Imagining Otherwise

Speculative Assignment Design Inspired by Digital Humanities

Welcome & Workshop Overview

You will leave with:

- One rough idea for a future-facing assignment

- A framework for student creativity that welcomes expansive thinking

- Strategies for small, concrete implementation

Why This Matters

At HBCUs and similar institutions that operate under various constraints, students demonstrate exceptional ingenuity, resourcefulness, and expansive perspectives.

Imagination fosters agency by helping students envision alternatives to dominant systems

- Speculative practices challenge deficit narratives and allow for the construction of liberatory futures
- Creative, multimodal assignments expand what counts as rigorous knowledge by surfacing gaps, silences, and unasked questions

We might aim to cultivate an environment where freedom, critical inquiry, and possibility are central to the learning process.

What is Digital Humanities ...?

DH is the study, exploration, and preservation of human cultures, events, languages, people, and material production in the past and present in a digital environment through the creation and use of dynamic tools to:

• visualize and analyze data
• share and annotate primary sources
• discuss and publish
• findings collaborate on research and teaching

for scholars, students, and the general public.

Black Digital Humanities lets us "build upon lineages of Black studies, feminist, queer, and womanist scholars, forging new paths using their innovative methodologies as they examine, construct, and reimagine innovative communities and people."

Alanna Prince and Cara Marta Messi, "Black Digital Humanities for the Rising Generation"

Black Digital Humanities "help unmask racialized systems of power at work," are a "site of resistance and liberation," and "places where joy and pleasure of Black life can be found."

Kim Gallon
"Making The Case for The Black Digital Humanities"

What DH means for us today:

DH = a set of strategies for rethinking how meaning is made.

DH is not tech; it's how we build meaning.

- Multimodal (maps, zines, timelines)
- Public-facing
- Iterative & collaborative
- Rooted in power, memory, absence

The Moment of Making

Production of History:

- The moment of fact creation (the making of)
- The moment of fact assembly (the making of)
- The moment of fact retrieval (the making of)
- The moment of retrospective significance (the making of history)

These are speculative phases too. Silence enters into each phase, and how we address these silences depends upon the phase(s) in which significant silences exist.

Asking Questions about Knowledge & Data Silence

- What constitutes a fact? How do you know?

- What is data, and how is it constructed?

- How will you handle data absence?

- What might absences and gaps in the data tell you?

What Is Speculative Pedagogy?

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Speculative pedagogy:

✓ Encourages students to design, reframe, and experiment

✓ Focuses on: What if...? instead of What happened?

Speculative Thinking in DH broadly refers to the act of thinking about future possibilities. While this can take many different forms, it is guided by three central questions:

1. What do I imagine the future to look like?
2. What is preventing me from achieving this future in the current world?
3. What needs to be changed or invented to get past this barrier?

Traditional Prompt:
"Write a paper explaining the causes of the Montgomery Bus Boycott."

Speculative Prompt:
"Create a fictional archive of a future protest movement inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott. What artifacts survived? What stories were erased?"

Teaching With DH-Inspired Forms

Format	What It Encourages	Example
Map	place, power, systems	speculative city planning
Archive	memory, voice	future protest archive
Timeline	rupture, continuity	climate reversal counter-histories
Story	agency, nonlinear logic	nonlinear speculative narrative

What Speculation Isn't
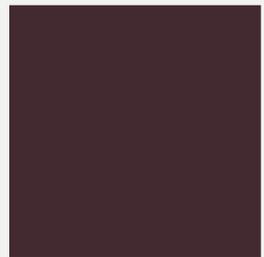
Speculative assignments are not:
- Random acts of creativity
- Fantasies without purpose
- A way to avoid structure

They are:
- Anchored in inquiry
- Framed by context
- Purposeful in what they open up

Pedagogical Purpose:

- Make room for creative risk, complexity, and voice
- Train students to think critically *about* systems, not just within them
- Connect learning to the future, not just the past

What You're Actually Assessing:

- Clarity of ideas: Is the concept well-developed and coherent?
- Insight and connection: Does the work make meaningful links across ideas or contexts?
- Purposeful design: Does the form support the content?
- Reflective awareness: Can students explain their choices and what they learned?

Why This Matters in the Age of Generative AI

- Interrogate what counts as data

- Examine the politics of absence and metadata

- Shift from consumption to authorship

- Teach the limits of algorithmic knowledge

Critical data literacy isn't just knowing how to read a chart; it's knowing who made it, what it silences, and what alternatives we can imagine.

Design Prompt

Design an assignment that asks students to explore something through a speculative lens and a DH-inspired format.

- What are students imagining, revisiting, or constructing?
- Which form (map, archive, timeline, story...) best supports that idea?
- Whose perspective or history does it center, challenge, or invent?
- What kind of thinking does this format make possible?

Example

Prompt:

Ask students to curate an archive of a community, movement, or future that was erased, forgotten, or never allowed to exist.

Student Deliverables:

- 3–5 fictional artifacts (texts, images, audio, etc.)
- Metadata for each (title, creator, date, format, origin)
- A statement (300–500 words) explaining the archive's purpose, point of view, and notable silences
- Optional: visual map or timeline of the archive

Speculative Function:

This archive makes visible what was excluded, imagining survival, refusal, or radical continuity.

- Uses DH form (archive + metadata) to explore memory and absence
- Builds critical imagination and design literacy
- Flexible across disciplines

More Assignment Ideas

- Story Map of What Happened the Day the Internet Collapsed
- Map of a Cooperative Economy After Capitalism
- Timeline of Erased or Forgotten Ways of Measuring the World
- Timeline from a Fully Decolonized Future
- Zine from a Joyful, Just Black Feminist Utopia
- Map of a University Transformed by Climate Change
- Timeline of the Global Shift to a Decarbonized Society
- Archive of Banned or Abandoned Technologies
- Map of a City Designed for Neurodiverse Life
- Story Map Tracing a Vaccine That Was Never Developed

Quiet Prototype Time

"Students will design a speculative **[format]** that explores **[theme or question]** from the perspective of **[audience or identity]**, in order to uncover, critique, or imagine **[insight or outcome]**."

Scaffolded Student Support

To support students:
- Provide models or examples
- Use templates or checkpoints
- Invite reflection on process
- Use broad rubrics (e.g. coherence, connection)

Reflecting Toward Practice

What would it take to try this?
- Where could this fit in your course?
- What would students need?
- What might grading look like?
- Could it replace an existing task?

What Could This Actually Look Like?

- 1-week module in an existing unit
- Midterm alternative
- Student-designed bonus assignment
- Speculative discussion warm-up

You Might...

- Build something expansive
- Invite student authorship
- Reimagine assessment
- Teach toward futures, not just outcomes

Exit Reflection

- What assignment could I open up?
- What will I try this semester?
- What support might I need to realize this?

Questions?

Thank you!