

The Productive Use of Boundaries in a Collaborative Digital Project

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ABSTRACT

This experience report discusses the inherently collaborative nature of multimodal projects. We argue that teams working on digital publications in particular must have established governance structures that are rigid enough to outline the responsibilities of each role while flexible enough to ensure individual agency and adapt to changes in technology and staff turnover. We use our experiences working on Sherlockian.net, an important resource for the Sherlock Holmes fan community, to provide examples of the collaborative nature of digital projects and illustrate the importance of proper governance. The report concludes with the following actionable recommendations for others working on similar projects: build teams with varied skill sets, establish expectations for collaborative practices, specify the governance and workflow of the project, ensure that all procedures are constantly updated to reflect changes in technology and staff composition, and provide space within the established guidelines and procedures for individual agency.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-Centered Computing** → Collaborative content creation

KEYWORDS

multimodal, collaboration, collaborative practices, digital publication, content strategy, governance

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1 INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly digital age, it has never been more important to reflect on best practices for working on collaborative projects. Digital publications in particular present unique challenges for the teams who create and maintain these spaces. We use our experience working with Sherlockian.net, a special interest website that hosts content related to Sherlock Holmes, to argue that effective collaboration and established collaborative practices are essential for teams that manage digital publications.

To begin, we provide background information on the project and describe the various roles members of the team play. Then, we draw from scholarship in the areas of both multimodal composition and content strategy to argue that best practices surrounding this type of work must include established governance and workflow structures as well as a plan for sustainability in terms of both content and team composition. Next, we discuss our own work on Sherlockian.net and provide examples that demonstrate how we have put these concepts into practice. We end by providing actionable recommendations that can be used by others who are engaging in this type of work to improve their own practices. These recommendations include building teams with members of varying skill sets because digital projects require a higher degree of collaboration and having a flexible governance structure that can provide guidance while still making space for individual agency.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Sherlockian.net Project

As the About page of the website states, "Sherlockian.net is a website dedicated to the Sherlock Holmes community. Through the information provided on this site, we aim to welcome newcomers, be a resource for Sherlockians, make space for knowledge experts, and encourage participants to share in the Great Game" [7]. The website was established outside of academia in 1994 and entrusted to Liza Potts and WIDE Research (a digital humanities lab at Michigan State University) in 2016, at which time the team began a complete redesign of the site [5]. Currently, Sherlockian.net is run by a small team of undergraduate and graduate students who are led by a faculty director. This team is assisted by a network of librarians and curators who advise on the acquisition and archival of content. Currently the number of onsite staff at Michigan State University is around a dozen students. Roles in this team include lead content strategist, visual designer, social media manager, content writer, content editor, and community manager. These roles are by-and-large self-appointed and were decided once the student had proposed or volunteered to

join projects on an as-needed basis. This development happened under the supervision of the director and the more tenured student employees.

2.2 Relevance to the Field

As a digital publication that is maintained by a staff of mostly student employees within the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University, the work done on *Sherlockian.net* is informed by scholarship within the field of rhetoric and composition. It is our belief that multimodal projects, whether they are completed in the composing classroom or in a professional capacity, are necessarily collaborative. In their position statement on multimodal literacies that was released in 2005, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) [2] put it well when they wrote, "Because of the complexity of multimodal projects and the different levels of skill and sensitivity each individual brings to their execution, such projects often demand high levels of collaboration and teamwork." It is evident that multimodal projects are more complex and require a wider variety of skills to create than something print-based. Because of this strong relationship between multimodality and collaboration, it is essential when working on a multimodal digital project to identify best practices and continually look for ways to improve collaborative practices.

Another important resource that we use to frame our thinking about multimodality is the New London Group's "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." [3] In particular, we find the section where they talk about composition in terms of design especially relevant for thinking about collaborative composing practices within digital publications. They state, "We propose to treat any semiotic activity, including using language to produce or consume texts, as a matter of Design involving three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned. Together these three elements emphasize the fact that meaning-making is an active and dynamic process, and not something governed by static rules" [3, p. 74]. Those three steps—Available Design, Designing, and The Redesigned—are also an apt way to describe the process that teams working on multimodal projects go through. Each team member comes in with their own skills (available design), they work together to create the multimodal project (designing), and the final product is a reflection of the team itself and contains pieces from each of the team members (the redesigned). Additionally, the idea that meaning-making is active and cannot be governed by static rules is important when thinking about the governance structures of these projects. The rules, teams, and technologies are constantly changing, so it is important to recognize that and be able to adapt.

Governance structures are an important consideration for any project, but especially so for digital publications. In her book *Managing Chaos: Digital governance by design* Lisa Welchman [8] outlines the reasons that governance is one of the most important, and the most often overlooked, element in any digital content strategy. Her professional career is comprised of showing organizations how they can cut out the uncertainty in their development "by clearly establishing accountability and

decision-making authority for all matters digital." Welchman outlines how a lack of governance leads to stagnant, chaotic teams that do not produce consistently quality content. Our experience with *Sherlockian* has shown that when a team follows a consistent governance, they can produce quality content regularly and still support student employees' growth and education. We have found this to be the case even with our team in a perpetual shift of staff due to graduations, summer and winter breaks, changes in funding, etc. While Welchman's content focuses on case studies from her work with large public and private sector businesses and organizations, our experience offers a miniature example which can be instituted by practitioners who manage small teams and who may have limited resources.

While her scholarship is more related to pedagogy than the governance structures of multimodal teams, Jennifer Sheppard [6] still provides important insights for those working on digital projects. Specifically, she talks about the need for adaptability when it comes to multimodal composition. In her article "The Rhetorical Work of Multimedia Production Practices: It's More than Just Technical Skill," Sheppard [6] explains that composition instructors should "[r]ecognize and embrace the exploratory and often messy nature of multimedia production. As you shape assignments, keep in mind that much knowledge and expertise with multimedia comes about through trial, error, and troubleshooting, so give students ample room to experiment" [6, p. 128]. The ideas of experimentation, troubleshooting, and room to grow are all relevant for multimodal collaborations as well. Having a set way to do things (i.e. governance structure) is useful, but it should not be so restrictive that team members are not able to exert their own agency and step outside of the boundaries of their position on occasion.

In that same article, Sheppard argues that multimedia projects require more than just technical skills; you must also look at the "practices of production" and understand the composing practices of the writers/designers. While technical skills do play a role in creating a multimodal project, it is just as important to pay attention to the composing practices of each member of the team and how they work together to create the final product. If you only think of multimedia production in terms of technical skills, you are going to be perpetually out-of-date because those technologies and skills are constantly changing. Therefore, it is more important to learn composing practices in general, such as how to consult resources and work with others, than it is to learn specific skills or softwares. In his book *The Design of Everyday Things*, Donald Norman [4] expresses this same idea of looking beyond technical skills when he states, "Producing a good product requires a lot more than good technical skills: it requires a harmonious, smoothly functioning, cooperative and respectful organization" [4, p. 240]. So, in addition to thinking about members' composing practices and skills, it is also important to consider the atmosphere of the organization/team itself.

Batova and Andersen [1] also echo this sentiment in their introduction to a Special Issue of *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* when they site one major change to the fields of professional and technical communication as being "the move to-

ward integrating organizational and user-generated content as well as disciplines and departments, expertise and roles, and business processes and tools.” This quote echoes our belief that organizational efforts regarding the people behind content are just as important as the organizational efforts focused on the content itself. Batova and Andersen also give a very comprehensive overview of the field of content strategy as well as its many applications. Within the introduction, they include definitions of the four tenets of content strategy: Substance, Structure, Workflow, and Governance. As we have said, governance is particularly important for the type of collaborative work we do as a part of the Sherlockian.net team, so our report will focus on that aspect of content strategy.

3 MAINTAINING SHERLOCKIAN.NET

In this section, we will draw from our experience working on the Sherlockian.net team—as lead content strategist and community manager, respectively—to provide examples that illustrate the collaborative nature of both roles. We will also present actionable strategies that can be taken and used by others who are doing collaborative multimodal work.

Because Sherlockian.net is an online resource, there are a wide array of technical skills that we need as a team to keep it going. Each team member has a defined role, which allows us to become specialized in a certain area and contribute to the team. For example, one of the authors of this report has been the lead content strategist for over a year, which means that she has developed a deeper well of knowledge on the subject than any of the other members of our team. For this reason, she has been working closely with new and old team members whenever the less experienced have questions about our site’s content. Additionally, the lead content strategist has the authority to make decisions about the content, meaning that other students may bring their ideas forward to whomever is in this role so that they might ideate and compose collaboratively before presenting their final product to our faculty director.

3.1 The Watson Wednesday Social Media Campaign

One pertinent example of the type of collaboration that goes into maintaining Sherlockian.net happened when we brought a social media specialist, Casey, onto the team. Casey wanted to institute a new campaign called “Watson Wednesday,” but because she was not very familiar with the site or Sherlock Holmes, she needed help figuring out what content to promote. Our lead content strategist had the knowledge to be able to help, so each week she sent Casey links to Watson-related content. Casey then took that information and turned it into engaging social media posts. Because Casey did not have to spend her time learning all of the content that we host on the site, she was able to focus her attention on building our social media presence. By having separate roles and specialties, Casey and others are able to become experts in their particular areas and devote more time to those jobs. This is ideal because the members of our team have autonomy, but we also have the opportunity to come together

and help each other when necessary.



Figure 1: A screenshot of a Facebook post for Watson Wednesday.

3.2 Redesigning the Homepage

Another example that illustrates the ways that collaboration functions for Sherlockian.net is the redesign of the homepage. Our interaction and visual designer, Hannah, was working on creating an entirely new homepage for the site. We had decided as a team that the homepage should not be static and had talked about having a basic template that could be changed every two weeks or so to keep the site interesting and engaging. Hannah had a basic knowledge of the content on the site, but she wanted to get more opinions on what should be featured and how. Additionally, she knew that she ultimately would not be the one updating that page, so we determined that it would be important for her to work with our lead content strategist on the new design since it would be the content strategist herself or someone in a similar position making those changes. Hannah had the coding and design skills to create the page structure, and the content strategist had the skills to provide input on the functionality, write the text, and determine what content should be highlighted.

Hannah and our lead content strategist started the redesign by looking at the old homepage and talking about the pieces they thought should stay. Hannah did not think that any of the elements needed to be carried over, but the content strategist argued that we should still include some introductory text so those who were visiting the site could get information about its purpose and how to navigate. In the next phase, Hannah created a few options for what the homepage could look like. She brought each of those iterations to the whole team and asked our opinions. Once we had all decided on a design, Hannah began recreating it in WordPress (which is the CMS we use to manage the site). Once Hannah had the structure in WordPress, it was up to her and the

content strategist to finalize the design and content and get it live on the site. At this point, Hannah and the content strategist met at a coffee shop to work through everything. Hannah showed her the different elements of the new homepage and explained that she still needed help writing the intro paragraphs and choosing the events and pages to highlight. The lead content strategist used her content knowledge to write the first featured article, write the text that we needed for the page, choose the events that we would add to the countdown, and pick the pages of the site that we would highlight in the Content Spotlight section. Once that was done, Hannah and the content strategist worked together to put all of the elements where they needed to go on the actual site. At that point, Hannah showed the content strategist how to customize the page, which included changing the featured article, updating the countdown events, and replacing the content spotlight pages. The next day, the two brought the homepage back to the whole team, and once everyone agreed, we went live with it as the new homepage for the site. Without Hannah’s coding and visual design skills and the lead content strategist’s writing and content knowledge, the new homepage never would have been created and published. The two team members were able to play off of each other’s skills and work together effectively. The process went smoothly because our content strategist deferred to Hannah when it came to questions about the layout and what was possible to create within WordPress, and Hannah trusted the content strategist’s expertise about all of the written content, the events and pages we promoted, and the inclusion of the introductory paragraph at the end of the homepage. Each team member knew their role, and that made the whole collaboration process much smoother than it would have been if they were each trying to do everything by themselves

3.3 Creating Homepage Feature Articles

Another example of collaboration which provides support for a mix of skilled, autonomous team members has been an ongoing effort between the lead content strategist and the community manager to create homepage feature articles which relate to community events and news. This aspect of the site was instituted as part of the homepage redesign and has been updated on a bi-weekly basis. Due to the continuous need for content, we knew that multiple team members would contribute to the creation of these features with oversight provided by the content strategist. The community manager, in particular, has been recruited to write articles on community related topics. These ideas were usually brainstormed at our meetings, written remotely, read and edited by our lead content strategist or our content editor, and then posted by the lead content strategist. The ability of the content strategist to make decisions on topic, style, and tone allowed us to work without much help from our sole director, which meant that her schedule did not factor into our workflow. Because of her other duties and the sheer volume of content being posted on our site, it helps to have only one or two people involved in a single project, or else publication would stagnate as we wait for every team member to have time to review, comment, suggest, etc. Because our lead content strategist has years of experience on this site, she is able to make responsible, educated decisions that help others who do not have as much experience, like the community manager during this composition process.

As these examples illustrate, collaboration on projects like Sherlockian.net requires a clear governance structure where everyone knows their roles and what is expected of them. This presents opportunities for independence—like Casey coming up with an entire social media campaign and Hannah taking the lead on the home- page redesign—and makes collaboration successful, just as it did when the lead content strategist worked with various team members to compose front page features. Because each member of the team has a well-defined role, we know who to go to when we need help with a certain aspect of the site. Our skills and responsibilities complement each other, so we are not duplicating work and we can work together without stepping on anyone’s toes.

4 TAKEAWAYS

Looking back at the scholarship concerning multimodality and content strategy as well as our own experiences working on the Sherlockian.net project, we have developed several actionable takeaways that can be implemented by others who are working on collaborative, digital work. Essentially, we are presenting strategies for creating a structured environment that allows team members to work collaboratively on multimodal projects without role confusion or conflicts. These takeaways bear special emphasis on the well-being of student employees as governance and workflow management are integral to their ability to understand their role within a team and where to turn for support as they branch out to new projects.

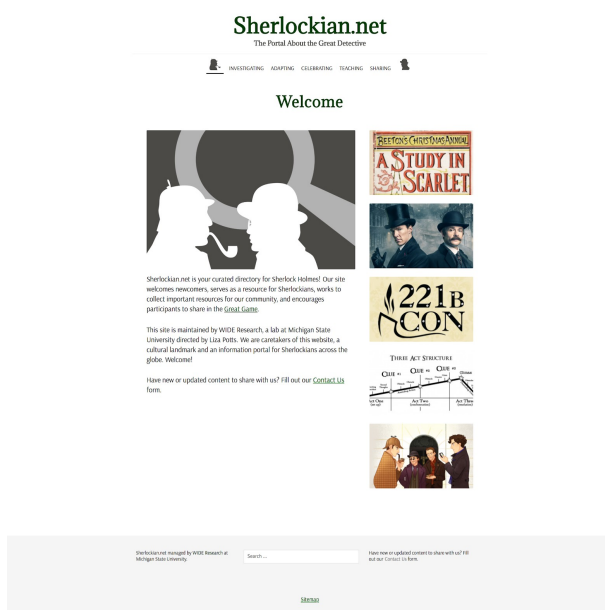


Figure 2: A screenshot of Sherlockian.net before the homepage was redesigned.

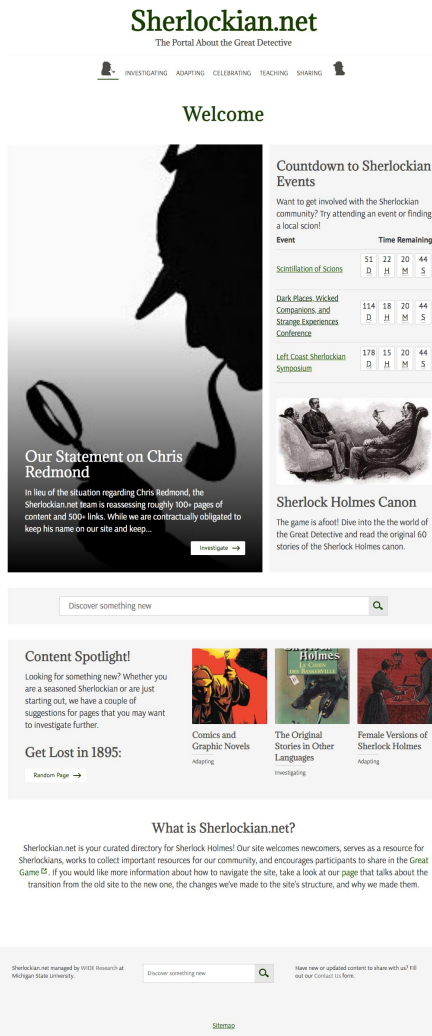


Figure 3: A screenshot of the current Sherlockian.net homepage.

Based on our joint experience, we have observed that the following practices are the baseline for any successful collaborative digital endeavor:

- (1) Build a team where each member contributes unique skills and expertise and respects the established boundaries of their role within the team. This will help to avoid duplication of efforts and keep the project moving efficiently and effectively.
- (2) Establish expectations for collaborative practices before the project begins. Each member of the team should know what is expected of them to avoid any misunderstandings or conflicts.
- (3) Create governance, guidelines, and workflows that are flexible and constantly updated. With staff turnover and

ever-changing technologies, it is important that multimodal projects have structures in place that provide space for adaptability.

- (4) Ensure that all procedures are constantly updated to reflect changes in technology, staff composition, and available resources.
- (5) Provide space within the established guidelines and procedures for individual agency. Employees (whether student employees or otherwise) will produce higher quality work if they are able to seek out tasks that play to their strengths.

5 CONCLUSION

As two members of a small team of students managing a popular community resource website, we have been made very aware of just how much governance and structure affects our ability to compose and manage content. Because each member of the Sherlockian.net team has a well-defined role, we know who to go to when we need help with a certain aspect of the site. Additionally, because we all come from unique backgrounds, our skills and responsibilities complement each other. This means that no one is duplicating work and we are able to bring distinct talents to each project. Our director has cultivated an environment where the governance and workflow structures are clear while also providing space for change as necessary depending on the needs of the project. We hope that others who are working on collaborative projects such as Sherlockian.net find the information and recommendations presented in this report valuable and that they are able to implement some of the strategies we have identified into their own work.

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