the other side of it and the hard work of ongoing disciplinary evolution and establishment still needs to be done. Meanwhile, the people who were involved in the hype wave will disperse and go on to the next big thing.

Stacey: [14:30] Right. They've moved on to another controversy.

Bill: [14:32] Right, so now I'm on to grand challenges and pathways. But embedded in that, baked into it still is digital liberal arts, digital humanities because those remain part of the ongoing set of challenges that our institutions have to face.

[14:48] It's not moving on, it's just adding on and expanding and taking DH and DLA not as some new thing that we have to encounter, but as something that's more or less here to stay. We have to deal with it. I think that's a positive outcome, but it's no longer a situation where

things are exciting and boldly transformational.

[15:12] They are simply the day-to-day business of our field, and of academe in general. In some ways it was that period of uncertainty that kind of brought me forward to do this.

[15:24] That was what happened the last time, too, because we had been turned down for a proposal to create an Honors program. At the time I was just learning about this supposedly new thing.

[15:36] It was probably 100 years old by then, but it was supposedly new called digital humanities because I had gone to the Digital Humanities Summer Institute in 2008. I came back and I was this very junior person on the committee and everyone quit after that first proposal was turned down.

[15:53] I thought, "Why don't we try it again and make this a digital humanities honors program?" They let me do it and it was like, "Yeah, whatever kid. Do that." Then they accepted it and it was a surprise. It got a phase one grant and then it got a phase two once we successfully implemented it.

[16:11] This was a similar situation in which the people who were really senior enough to lead this were no longer around. I was still around and I got to write the proposal. Now, here we are.

Stacey: [16:25] I have to say, as a junior scholar to you, I really admire that you positioned yourself to be able to take on that opportunity when it was presented to you. I kind of want to get some advice. I'm interested in writing grants.

[16:41] I'm interested in participating in a larger community and working on projects that are really meaningful and maybe even cross institutional boundaries. What advice would you have for me, or for people like me?

Bill: [16:51] I don't have any advice because these things were largely random and they were more about volunteering to do something or being around to do something when the opportunity emerged that could not have been foreseen.

[17:06] I think at the time I was preparing — after having directed the Mellon program for

seven years — I was preparing to go back and be primarily a teacher and finish a book project that had been set aside. I was not planning to embark on this next thing. I'm glad to be doing it, but it was not my plan.

[17:26] It is, in many ways, a logical extension of what we've done before, but there are probably other people who could've directed this and were probably better positioned institutionally to do it, but they're not here anymore.

[17:37] [laughter]

Stacey: [17:37] Right. And they didn't volunteer. Maybe some are here, but they just didn't stand up.

Bill: [17:43] Yeah. Maybe that's true, but I think in this case it had to do with the credibility that had been built up with the foundation. If we were able to successfully implement our proposals last time, for whatever combination of reasons, we'd be able to do it this time.

[18:02] I think that's a fair assessment of it. Whereas I don't think anyone else, institutionally, had had the history. Although there were others who were better positioned in terms of their institutional rank to do it.

Stacey: [18:15] You might not have any advice for me, but I gleaned some from your comments anyway. Which is volunteer and do the smaller tasks well, so that you'll be asked to do the bigger tasks.

Bill: [18:29] I think that's an accurate...yeah. Be on the right committees that are doing entrepreneurial things. Often the more senior people have too many other things on their plate that they may be willing to delegate entrepreneurial, unexpected, exploratory responsibilities to junior people on those committees who can rapidly build up a portfolio of accomplishments by taking on things that others, because they're too busy or because these things seem too speculative, to undertake themselves.

Stacey: [19:04] I think that might actually contradict a lot of the advice that junior faculty get, actually.

Bill: [19:10] Like what?

Stacey: [19:10] Which is to limit the amount of service you do, don't sign up for anything that's nebulous or where the commitment is unclear.

Bill: [19:18] But I've had a career that's very different from the one I expected to have. I was trained to be a faculty member at a research university and I ended up at a liberal arts college. I was glad to because that's really where I became interested in being a professor, so that was a good thing.

[19:34] But I still expected to have a career as someone who writes scholarly articles and books and teaches. Then this kind of entrepreneurial program development things happened, very unexpectedly, about nine years into my career and one thing just led to another.

[19:54] On the whole, that's been a good thing, but there's always this voice that says, "This is not what you were trained to do. Get back to what you are supposed to be doing."

Stacey: [20:02] Like the book project...?

Bill: [20:03] That's right.

Stacey: [20:03] ...you're not currently working on?

Bill: [20:06] Well, I'm working on it, but not at the pace that I probably otherwise would have been working on them. It's hard to be engaged with the scholarly community while you're involved with these kinds of entrepreneurial administrative program development communities. That's an exciting world to be in, but it's also a very kind of changeable...I guess just like the scholarly world, there's a trendiness to it.

[20:31] Where some things are very funded at one moment and they're celebrated, and then they kind of fade away and the next big thing comes along. You keep ascending on these trend waves and you're always trying to figure out where the next trend wave is going to be. That was true of scholarship as well, as least in the job search pre-tenure era.

[20:52] I suppose after you get tenure, if your ambitions are simply to be a good scholar in the realm that you inhabit, you're less affected by those trends.

[21:01] But on the other hand, how do you get published unless you are, in some way,

addressing the ebb and flow of trends within the discipline? It seems like it's six of one and half a dozen of the other.

[21:13] You can be involved in those administrative entrepreneurial program developing fields that effect enormous numbers of students all over the country and the world and have resources available to experiment.

[21:28] Or you can be in a field that is in your own specialty, which is important, but it doesn't have the wide ranging impact that's in many ways more exciting, but is also more diffuse and less close to the heart of your own disciplinary interests.

Stacey: [21:51] As we've been talking, I was thinking about how does the digital affect the traditional residential liberal arts experience for undergraduates, but now I'm thinking maybe the digital is a way that we sort of package the integrative learning that traditionally happens so well on campuses like this one, and are able to say, "Even if you don't have this residential liberal arts experience, you can still have this cross-pollination and this student investment in cross-disciplinary work. Here's a model that works for that."

Bill: [22:27] It can be and I think we've been able to do it with a kind of incubator model, a kind of special program model, but we haven't, I think, been able to do it for the whole of the institution. Maybe we never will and maybe that's a good thing.

[22:42] I think as the digital humanities ascended to visibility, there was a counterbalancing movement towards simplification and stripping away technology, saying that technology is causing distraction and making us stupid and so on. That's legitimate, too.

Stacey: [23:02] Oh, I don't think so.

[23:02] [laughter]

Bill: [23:03] We don't want to go too far in one direction. I think in the hype phase we went really far in that direction in order to make the case to a large audience and to the funders and the administrators. A certain amount of hyperbole was involved in doing that.

[23:17] Now, that has provoked a reaction, which has to be addressed in turn. The reaction is a legitimate one. In my own work as a teacher, I've gone away from these long, contractual

seeming syllabi towards a one page statement of what we want to do in the class, without getting too specific about it.

[23:39] I think moving back towards that kind of simplicity in teaching, that was normal when I was in college in the '80s, might be a positive development. I'm finding it to be that way. There's a yin and yang to this that is unavoidable and is, on the whole, a good thing.

Stacey: [24:01] I actually have a question about your own teaching, since you brought up your syllabus. Do you teach with technology?

Bill: [24:10] I use a course management system because it enables me to keep in touch with the students. There have been times I've used Twitter and discussion fora to enable dialog, but more and more I'm using less and less, at least in the classroom. I don't like using email anymore with students because it encourages a lack of thoughtfulness in interactions and a lack of humanity and authenticity in communication.

[24:41] I'd much rather meet with students face to face and try to schedule meetings with them every week because it's a human interaction.

[24:48] I teach online, but I still consider that a second-best approach. If that's the only option that we have in order to accomplish certain curricular objectives, then we can do the best we can with it.

[25:00] But it's the traditional face to face model in a community of students in a larger community of an institution that characterizes residential liberal arts education in general that I think is the best model. Online is a supplement, the technology can supplement that in a variety of ways.

[25:19] People have different kinds of successes using different things, but having gone through this period of deep investment in trying out new technology, in the end I've come back more towards the traditional model supplemented by the technology, rather than substituting for anything.

[25:40] I think that's where I'm going to stay, but as new things come along, I'm going to keep trying them out. But I'm never going to sign on, I think, to the idea of a fully technologized undergraduate educational experience.

Stacey: [25:53] Right, because of the essential nature of that interpersonal connection.

Bill: [25:57] That's right. More gets accomplished in terms of the progress of my students, for example, in an introductory writing course in five minutes of mostly non-verbal conversation than can be achieved in a semester of back and forth via email.

Stacey: [26:21] Right, there are so many other factors mediating conversation besides our human bodies. When you start doing it over technology, it becomes very difficult to communicate.

Bill: [26:31] I think the student can tell what I think of them and how I want them to move forward. I like them, but I see things that they need to work on and I'm on their side.

[26:42] Whereas if I write to them, "Here's what you need to work on," and no matter how I cushion that with encouraging remarks the beginning and the end, it's not believed in the same way as if I've conveyed that by the attention that I've given them personally in the meeting.

[26:58] We can use that technology to provide opportunities to enhance things that we're already doing, but not as a substitute for them.

Stacey: [27:09] Right. Great. There's one question we ask all of our guests on the podcast, and that is what is your favorite analog, non-digital educational technology?

Bill: [27:18] The pencil.

Stacey: [27:19] Why would you say that?

Bill: [27:20] Because, I can write on their papers with the pencil and I'm not even writing words, I'm just drawing attention to things on their papers that need some kind of attention. They already know what it is without my writing it in the margin. When I circle something, half the time they say, "Yeah, I know."

[27:40] [laughter]

Stacey: [27:42] Right, just helping them notice it was all they needed.

Bill: [27:44] Yeah, that's right. I don't know if the pencil's the right answer to that question. It might just be the chair. "Sit down in the chair or two chairs. Sit down in the chair and let's talk." I think that maybe it's the chair. But you could sit on the ground, too.

Stacey: [28:02] I'm sorry, did you just...?

Bill: [28:03] It is an analog technology. The analog technology is the human voice. It's not parseable, it's a holistic...It's the encounter between two people around a subject of common interest. Is that analog?

Stacey: [28:22] Maybe it's something else. It's human.

Bill: [28:26] Human, that's all it is. The technology is a nice supplement for that when that's not available, or an enhancement of some dimensions of that.

Stacey: [28:36] Because that's what a pencil does, it allows you to grade your student's paper without them actually sitting next to you. They don't have to be there.

Bill: [28:44] It's a mediation, the pencil is a tool of mediation. How do we have the unmediated encounter between two minds over some subject of common interest, apart from the conversation in this life?

Stacey: [28:58] Right.

Bill: [28:59] Right.

[28:59] [music]

Derek: [29:02] That was William Pannapacker, professor of English at Hope College, interviewed by Center for Teaching Assistant Director for Educational Technology, Stacey Johnson. I have Stacy here with me now, with a follow up to the interview.

Stacey: [29:12] Hi, Derek.

Derek: [29:13] Hey, Stacey.

Stacey: [29:15] I wanted to talk a little bit more about that pencil anecdote we got at the

end. I think several of our guests on the show have talked about how much they love the analog technology of the pencil, especially as people who are in research and writing, it makes sense that would be our go-to.

[29:30] What I especially liked about the way that Bill framed his pencil choice was he was really trying to find what is the technology that's a precursor to what we use now as a course management system, to really help us interact with each other and make sense of each other's writing. I thought it was a really beautiful way to frame that. It was a nice conversation, we had fun.

Derek: [29:55] Yeah. I hadn't thought about the pencil and marking up a student's paper as a mediated form of communication, but that's precisely what it is.

Stacey: [30:05] He brought in the idea of symbolic marking instead of marking up with language and it went in a really cool direction. Another cool thing that happened, and I have my pencil here, I know our listeners can't see it, but we did put a link to this special pencil in the show notes. I'm going to include a picture in our show notes as well.

[30:24] But, it turns out that Bill has a habit of giving a lovely pencil, which some of you might be pencil enthusiasts and know what a Palomino Blackwing is. I'd never heard of it, but he has a habit of giving this pencil as gifts, as small gestures to people. After our conversation about pencils, I was lucky enough to be the recipient of one of his Palomino Blackwings and it's such a cool pencil I have not yet sharpened it.

[30:50] My goal is to sharpen it and use it only for the most important writing I do. Maybe only marking up student papers. That would be a good idea.

Derek: [30:56] There you go. That is a fine looking pencil.

Stacey: [30:58] It is.

Derek: [30:58] And now I'm really interested to try it out myself.

Stacey: [31:02] There's apparently a whole collection. They have limited release, so you have to snatch them up. You can find old versions of these pencils on eBay and they go for a lot of money.

[31:12] There's a whole subculture around these Palomino Pencils that I've been ushered into now and so I am excited to learn more.

Derek: [31:18] And for the listeners, I should note this is not a mechanical pencil. This is a pencil you sharpen and use and use up over time.

Stacey: [31:25] I don't know, who makes this pencil? Is it made by hand like a Cuban cigar? I need to learn more. It's really sparked my interest.

Derek: [31:34] That's fantastic. We will have a link in the show notes to more about the Palomino Blackwing, which is also just a great name for a pencil, as well as links to the Mellon Scholars Program, the Grand Challenges Initiative and other resources that Pannapacker mentioned.

[31:48] You can find those show notes on our website, leadinglinespod.com. We welcome your comments and questions there, and on Twitter where our handle is @leadinglinespod.

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[32:06] Leading Lines is produced by the Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications at the University Library and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[32:15] This episode was edited by, Rhett McDaniel, and Stacey Johnson. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.