Let Us Fail: Speculative Futures and Digital Librarianship

Natalia Estrada, Kristina Bush, and Stacy Snyder

EPISODE 1. INTRODUCTION

Natalia Estrada: Hello, and welcome to this special publication for the *Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship*. This project and this publication is called "Let Us Fail: Speculative Futures in Digital Librarianship." I'm Natalia Estrada, my pronouns are she and they. I am the Digital Scholarship Librarian at the University at Buffalo. And I would like to introduce my collaborators. Let us start with Kristina.

Kristina Bush: Hi, I am Kristina Bush, I use she/her pronouns, and I am currently the Online Learning Librarian at Tufts University's Tisch library.

Stacy Snyder: I'm Stacy Snyder, pronouns are she/her, and I'm Educational Technology Project Manager in the University at Buffalo Libraries.

Estrada: So now that we've figured out who we are, in that basic sense, we kind of also have to discuss how did we get to here? How did we get to this idea? And why are we recording this podcast for a journal publication on this topic, and why we're doing something that's called "Let Us Fail?" So why don't we start with you, Stacey, how did we get here?

Snyder: Oh, it's a long and winding road. Personally, I got here, I was in library school in the mid-90s. And that's, of course, when the world wide web came to be. So I've been playing around with digital stuff, since I got out of library school, from doing digital collections to most recently working with our digital scholarship studio and network. So I've been working a lot along the years with the evolution of digital library spaces.

[musical interlude]

I think with the subject librarians that they…this is, this is my impression from the outside of that. But the idea, the fact that they are first and foremost focused on their subjects, and to do what they need to do to help those faculty along to get the resources that they need. Whereas I was seen, and have been seen as one of the IT people. So doing all of those things with the computer and the programs and the testing is what it people do. And certainly there's been kind of a split between, you know, the, the hierarchy that is in higher education between faculty and staff. And I have certainly felt that over the years that the faculty are at a higher level in the hierarchy than staff are. So while I feel like my expertise hasn't been challenged, I think that in some ways, my librarian-ness has been challenged. Hardly ever anything overt. Although, I have heard from faculty librarians that, "well, you're not really a librarian", because I don't have that in that position. So no, I'm not in a librarian position. But I still have the degree I work in libraries, I understand the how the library field exists, and what's different than doing any sort of it in a library versus doing it in another organization.

[musical interlude]

Estrada: What about you, Kristina?

Bush: Yeah, so I'm still pretty new to this profession. When I was in undergrad, I got really involved in a digital humanities project. And it opened my eyes to thinking about wow, like, what can digital tools and these methodologies do with all of the amazing things that libraries have? Like, what would that combination of digital tools and the access that they can create to archival materials? Where can that take us? So I went into library school thinking like, this is exactly what I'm going to do. And then I ended up getting really interested in instruction, like I just became such a pedagogy nerd and absolutely loved teaching. And my first job out of library school, which I went to, right after undergrad was at UC Berkeley, which is where I met Natalia, and it was, um, it was the digital literacies librarian. So to me that felt like a really cool intersection of the digital world that I was coming out of and the instruction world that I was, I had become really interested in. And my current job is online learning. So I've kind of stayed at that intersection of instructional design and the digital world and digital scholarship through about my career so far. So that's, that's what got me here is kind of thinking these big picture questions about the digital world digital landscape that we operate in and where libraries, especially academic libraries fit in there.

[musical interlude]

I remember the first time that I heard digital humanities as well, which was after I had been involved with that project for I think, like two years at that point, and I had joined this minor that was in public history and archives and the instructor that I was working with. He's like, "you know, the minor also has digital humanities. And this is a digital

humanities project." And I was like, "what is this word?" And after that, I was like, Okay, this is, what I want to do with my life is I want to be a facilitator for DH research, because the possibilities are magical, and felt endless to me at that point, you know, not knowing all that much about all of the roadblocks. But being involved with that project, I just thought, like, look, what is possible, when there's digital access to these materials that are spread across the globe, I was working with Syriac manuscripts, we had like 85% of all of the ones that still exist in the world today, that are spread between many different countries and different libraries. And if this can be done with Syriac manuscripts, what can be done with anything else in the world on and it felt so inspiring.

[musical interlude]

Estrada: So I feel like I have two different paths to talk about how we got here and how I got here, especially. So I have my path of how I got into librarianship. And where I kind of didn't intend to fall to become a librarian. I just generally knew when I was going through undergrad that I really liked research. But I had also worked in a library as an undergrad, I also ended up graduating into the recession in 2008. And so I just essentially was finding jobs, anything I could do. So I got a lot of library jobs that were mostly staff positions. And in those positions, it was a lot of very much someone else told me what to do, I had very little freedom, very little autonomy of what I could do. And so if I was very curious about anything like, "oh, I want to learn, like, Drupal, because this would help in this project that seems very interesting." Or, "hey, I see this trend is happening," it was very much a decision of somebody higher. And so they can say either yes or no, on whether I get to learn these things, whether I get to try something. It wasn't until I became librarian, "Big L" Librarian, that I had more freedom to try different things to do what I felt was best. And it was also, you know, right around that transition that I actually attended. Thanks to the ARL, what was then the Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce, what is now Kaleidoscope, giving me funding to go to the Digital Scholarship Institute where I met Stacy, and learn different aspects of digital humanities/digital scholarship there. And so I was able to take those skill sets and be able to try out some stuff, I became a librarian over at Berkeley, eventually, in political science, public policy, where I also got to work with Kristina. The pandemic happened, we had to transition to a lot of things where things were digital, and so we had to be more innovative in these things. And then I ended up in Buffalo, where it was a whole different, you know, need different function, where it just became all these different environments that I wanted to be able to explore but also different kind of relationship. Parallel to that is also my general path to digital landscapes. I actually got very late to the internet, to most people, I didn't get the internet at home. So I grew up in LA, fairly low income. I didn't get internet until like 2003, which for most people is actually kind of late. And so I didn't really have access to like that early landscape of the internet. I didn't get much access to like a computer by myself until much later and stuff like that. So I feel

very behind in compared to my peers. And so I feel like I've constantly had to like play catch up.

[musical interlude]

For the first year and a half of my college program, I did not have a computer of my own. And so that made it really tricky. I also avoided all computer classes, because I fell Like, if I don't have my computer, there's no point in me having this. So I was very much a person who lived in libraries and computer labs, to be able to just type up my papers, or the access my like, class boards to do assignments, email that I that was my second home was the computer labs. And so that made me very self conscious about like, you know, how people perceived my ability to work with the computer, and how like, my understanding of what's going on, say like with the internet, and stuff like that throughout college, and also just like class, and how much money I had. And like, what came with those signifiers. The longer I went on through college, the more apparent it became, have my classmates have Macbooks, or like some other expensive hardware, stuff like that, when I finally was able to get my own computer, it was just like a, we got it from Best Buy for like less than 400 bucks. And it would break a lot. If, you know, I lit I missed out on a lot of the like learning things. And a lot of my classmates learn on how to work with their machines and stuff, I was just more self-conscious of being like, "don't break! I just need you to do a Word document!" Like "don't die!", or even just like taking on more intensive kind of projects as well, I took a linguistics course that require downloading software. And I was so afraid, like my introduction to Audacity was in this class, and I was so afraid that Audacity was gonna break my computer. And from then on, like, after that, and after a series of like, to having to replace computers that were very cheap, that wouldn't last very long and things like that I just learned over time of like, you know, trying to figure out like, How can I pretend I at least know how to work with a computer. And also like, be able to stay connected to how other people in the general academic sphere, working with a computer. I feel like my whole experience from there makes me more empathetic, to help people work with a computer and stuff. I'm slightly more proficient at working with a computer, but not enough to where I can be confident about it. I still feel impostor syndrome. But at the same time, I'm, I'm always like, you know, trying to understand I always feel for like students who can't afford for people who can't, like have reliable internet and stuff like that. And so that that kind of really helps drive how I view, my practice in digital librarianship and digital scholarship. And just librarianship in general, is just like, I've been there, I know what it's like, let's make it a little bit easier and less sucky for like, the next generation.

[musical interlude]

I do also want to say before we go on with our conversation, we are three women, cisgender women, we are either white or white presenting, we are at institutions where

we have some flexibility, and we do have at least a master's degree amongst us, I believe, that gives us a little bit of position and understanding only certain aspects of how that affects, you know, the experience of digital librarianship, we, we do acknowledge that other people say like who are Black, brown, queer, transgender or whatnot have a totally different experience in digital librarianship. And we can't really speak to that we want to at least acknowledge that.

Bush: Something else we want to acknowledge is that the work of speculative futures and speculative futuring is firmly rooted in the black experience and the people who pioneered speculative futures are, are black. So we definitely want to, like acknowledge that history of race and speculative futurism and pay homage to that and in our work.

Snyder: Speculative futuring is a design practice that grew out of speculative fiction. Speculative Fiction is a genre that includes works in which the setting is other than the real world, and explores possibilities and impossibilities of the world. What originator of this genre is Octavia Butler who explored racism and oppression on Earth. Through science fiction plots, including alien colonialism. Speculative Fiction is deeply rooted in Black history and culture, imagining a new world in which oppressive factors like racism, capitalism, and colonialism exist in different ways or not at all, is part of the challenge of speculative futures. Speculative futures is a mindset of building a world in which we can enact change and visualize potential worlds beyond what currently exists.

Estrada: So one other thing we should mention, and this will go on to another part of this is that there's a reason why we picked a podcast format, which is this, you know, allows a, an accessibility format, a difference in accessibility, and especially in terms of neurodiversity access. So I should say I am what is considered neurodivergent, I am both autistic and have ADHD. And so doing something that allows a different medium in scholarly publication is a little bit of a freedom for me to be able to do something that allows me more access. And this kind of ties into aspects of critical disability studies and being able to do those kinds of freedoms.

Bush: Something else that I wanted to bring up was on I read in Crip Negativity, that what the quote is that crips need more futures. And in that book, the author uses crips to describe disabled people. That's his terminology. So, crips need more futures, because the only one that has been given to us is reproductive normativity and rehabilitative futurism[1]. All right, so a future that does not include disability so erases people who are suffering from disabilities or who have disabilities, from those futures that are imagined. And that few charity has been the cause of a lot of violence against disabled people.

Estrada: So this is from *Crip Negativity* by Jonathan Logan, Smilges. It was published in 2023, from the University of Minnesota Press.

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[1] J. Logan Smilges, *Crip Negativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 35.

Bush: So we want to be speculating a future also for those who are not given a future to begin with. So for disabled people, for people of color people who have been removed from futures historically. So that's part of our challenge here, too, is to be able to come up with a future that includes everyone, and lets people have that humanity to them. So I mean, we're very much focusing on digital librarianship here. So we...

Estrada: Which is still people. Still humans.

Bush: And it's still people.

Estrada: Yeah, I think that's actually a really great way of framing this whole conversation where it is just like, the idea of like, these are for to make sure that everybody who normally wouldn't see themselves in these spaces, folks who are disabled, you know, like yourself, and neurodivergent, like myself, people of color, folks who have been marginalized in different areas, can actually see themselves and be able to, like, try out these spaces and be in these spaces in a way that brings joy and play. So we should also talk about our institutions, and especially the difference between Kristina, you are at a private institution right now, Stacy, and I were at a state institution. So there is a lot of difference with that. Stacy, do you see any? What are the differences to you that you've noticed?

Snyder: It's an odd paradox of more and less freedom, more freedom, in that we're kind of ultimately accountable to the public, to our fellow New York State residents. So in some ways we can, we're more free to explore I think, but on the other hand, a private institution might have more funding available, and might be able to step around boundaries, that as a state institution, we have to pay attention to, you know, there are a lot of rules around purchasing, for example, because we're accountable to the state. So, you know, if we want to buy something that is over a certain dollar amount that has to go to bed, we, you know, there's a favor for as I think it should be women and minority owned companies, that sort of thing. Whereas with a private institution, my understanding is that they can just do business with whomever they want, whenever they want without those restrictions. So and I think that that's, it's good and bad to have those kinds of restrictions involved.

Estrada: I'll also add on that, for a state institution, we do try to attract the attention of not only citizens of the state and our general area, to show what work we've done, but to help validate and maybe increase donations, which is kind of this like, kind of a dangerous land to be in where you have to really hope that someone wants to give you money to work on a project or pay for resources, things like that. You know, there wasn't a reason announcement of a very large donation, but it's only for a certain division of the campus. And so it's not very splintered equitably. And also, there is this whole

consideration of like, who are we answering to? Who do we do these projects for? Whether it is for just for the sake of ourselves, or whether it's for like, the Greater Western New York area or for the general state of New York? What is it like over at a private institution, Kristina?

Bush: Yeah, we definitely also have a lot of rules about funding and acquisitions. So a lot of the money comes from alums who have donated for particular causes, and they'll say, you know, however much money and only for classics related acquisitions. And we can only do so much fudging of that, as far as being able to expand where we want to put money towards to grow with the direction of the university, and Tufts has definitely been trying to do more like DEIJ oriented work. Also, the undergrad enrollment here is like, less than 7,000, it's a very, it's a small university. And we do try to support research interests for our faculty especially and collect where their research interests lie. And that also kind of is, is how we're, we're staffed. And how we work is, like the research and instruction department is fairly small. And the majority of it is subject librarians who work closely with their faculty and are kind of more like graduate student focused. And then I'm my department, which is User Experience and Student Success, there are four of us, and we're responsible for the undergrads. So like, it's a really small environment within the library as well. So like, in comparison to UC Berkeley, there are so many fewer librarians, and it's the kind of thing where, you know, the work keeps getting piled on, because we're all trying to do so many people's jobs, and so much work. And we're all trying to adapt to the new needs of our students and the new needs of this university, as more digital needs appear, especially after the pandemic and being able to adapt to what we've seen our students need now and how they liked having hybrid options and learning remotely and really being responsible for their own education and being able to access content whenever and wherever and really, you know, have agency over their learning. So the library has been trying to adapt to that. We've been really trying to be responsive to our community, but sometimes it's like, you know, one person muscling towards an outcome and like trying to bring people with us. But yeah, like what you're talking about with community, we, we our Tisch library is open to the public, but I don't think our community knows that or particularly feels welcome. Like I've received, like virtual reference chats where people will say, "Oh, well, when can I come when I won't be too busy with students?" Or "am I allowed to come as a community member, and not feel particularly invited into the space", so people from the community can come use our physical space, but they can't check out materials. So it's, it's a different...It's a different situation than y'all were... when we're talking about serving our community, it is much more like we're serving our researchers, we are serving the people who pay tuition here or work here, rather than we're serving the greater Medford or Somerville population.

Estrada: I think that's a good point. I think that's also, in a way, a good transition over to what I think we should talk about next, this sense of like, do you feel welcome using the

services and also just like coming in, because even for a public institution, we still have members of our community who don't feel super welcome in our spaces, or feel like that they can use our spaces, both within physical spaces, but also digitally, which leads to what I think the next question that I want to bring up. So we've kind of been tossing these terms around without really giving a definition to them. And I think that we really before we keep going, we should probably give definitions to and the two terms that I'm thinking of is "digital librarianship." And especially like just this general concept of like the digital landscape, but like digital librarianship, and also the idea of "speculative futures." So who wants to take a crack at defining either one of those two,

Snyder: For digital librarianship, there is a good quote from a book called *Exploring Education for Digital Libraries*. And I'm just going to quote it because it's better than me trying to paraphrase it:

> The ontology, the world of the digital librarian, can be understood to comprise knowledge creation, information flows, recording information in various ways and documents, digitization of information and the trend and its transmission over networks describing the physical and intellectual aspects of documents and human information behavior, including information seeking, and making meaning.[2]

And I like that, because it's, I think it encompasses everything that we do in digital librarianship. Because I think so often, people just look at the, the output. So like, the images that you put online, or the book that you digitized, or, you know, someone's dissertation that is online. And it's so much more than that it goes into the end user and the what, how people actually use and think about what we do in the digital libraries. area.

Estrada: Yeah, I like that. And I think, especially if you want to paraphrase, it's essentially "digital librarianship is not digital archives."

Snyder: Very good. Yes.

Estrada: Or just like, it's not just managing digital collections and whatnot. So I, I like this, this definition of just like this, encompassing all different aspects, and is not very far from what is considered general librarianship, where you are thinking of the user and how they use things. Kristina, you talked about speculative futures a little bit earlier. Can you talk a little bit more of what that means?

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[2] Susan Myburgh and Anna Maria Tammaro, *Exploring Education for Digital Librarians* (Witney: Chandos Publishing, 2013), 232.

Bush: Absolutely. So I also have a quote from the book, *Speculative Futures* by Joanna Hoffman, that says:

> Speculative futures are design approaches that help us visualize new and potential worlds, move us beyond what currently exists into what could one day be inspired by art, film, fiction and industrial design, they use speculation to provoke, imagine and dream into what lies ahead.[3]

So that's a very designing definition of it. And I think that that one would work well for us in this podcast, because what we are really doing here is trying to design and visualize a new world for digital librarianship and for us as digital librarians. So even that definition of digital librarianship that we took is almost speculative in a way because it encompasses all of these potential new things that we can do with this field. And it's a more encompassing view of it, then that traditional kind of association of digital libraries with just digital collections or digital archives, so I think we're already kind of doing that work of moving beyond what what currently exists in digital librarianship, to imagine what could one day be our job, right as digital librarians. And, um, like I said earlier, speculative future is rooted in the Black community. And like Octavia Butler is really, like foundational here. So again, paying homage to her and her work.

Estrada: There is one other factor that related to a lot of what's been going on in the year in the US, is the general concept of work, and labor. And Stacy, I think you were about to bring up an important point.

Snyder: One of the differences between working here at the University at Buffalo and what Kristina experiences at Tufts, is at the University at Buffalo as part of the State University of New York, we are in a union. It's the United University Professions. It's everyone, all the faculty, professional staff, in the State University of New York, a part of this union. And so we have all of the benefits of what union membership brings to a person. And, you know, certainly there are some drawbacks to it. But I think, you know, overall, it's a benefit to have a union, whereas, you know, Kristina, being in a non union work environment has some very different experiences than we have. And I don't think that that's necessarily because of the size discrepancy, toughs being much smaller than the University at Buffalo. But, you know, there are things as being part of the union, that Natalia and I can be certain of our continued employment for example, people to talk to if there are problems, formal grievance procedures, all of that which may not necessarily be available to people who are not in a union environment.

Estrada: So, I think this is a good introduction. to our project. So what we're going to do is we're going to take a lot of our talking points that we talked about here. And we're

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[3] Johanna Hoffman, *Speculative Futures: Design Approaches to Navigate Change, Foster Resilience, and Co-Create the Cities We Need* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2022), 208.

going to talk about some of the barriers that we face and also how we envision a future around those barriers. So thank you for listening to this first episode of "Let Us Fail: Speculative Futures and Digital Librarianship."

Snyder: We would like to thank Samantha Quiñon Snair for helping form and refine ideas for this project. We would also like to thank Chris Cheung and CJ Keogh for their technical assistance and Janina Mueller and Sophie Ziggler for providing feedback

[musical shut-down]

EPISODE 2. SPECULATIVE FUTURE SOLUTION: PLAY AT WORK, NORMALIZE FAILURE
Natalia Estrada: Welcome to "Let Us Fail: Speculative Futures and Digital Librarianship", a special publication for the Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship. This is episode two: "Speculative Future Solution: Play at Work, Normalize Failure." I'm Natalia Estrada. I'm the Digital Scholarship Librarian at the University at Buffalo, I am joined with my colleagues.

Kristina Bush: Yes, I'm Kristina Bush, I am the Online Learning Librarian at Tufts University.

Stacy Snyder: And I'm Stacy Snyder, Educational Support Project Manager at the University at Buffalo.

Estrada: And today, we are going to talk about some of the challenges related to digital librarianship and some of our possible futures that we would love to see to get around that. So we are going to do this in kind of big themes. And I'm going to start with Kristina, and Kristina, you have this, let's say issue around metrics. Can you talk about this?

Bush: Absolutely. So yeah, I, I am facing a challenge when it comes to metrics. And this is something that I would like us to speculate on how can we solve this in our in our future. So, you know, the traditional like quantitative measures of assessment aren't particularly useful when it comes to creating digital learning objects or other aspects of digital scholarship, right? So when I say that, I mean, if you are teaching workshops, for example, then there are easy ways to assess like how many people showed up, you submit a feedback form and whatnot. And that's like how you assess the success of it, how many people registered, how many people actually appeared. And that's the type of librarianship that many of our colleagues do, right? They have workshops, they teach classes, you can count how many classes that you teach, how many like course integrated sessions you have. So for that type of work, then you assess your success by how many sessions you teach, it's all quantitative, right, and it's easy to measure in certain ways. However, with online learning objects with other types of digital

scholarship, those type of measures aren't going to work quite as well, the success of an online learning object isn't how many people clicked on it, or how many people submitted the quiz, the success of a digital humanities project isn't how many people have seen it, for example. So we need a more flexible approach to that that includes feedback and iteration and is mindful of the design that we put into these objects, right? Because design thinking is about iteration, and it's about failure. And design thinking is thinking is something that I personally like to do. And I have worked really hard to become anti-perfectionist and be okay with putting out products that are not perfect for the purpose of iteration. And it's something it's a way I like to work. And it's a way that works for this type of scholarship for digital librarianship. However, it is not supported by the traditional librarianship. Right. So what what I need is a way to play and to experiment that, and that be included in metrics. And that'd be included in the way that I go about applying for a promotion, or applying for a merit increase, or whatever, I want to be able to show my success without being tied to these really traditional modes of assessment. So metrics make play and experimentation more difficult, because they want to show that things are successful in a way that's quantifiable, but that data is just not actually useful in developing creative products, right? So I'm talking about design, I'm talking about iteration, I need real feedback, like I need good, honest feedback to make something better. I can't say "Oh, well, you know, 100 people interacted with this. So I guess it's fine." Like I need them to, to actually tell me like, alright, what was your user experience here? Did you meet my learning goals? Did you? Like did this help you to understand how to do your assignment? I need different types of feedback.

Estrada: I was like, Yeah, I think this was like a kind of like a kind of a very academically traditional aspect of like, how do you assess by essentially you count the bodies in a room, and they make eye contact with you, then clearly, you are engaging with them, and they are engaging with you and they are learning as opposed to say, you know, especially for someone who's like with ADHD or something like that, if you're fidgeting or if you're like not paying attention, or like what looks like not paying attention, then you've lost the crowd and thus, it's a failure, but you don't know exactly what is going on with that student, kind of a thing. So like that kind of ties into the issues of metrics as well.

Snyder: What I wanted to say about qualitative feedback that you want, is there are challenges with that, because it's can be very difficult to get, because you can send surveys or questionnaires to the people who are using the objects that you create. But you don't have any guarantee that you're going to get responses or that you're going to get enough responses to be significant. And then even if you do get the responses that you would like, how do you collate those into a way that is meaningful for your supervisor, or for whoever it is, that's looking at your work to decide if you deserve that promotion. And also, it takes a lot more time to administer a survey to collect the results to analyze the results than it does to count the number of people who accessed it, or to

count the number of of people who are in the seats. So you are increasing your workload in that way? Because you're, you're trying to be innovative, but in being innovative, you're making more work for yourself? Yeah. And that's kind of a challenge, because I think sometimes we, I guess I should just speak for myself, you get kind of feel defeated. Sometimes it's like, I'm putting all of this work into this new thing. And it doesn't seem to matter to the people that make the decisions. So how do we, how do we get that stuff to matter?

Bush: Yes, and the other thing, I'm thinking too, is that like, yes, a lot of this is probably going to resonate with people who do traditional in person instruction as well, right? Because I'm sure they want, you know, formative assessment, they want to make sure that students are learning. But also with with digital products, it's different because like Stacy said, We're and Natalia said as well, like, we're not making eye contact with the people using it, we're not actually like assessing in time we go about making something, we put it out into the universe, and we hope that it works, we hope it resonates. So the entire design process, it's a different approach. It's different than writing a lesson plan. And then you go and do it. And you're like, Alright, okay, I flopped. I'll try a different next time, you don't have that kind of like agility, right, you have to get a certain amount of people to interact with something before you can actually iterate on it. And the amount of time that goes into developing online learning objects that goes into learning the software that you're using to create something that goes into designing the outcomes, making the content, like editing the content, figuring out the hosting situation, like there are so many other considerations that build on that. And speaking for myself, I also have like a million other responsibilities. Like I'm seeing nods, we all have a million other responsibilities. So it's like, how am I supposed to do all of these things at the same time as also teaching in person and like, doing my liaison work and all of this stuff, and that ability to play and experiment and learn the software's do all of this additional work that is required to make good online learning objects to make good digital product? It's not currently supported. So when I imagine my future digital librarian world, I want to be supported through that process. I want time I want space, I want agency to be able to put the time that I need into that, that play into that experimentation into learning what I need to learn and having time to talk to people and say, Hey, how's this? How does this look, you know, is this working for you? That's the world that I want. And I want to like hear more from you all to like, how would you build on this world where we get this play? And this experimentation and this freedom from this many people did this thing and you know, those ties to traditional measures of success and academic scholarship?

Estrada: Oh, yeah. No, I've been thinking about this too, because a lot of times, I work with students, but also with faculty and trying to learn new things, new platforms, new methods of thinking, and it is very hard to do if a lot of the time they are thinking like how do I actually present this to an outside evaluator. So say like people who are going up for for promotion, so I teach new faculty who come in for their first year on how to

do publishing and, I do a co facilitation of that program. And we try to introduce them to new platforms, new ways of publishing podcasts. And a lot of times they say, "that's really cool. How do I get this measure for tenure?" And so what I usually do, depending on hope to usually do is just to allow, like, I would love a future or like, I would love the environment, if it was up to me, the ability to just have like, time that isn't restricted, just like time is a huge thing to be able to just say, I have nothing else to do. Nobody is forcing me to go anywhere, I don't have a ton of meetings, I don't have to be in a bunch of responsibilities, I can sit down with a like a group of people who also want to learn something. And we are given the thing we are given some guidelines or some like instructions on like, you know how basic our tos. And we go out, it's kind of like, I approach it with kind of like how I approach Legos. So if you know me, I am an adult Lego [laugh]. And I actually have a box of Legos in my office for teaching. And usually, I've seen other instructors uses, there's a historian and I believe social scientist, who actually has made a qualitative research data management workshop using Legos.[4] And you know, just the ability just just take the tool or take toys, and just like play around for a bit, see what works, what doesn't, it's very, like natural with Legos. So like, I want to be able to, like take that same approach to like a software, new method of thinking like textual analysis, how do you do this with say, like topic modeling? How do you approach with like a Python like library like spacey to do with like a huge text, just like to play around with it, I imagine that future to be able to just have that time and just like to have the support. And just like, especially that framework of, we're just going to play around and find out and see what happens if we do this. And we don't have to worry about like, all of the other like, kind of administrative aspects of it all and all the other quantifiable things.

Snyder: What Natalia was describing, what you both described are both absolutely things that need to happen for this to continue. And especially, you know, Natalia, what you were saying about getting a group together, and that can't be a one off thing. No, that can't be, you know, some Friday afternoon in October, and then you forget about it, because you have to play with the thing, and you have to have time and, and that extended time to experiment, and then come back together and show each other what you learned and, and think about how you can apply what you've learned to current projects or to upcoming projects. So I'm thinking from the evaluation port aspect of that, and I mean, evaluation of us as employees is the evaluation, measures have to change, and they can't necessarily be the same for every position. So, you know, if your subject liaison, who's teaching, you know, one shots, you know, several times a week, and doing your publications and whatever, that's, that's one set of measurements, and that's okay, you get to the digital librarians, and, you know, anyone who is creating learning objects, or, you know, anything that we're putting out there for the world, there needs to be a

[4] The assignment, on using Legos to learn how to classify qualitative data, was developed by Michaela DeSoucey, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at North Carolina State University. Dr. DeSoucey shared a copy of her lesson plan on what used to be Twitter in 2022.

different measurement for that kind of work. And, you know, I could say, maybe it's, How many things did you create? What did you learn? How did you apply what you learned? How did you go about learning it, you know, maybe documenting the process? You know, there are a lot of different ways, but we have to pull out of that one size fits all evaluation. And I know that that's, that's really difficult on an institutional level, because, you know, institutions are very good at creating the widgets. And we're, historically have created widgets, in a lot of ways. So how do we get past that when we're doing our evaluation?

Estrada: I will say that...

Bush: Free the widgets, free the widgets.

Estrada: Do we need the widgets? But like, what, what I was thinking when you were talking about that is, you know, what I usually think of is I think of projects that are out there that act as kind of like guiding light as essentially just like they're kind of toeing the line of doing stuff that in theory could be seen as like, you know, very frivolous but also it's very much play. It's very much joy. They are having fun doing these projects, but still can be assessed in some like scholarly like traditional academic metric way. My first thought was the Data - Sitters club. The Data - Sitters Club has been doing a lot of work on technical analysis. For those who are not aware. This is a project in which a number of Digital Humanities folks got together and do textual analysis of the baby sitters club, because they discovered that there's no scholarly research into the baby sitters club.

[musical interlude]

The Data - Sitters Club is a project started by the following researchers, Lee Skallerup Bessette, Katia Bowers. Maria Sachiko Cecire, Quinn Dombrowski, Anouk Lang, Roopika Risam and Mark Algee-Hewitt.[5]

[musical interlude]

And at first, you can think of that as just like they're messing around with the baby sitters club and just seeing what happens, but they are also publishing, they are also teaching others, they are also talking about the process. And talking about, like, what has worked for them what hasn't, and in a way that is very innovative, but can also be, you know, viewed and kind of generally assessed in like a traditional aspect. And so when I see projects like that, I see that as essentially, just, there is a way, and there is a way to be able to do metrics and be able to like, still be able to have fun and still play, but be able to take into like, the accounts to like be able to see like how many people are reaching

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[5] "About The Data-Sitters Club," The Data-Sitters Club, accessed March 8, 2024, https://datasittersclub.github.io/site/chapter-2.html.

out how many people are like actually interacting and stuff like that. So that's kind of what I mean for like, at least for something to give guidance, and still give me hope. In a way. Kristina, you had a thought?

Bush: Yeah, I feel like that's like the middle ground. Right? That's our we're breaking free. But I want to go even farther than that. And like, he said, like, how many products? No, no, not how many products? How do we imagine this, like breaking free even farther from that, like I loved what Stacy said about like, quantifying success by learning, I would be all about that. I want to I want my, my evaluations just to be like, how much did you learn? Yeah. So I think like, if we're imagining a brand new world, this world creates time for play, it creates time for experimentation. And for those learning communities that Natalia was talking about, where you can just sit together and share what you've learned and learn together and experiment and have fun and dream bigger in a collaborative community setting. So we're imagining a university, because that's the world we're in. So we'll just stick with universities, where we're allowed to have those communities. And maybe those are even communities that are outside of a particular university, they could go beyond we could have the northeast, or you know, national, it could, you know, international, whoa, and communities to learn together and talk about what we're doing with these tools and technologies. Also, like, let us fail. And that's all part of experimentation, right, is to be allowed to fail and learn from it. Yeah, so we're, we're gonna throw out quantitative measures of success. We're tossing them there in the trash. And we're, we're using learning as our measure of success. Did the students learn? Did we learn? Like, how much fun did you have? Did you find joy in this, because we should all find joy in our work, we shouldn't just be trying to produce stuff and like tied into that, like, you must be innovative, but there's no creativity and innovation anymore. Right? And especially digital, digital librarianship. Go ahead, Stacy.

Snyder: Yeah, and also what you're saying, like the title of this podcast, let us fail. Not all of those experimentations that we do are going to lead to anything, I was gonna say lead to anything good. They might not lead to anything at all. We might, you know, have these times, you know, working with our groups and, and experimenting with something and realize, yeah, this software is not great. Or the software is great, but it doesn't have any immediate applicability. And to be able to say that is important, too, because I think so often people will hear of the latest new thing. Yeah, you know, they're at a conference, they hear a thing. They talk to a colleague, oh, well, there's this new this new thing for text analysis or this new thing for slow computing or whatever. And then they come back. And I have to admit that I'm picturing the supervisor in this role, the one who comes back with his word and says, "Hey, I heard about thus and such at the conference. Do you think we should use that or do you think that that's worth something?" And, and to, then what the supervisor needs to do is not just to say, tell me if this is something that we should use, but give us time to explore that. And the permission to come back and say, This is not the thing for us. I think that we've all had

experience with something that is supposed to be the latest and greatest. And we realize that so much.

Estrada: Alright, I will also throw in. So I think one other concept that's kind of helpful here. And this is something that I think it's just been more brought up in the general academic space. But the concept of leisure, and learning leisure just learning for the sake of learning. So leisure learning is essentially this idea that you like you're learning just because you want to learn, like there is no general benefit for like your work or for like, self improvement, whatever, it's just you're learning because you're learning you have the free time and you would like to do that. And normally, like I've seen this conversation come along, and like the concept of classics education. So like, I want to learn Greek because I want to learn Ancient Greek or whatever not not, because it makes me a better businessman, or just like I want to learn like the great books or whatever. But I feel like that's the same theory or like a same application that can be used in digital librarianship where it's just like, I just want to learn this thing, because I want to learn this thing. And I think the students should be able to do that too, or just like anybody that we're doing these products for, or just like new platforms, or new learning methods, we should be able to do that and say, this is a thing people can learn, because this is a thing they can learn. So like, I'd be like, like having that thought idea where it's just like, we shouldn't have it a reason we shouldn't have a metric or some goal to hit, we should just be able to say like, this is a freedom. And this should be like a thing that we should be encouraging for all of our community members, that they should just be able to take the ability and like some time to themselves, and to just learn whatever they say they want to learn at that moment. Do they want to learn like a new textual analysis process? Go ahead, just for the sake of it? Sure. Do they want to learn how to build a website just because? Go ahead. Anything else like that should a philosophy that we should be approaching? And I think that's kind of forgotten at times.

Bush: We need like paid learning sabbaticals.

Estrada: Oh, my god! [laughter] I think you have to get tenure?

Bush: For our next challenge. Our next challenge,

Estrada: Which is a group discussion, we're going to talk about promotion and job security. Speaking of which, so Stacy, do you want to start us off? What are your thoughts on promotion adjust curity?

Snyder: Well, in a way, this kind of comes back to the union thing that I think I mentioned in our last episode. And within the State University of New York, we have faculty who get tenure, which I think most people most universities still have, although I know some universities are getting rid of tenure for their faculty. But the professional

staff also gets kind of the equivalent of tenure, which is permanent appointment. And it's the same sort of timeline. Of course, the requirements are different, but it's basically, you know, the seven year mark, if you've done what you're supposed to do in your time working here, you get permanent appointment, which is kind of the same as tenure, meaning that you are not easily fired. It's not an at will employment kind of situation. And I think that it has, you know, the benefits of tenure have been published at nauseam elsewhere. I think that it does come into you know, a problem when we're dealing with the innovative stuff that we've been talking about. And when you need to have those measurements, like Kristina was talking about to get to that tenure to get your tenure to get your permanent appointment. And then that's where we need the different evaluation.

Estrada: Yeah, and I mean, the issue, especially in academic librarianship and digital librarianship, and like working in libraries in general, is that for especially early career, or like, early on while working, you're pretty much at the mercy of like, what do you produce? Do you produce anything that has some form of impact, and it has to show success as well. If you're on the tenure track, you have to have a certain number of publications. And those publications have to be at a certain metric, and they have to have been seen by others and they have to have impact and they have to be in a way that is easy to measure. If you're like for up for like permanent status or just some for job security in the library staff is important. You have to show usefulness, you have to show that your job match letters in a way. And for digital scholarship, digital librarianship, digital like working in the digital sphere, that can be really tricky. And especially like when you think about one, how long the platform's last, like, you know, what is the new sexy thing? And can that new sexy thing last for quite some time? I especially am confronting this because I am secretly also the AI librarian, somehow, and AI has been on the top of a lot of people's minds. And I don't know how long that will last. But you know, you have to be proficient at it. And you have to see like how long this will go, and you can't fail at a point. Krristina, I know, you have thoughts on this as well.

Bush: Yes, exactly. Right. You can't, you can't fail. Um, so at Tufts, we don't have tenure or tenure equivalent. So my, my work is is tied to those metrics, which is why is my challenge, because I will not, you know, get promoted, get my merit increase, not be able to stay here if I don't produce stuff, and I can't show that I'm producing stuff. But something else that we wanted to mention is that a lot of digital librarian work is contract based or grant based. So short term, the job is tied to a particular project or a particular product or particular software. So those jobs are especially precarious, and don't have much security, or any security, because they are so short term. But digital products are, are always going to be tied to risk digital scholarship will always be tied to risk. And that also goes back to what we talked about where experimentation needs to be built into this work. Because it will always be risky. It'll always take time to learn and figure out what your you're doing and how you want to put it out there. But yeah, like,

all of these modes of promotion modes of measuring success are are tied to traditional scholarly output. So we need to expand.

Estrada: Yeah, we need to expand that. And then also, we need to be able to figure out ways that like, you know, there are folks out there who are experimenting in different ways of producing scholarship, obviously, we are right here. But Katina Rogers has been helping lead with, she helped with I think Syracuse University developed the Next Gen Dissertations[6], where it is folks who have completed dissertations, but they do it in a way that, you know, it's innovative. So there was the first ever peer reviewed rap album, there was, you know, a series of podcast about Victorian Gothic, folks who've done gamified dissertations.[7] And so but it's still a small number, not big enough to be able to like, cause a big shift, to be able to, for us to get out of this like very tight, strange, like way of getting through promotion and tenure, and also to make sure that our contract, coworkers and whatnot get to stay on and a more permanent, sustainable method. So what can we imagine that as like a more equitable and like a better future for all of us?

Snyder: I think that when we're talking about tenure, it's not just for the librarians who are doing the digital librarianship. It is for the faculty that we often work with on these projects. And you often will have, you know, the junior faculty, like Natalia was mentioning before, who are very, very, very interested in doing digital scholarship projects, but they don't count toward tenure, or they can't figure out how to make them count toward their tenure. So the junior faculty who may have some really wonderful, bright, fresh ideas, don't feel comfortable putting the time into those projects, because it may not count for their tenure. So oftentimes, then it leads to tenured faculty coming in and doing the work, which is not to say that that's they don't always also have really good ideas, but it feels like we can't have it not not allowing that in the tenure process is doing a disservice to those ideas. And that may be by the time those faculty members get tenure. They won't have the idea anymore, or they'll be have moved on to other things. So it's the ideal I think, for the future will be to treat digital scholarship on par with traditional scholarship. And I know that that's a huge paradigm shift for us. or cities? You know, in some disciplines is like your tenure your dossier is, you know, how many monographs Did you publish? And others it's how many articles Did you publish in peer reviewed journals? You know, it's in we have to figure out how to equate digital scholarship project with one of those things.

Bush: I was just kind of reminded of what Stacy said when we were talking about metrics and that we need to break free of this one size fits all model and valuing learning over

[6] Katina Rogers, "About This Project," Next Generation Dissertation, September 28, 2021, https://nextgennmd.hcommons.org/credits/.

[7] A.D. Carson, "Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions," PhD diss., (Clemson University, 2017), https://phd.aydeethegreat.com/; Anna Williams, "My Gothic Dissertation," PhD diss., (University of Iowa, 2019), https://www.mygothicdissertation.com.

output. So that to me, also sounds like valuing process over product, right? That's something that also just as a design thinking nerd processes valued over product for that for design thinking as well. So I'm, I'm wondering, how do we tie process to job security? Because, you know, I would love to have job security. That sounds wonderful. And I would love to not have to jump through all of the hoops to get to get it. Yeah. So how do we reimagine academia? Or these types of jobs that we have, where we have the security that would make us feel comfortable without having to submit to the traditional academic publishing to be able to get it? How do we not have to check these boxes that maybe don't align with the work that we do, or the the work that we're interested in doing?

Estrada: So in my mind, I think of two things. And I think of like they both fall under the general theme of being more publicly open about these kinds of things. And the first one is discussing more about these projects and the way that people have responded to it. I am thinking of, especially around the creation of Zotero. So if you've worked in academia, you've probably abused or have seen the citation management tool Zotero, I'm a huge user of it. But one of the researchers who worked on Zotero in its creation was when he was going through the tenure process. And he had written about it as well. He mentioned that there was a discussion on whether it's the taro the creation of a candidate service or scholarship, and that they were going to they were leaning towards county into service, and thus possibly affecting his tenure vote. And so there was this whole discussion about like, what do these kinds of like projects? How do these count in the larger world of academia? How do we get people to understand how we frame them and how we use them as well?

[musical interlude]

In 2013, Shawn Takats, then the director of research projects for the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, and the co director of the Zotero project, at the time went up for tenure, and at the vote of 10-2 was able to achieve tenure, though there was discussion about the role of Zotero whether as scholarship or as service, what the note from the portfolio. Quote, "The committee also recognizes considerable work at the Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media as it relates to projects such as Zotero, and the substantial funds he and his collaborators have raised to help sustain them. Some of the committee question to what degree Dr. Takats involvement in these activities constitutes actual research, as opposed to project management. Hence, some determined that projects like Zotero et.al, while highly valuable, should be considered as major service activity instead." This is from Shawn Takats personal website in 2013, titled, "A Digital Humanities Tenure Case, Part Two: Letters and Committee."[8]

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[8] Sean Takats, "A Digital Humanities Tenure Case, Part 2: Letters and Committees," Quintessence of Ham, February 7, 2013,

[musical interlude]

The other way of thinking about it as well as talking more openly about failing, which is kind of what we're doing here. And I'm especially thinking about the collection of essays from Shaun Graham, *Failing Gloriously and Other Essays*[9], and what Shawn writes about his experiences, failing to get any form of a permanent position. This is very much a job like a book about job precarity and then also like where things have failed in his projects. So Shawn Graham is a digital humanist over in Canada, I believe, at the University of Carleton in Ottawa, and written in this collection of essays about having to work as a substitute teacher and various aspects after graduating with his PhD, not being able to find like steady work for a while but then also talking about when he did started working on big projects in the tenure faculty position. How big problems happened including one that just disappeared or like one that had like all these vulnerabilities that led it to become any usable, and how he had to write about how it failed and how he was so embarrassed about it, but then how people responded to it. And so I think that trend really is going to help us out. It's a stepping stone. But I think talking more and more about like these kinds of aspects is going to help us get to where people become more comfortable in taking these as scholarship and things that are worth considering. But then also just like allow more people in review positions to like, allow them to have more freedom.

Bush: I love thinking about talking about failure as a stepping stone. And yeah, that's like process over product, right? Where if we, we would get the same amount of success, I guess from a failure, if that makes sense. Like the failure will be valued equally to a success. That's what I'm that's what I'm trying to say, there we go. There we go. That's what we're seeing in our future is failure is valued equally to success.

Estrada: So, I want to just take a bit of a pause, because I want to save the next couple of topics for episode three.

Bush: We can do a quick summary.

Estrada: Yeah, go ahead.

Bush: Our demands are what we would love a summary of our demands. Amazing. All right. So we need to be supported in experimentation, play and failure, measures of assessment and promotion to be based around this standard. And we cannot be held to

http://quintessenceofham.org/2013/02/07/a-digital-humanities-tenure-case-part-2-letters-and-committees/.

[9] Shawn Graham, "Failing Gloriously and Other Essays," *Digital Press Books*, January 1, 2019, https://doi.org/10.31356/dpb015.

purely qualitative or sorry, quantitative data, traditional, traditional measures of performance when we must fail to learn and to succeed.

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