# Humanists and Hierarchy: Reconciling Critical Theory with Hierarchical Teams

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Many humanities scholars are not accustomed to teams and teamwork; they have been disciplined to resist rather than reinforce hierarchy. NSSE data tells us that entering students express interest in and desire to work with faculty on research projects, but fewer than 15% ultimately do. While students say they want this kind of experience, almost no students in the humanities have the opportunity of working with faculty on their research — outside of Digital Humanities.

Feminist pedagogy addresses the nuances in which feminist instructors subvert traditional classroom hierarchies but do not abdicate their responsibilities to lead, direct and encourage growth and learning. Anti-racist pedagogy goes even further in its skepticism of traditional hierarchies in which power and status are played out among faculty, staff and students at universities. Both feminist and anti-racist pedagogies build on Critical Theory, an approach to analysis and practice that is oppositional and critical of traditional power structures.

For humanists schooled in Critical Theory, hierarchies violate principles in which students are held accountable for their own education; hierarchies also raise important questions about ethical treatment of students and other low-paid workers. These humanists have difficulty thinking about ways in which students might be credited for their work in the partial completion of a project, never having had this kind of experience. To do the kind of research required for an NSF or NIH grant, researchers in the sciences must construct teams of people who have very different levels of ability, skills, experience and knowledge. For scientists accustomed to the assignment of work based on the scope and scale of knowledge and experience, ethical treatment of students would require appropriate levels of responsibility and an appropriate scale for required work. Furthermore, to teachers and researchers accustomed to complex, functional research teams, the practice of what seems to be denial of teacher responsibility to run the class and evaluate student performance borders on the specious.

These are values conflicts, often considered by conflict-management professionals to be the most difficult conflicts to mediate and manage. In order to bring many humanists into the Digital Humanities, however, leaders of DH projects will need to navigate these conflicts, especially for projects built into DH curriculum.

In order to reconcile the two sets of research and pedagogical practices so that humanists can develop and lead projects large enough to require teams, we need to develop explicit approaches to developing teams made up of students and new and senior faculty as well as staff and alt.ac members. This approach to include students who are fully invested as members of the team at levels appropriate to

their abilities and educational needs must be accessible and explicable to humanists who have not worked through this problem, and we must be certain that our approach is ethical. We also must formulate this approach so that people in the humanities who do not have experience working in hierarchical teams understand how to construct and lead them so that the teams are educational, ethical and successful and so that students get accurate credit for their work.

Based on experience developing multidisciplinary teams in predictive analytics, we have developed the following suggestions for successful teams of students working on complex DH projects:

- Identify and recruit students with interest and ability appropriate to the projects. When possible, look for opportunities to recruit students across multiple disciplines to work together.
- Outline possible projects that will be of sufficient difficulty to keep students engaged for at least a year, but not so difficult as to overwhelm or intimidate students.
- Establish a regular meeting time, usually once per week, and make attendance mandatory.
- Group students into smaller teams of 2 or 3. Once the project is established, pair each new recruit with at least one student who is experienced in participation in the project. The new student can serve as an apprentice to the experienced student and move into a leadership role in the following semester or year. Use knowledge of the abilities and weaknesses of the students to form groups that use the strengths of everyone.
- At the weekly meetings, lead discussions about work that the students have done in the last week, and identify next steps for each project.
- Gauge progress as the year goes by, to lead the students to a culminating presentation or paper/report by year end.
- Be on the lookout for teams that are not functioning well together. Mediate immediately if they are not solving the problems that are inhibiting progress. Shift responsibilities if necessary, without blaming or drawing unnecessary attention to the situation. Be an advocate for each student participant, keeping in mind that the student experience and environment for learning is of utmost importance, more than the completion or quality of the project results.
- Praise students whenever possible and draw attention of faculty and other university colleagues to the work they are doing. Deflect credit away from yourself, giving it to the student participants.
- Work within the participating departments so that the project counts in some tangible way toward the students' graduation requirements, which may be through independent study credits, internship, practicum, culminating project, or other appropriate curriculum vehicle.
- That is, the faculty leader/researcher needs to construct teams that call out student strengths and teams in which students work at the level that gives them the most educational life.