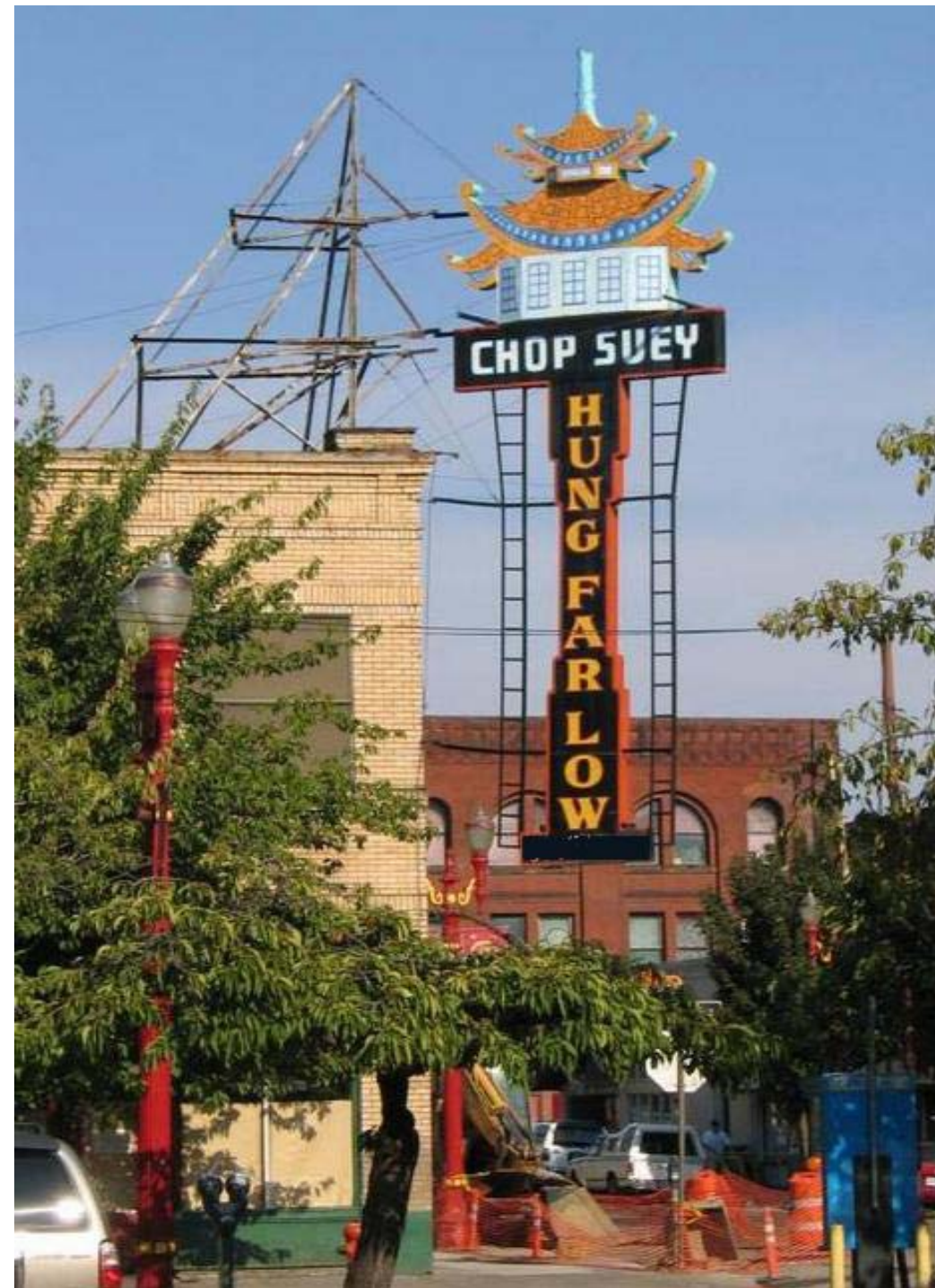# *Evidence* in & evidence of "Evidence of value"

AHRC ICT Methods Network
Expert Seminar,
Wednesday 5 November 2008

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Hung Far Low
restaurant,
Chinatown,
Portland, Oregon

The phrase

- 8th in Google's list of 914,000 hits, most of which on the question of *what counts as evidence* for policy decisions (on social issues, such as medical care), with frequent reference to evidential "gold standards" (Bullock 2004);

- Huge debate as to what these might be, about definitions of evidence, distinctions among kinds and consensus on when to use what – and who decides;

- All of which suggests a ripple of anxiety triggered by a catchy corporate slogan;

- Conclusion: "evidence of value" is not an answer but a question, and not a question about where to find it but about *what we think it is,* which implies the question of the *argument* it is intended to support and *to whom* this argument is being made.

Argument, reasons & evidence

Some provisional distinctions:

Argument: a process of reasoning; a statement advanced to influence the mind of an audience, to persuade its members to some action;

Claim: the core of an argument; an assertion that something is the case;

Reason: a premise in an argument; why an audience should accept a claim;

Evidence: that which is to be accepted as fact in support of an argument; that which is evident to anyone who observes it.
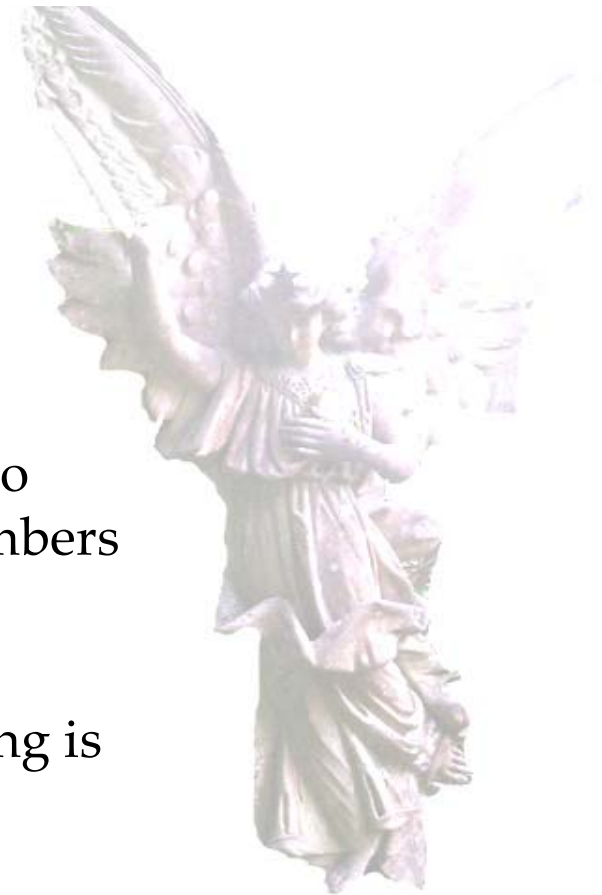
Questions

- What is our argument? What are we claiming?

- To which audience(s) are we making this argument?

- To what end(s)? What are we envisioning, and why is it that we are envisioning anything at all?

- What's the motivation? (So what?)

- What reasons do we have?

- What counts as evidence to support them to each of the audiences we address?

- How are the facts to be identified and gathered and *made evident*?

Cautions (why our question of evidence is important)

- Claims aren't good enough, and a collection of them does not sum either to reasons or to evidence;

- Anecdotal testimony is useful, especially locally, but doesn't travel well and doesn't survive for long;

- Objects are mute, and software objects tend not to last very long (not even as long as most of us);

- Any academic activity not within the fundamental purposes of a university is highly vulnerable (NB the lamentable closing down of humanities computing centres);

- Asking the question of evidence has a *long* and mostly unexamined history; ignorance of that history cripples us because without it our practice has no autonomous identity and without that we are only what others say we are.
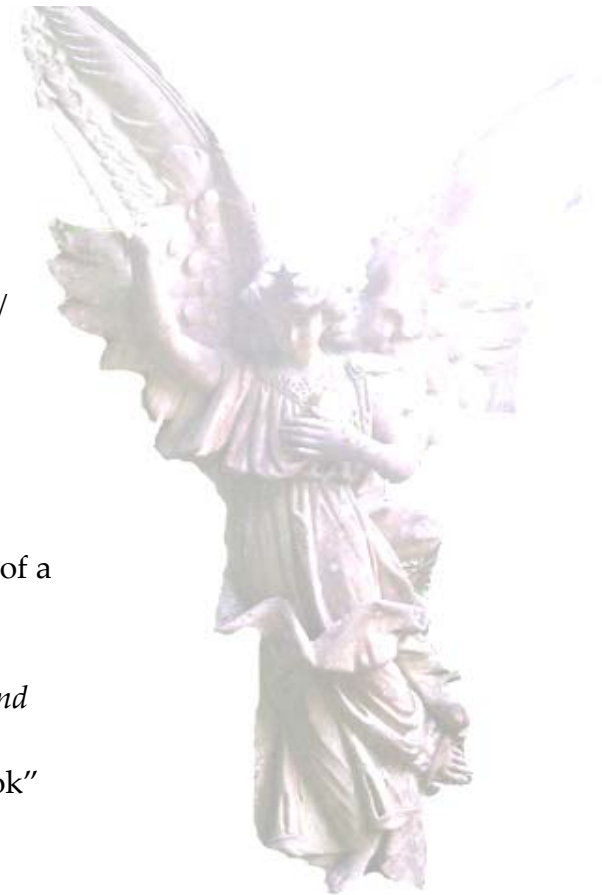
The history of asking

Only the beginnings of an unshaped list:

- 1962. Margaret Masterman, "The Intellect's New Eye"
- 1962. Ephim Fogel, "Electronic Computers and Elizabethan Texts"
- 1964. Ephim Fogel, "The Humanist and the Computer: Vision and Actuality"
- 1966. Louis Milic, "The Next Step"
- 1967. Louis Milic, "Winged Words: Varieties of Computer Applications in Literature"
- 1967. Norman Holland, "Futures: A Non-Summary of the EDUCOM Symposium"
- 1968. Diane Burton, "*Respice Finem:* An Essay Review of Computational Stylistics for 1967-1968"
- 1969. Robert Dyer, "The New Philology: An Old Discipline or a New Science?"
- 1976. Roberto Busa, "Why can a computer do so little?"
- 1978. Colin Martindale, "Sit with statisticians and commit a social science: Interdisciplinary aspects of poetics"
- 1978. Susan Wittig, "The Computer and the Concept of Text"
- 1979. Bruce A Beatie, "Measurement and the Study of Literature"
- 1980. Roberto Busa, "The Annals of Humanities Computing"
- 1980. Susan Hockey, *A Guide to Computer Applications in the Humanities*
- 1981. John B. Smith, "Computers and Literary Theory"
- 1982. Richard W. Bailey, "Computing in the Humanities"
- 1984. J. David Bolter, *Turing's Man*
- 1984. John B. Smith, "A New Environment for Literary Analysis"

The history of asking

- 1985. Bernard Derval and Michel Lenoble, eds., *La Critique Litteraire et L'Ordinateur / Literary Criticism and the Computer*
- 1986. Thomas Corns, "Literary Theory and Computer-Based Criticism"
- 1987. Thomas Corns and Margarette Smith, "Literature"
- 1987. R. A. Zwaan, "The Computer in Perspective: Towards a Relevant Use of the Computer in the Study of Literature"
- 1988. Rosanne Potter, "Literary Criticism and Literary Computing: The Difficulties of a Synthesis"
- 1988. Estelle Irizarry, "Literary Analysis and the Microcomputer"
- 1989. Rosanne Potter, Preface, *Literary Computing and Literary Criticism: Theoretical and Practical Essays*
- 1989. Willie van Peer, "Quantitative Studies of Literature: A Critique and an Outlook"
- 1989. Northrop Frye, "Literary and Mechanical Models"
- 1990. Steven DeRose et al., "What is text, really?"
- 1991. Christopher Turk, *Humanities Research Using Computers*
- 1991. C. M. Sperberg-McQueen, "Text in the Electronic Age"
- 1991. Thomas Corns, "Computers in the Humanities: Methods and Applications in the Study of English Literature"
- 1991. Rosanne Potter, "Statistical Analysis of Literature: A Retrospective"
- 1991. Paul Fortier, "Theory, Methods, and Applications"
- 1991. Mark Olsen, "What can and cannot be done with electronic text in historical and literary research"
- 1991. Joseph Raben, "Humanities Computing 25 Years Later"

The history of asking

- 1992. Anthony Kenny, *Computers and the Humanities*
- 1992. Jean-Philippe Genet and Antonio Zampolli, eds., *Computers and the Humanities*
- 1993. *Computers and the Humanities* 27.5-6 (provoked by Olsen 1991)
- 1995. David Miall, "Representing and Interpreting Literature by Computer"
- 2000. Susan Hockey, *Electronic Texts in the Humanities: Principles and Practice*
- 2001. Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality*
- 2003. *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 18.2
- 2004. Susan Hockey, "The History of Humanities Computing"
- 2004. Thomas Rommel, "Literary Studies"
- 2004. Jerome McGann, "Marking Texts of Many Dimensions"
- 2005. Willard McCarty, *Humanities Computing*
- 2007. David Hoover, "The End of the Irrelevant Text: Electronic Texts, Linguistics, and Literary Theory"
- 2008. Patrick Juola, "Killer Applications in Digital Humanities"
- 2008. Willard McCarty, "Perspectives of Literary Theory"
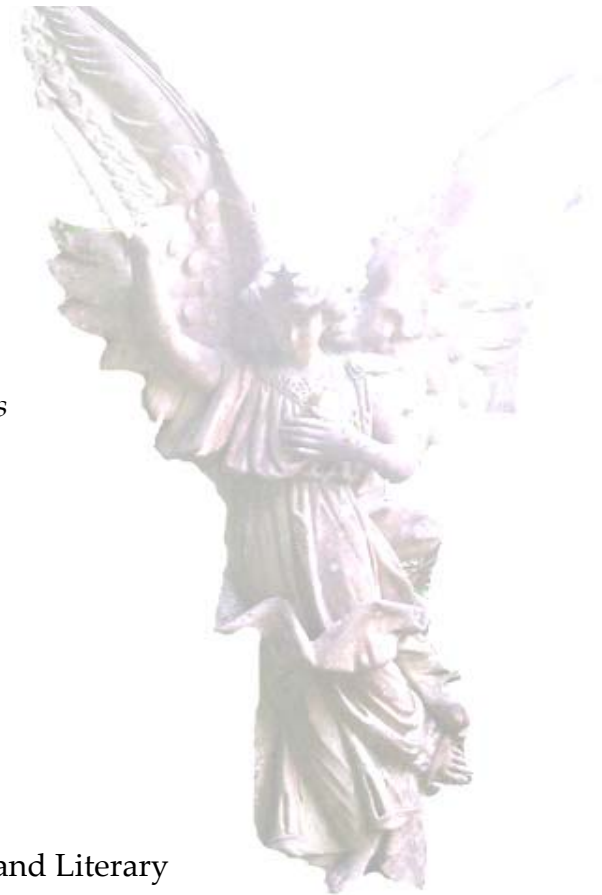
An example: Kenny 1992

- Stages of development

  - 1949-1969: pioneering work;

  - 1970-1984: pre-designed packages; citations of use disappear; work done with(in) computing centres; specialised centres set up;

  - 1985-1992: microcomputers in the study; e-mail communication; resource construction; data on CD.

An example: Kenny 1992

- Levels of development: work that is

  - *humdrum,* leaving few visible traces;

  - *most technically ambitious,* undertaken for demonstration of method rather than enrichment of the domain of humanities research;

  - *central to* the humanities ?

An example: Kenny 1992

♦ Little evidence of value: "surprisingly difficult to point… to solid, uncontroverted gains to scholarship … [T]hroughout humanities disciplines, after thirty-odd years … embarrassingly few books and articles which can be confidently pointed out as passing" these criteria:

1. Studies that are respected as an original scholarly contribution within their own discipline, and

2. Could clearly not have been done without a computer.

How things look now

- Kinds of work:

    - The *humdrum* may be part of the furniture but has problematic social and intellectual consequences whose informed study is beneficial;

    - The *most ambitious* may have no immediate or obvious application to the humanities but feed methodological innovation and development – they comprise an important aspect of our research;

    - Those *central to* the humanities? This is the question!

How things look now

- The criteria

1. *Respect*

    a. In what disciplines & with what types of problems have we done well?
    b. What do those disciplines & types of problems have in common that would explain our success in them?
    c. What do the others share that would explain our failures in them?

2. *Sine qua non*

    a. Distinguish acts that are inconvenient from those that are difficult to impossible;
    b. Observe principles of emergent order.

An example: Wittig 1978

- Early claim for the potential of computing: a "telescope for the mind" (Masterman 1962).

- This has not been realised. Why?

- Blame fixed on "the limited conceptual framework of New Criticism".

- The central problem: "the concept of *text*".

How things look now

- Exactly the same conceptual difficulty identified by Jerome McGann 2004, which begins with the question, "What is text?"

- McGann 2001: "the general field of humanities education and scholarship will not take the use of digital technology seriously until one demonstrates how its tools improve the ways we explore and explain aesthetic works – until, that is, they expand out interpretational procedures" (p. xii).

- A stalemate for those disciplines particularly concerned with the exploration and explanation of aesthetic works? If so, what do we do?
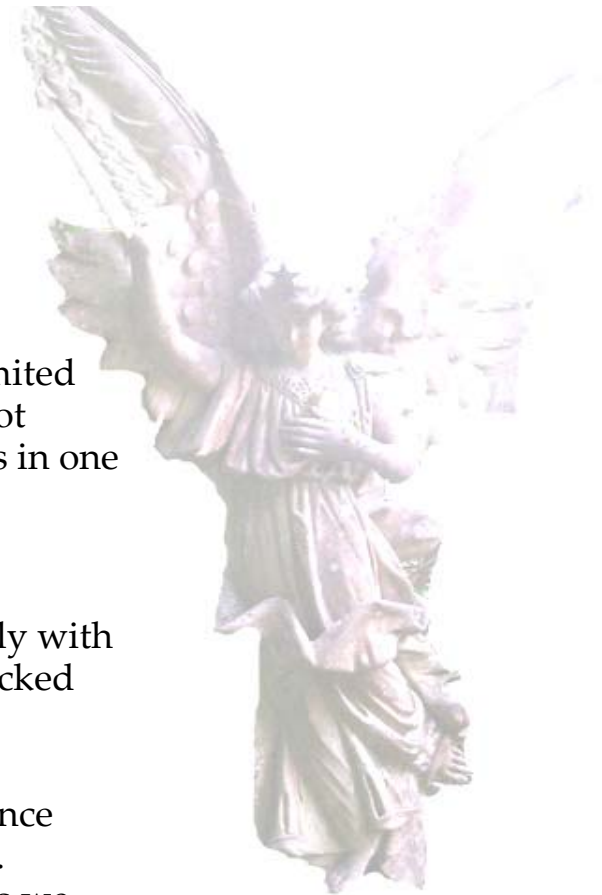
How things look now

◆ But note: evidence of value lies also in the theoretical questions raised by practical work, perhaps especially when that practical work has failed to live up to expectations.

◆ "Science in general… does not consist in collecting what we already know and arranging it in this or that kind of pattern. It consists in fastening upon something we do not know, and trying to discover it…. That is why *all science begins from the knowledge of our own ignorance*: not our ignorance of everything, but our ignorance of some definite thing…." (Collingwood 1993: 9).

An example: Milic 1966

• First fruits now to hand (concordances etc), "but satisfaction with such limited objectives denotes a real shortage of imagination among us. We are still not thinking of the computer as anything but a myriad of clerks and assistants in one convenient console… We do not yet understand the true nature of the computer."

• Scholars' shift toward that which can be done mechanically (i.e. most easily with the machine). Fear that computing will mechanize literary studies has blocked understanding of its "rich and genuine possibilities".

• Computer is "neither a human brain nor a mechanical clerk… Its intelligence and ours must be made complementary." Example of pattern-recognition. Augmentation of human intelligence only if the computer "opens avenues we have not expected the existence of".

• Next step: imitation of the process of literary composition [much early activity attested]; example of the gain in understanding from the failure of the machine-translation project. Modelling human creative powers.

How things look now

- How far beyond the "myriad of clerks and assistants in one convenient console" have we come?

  - Better educated and more highly organized clerks and assistants?
  - A blurred distinction between them and us?
  - A golem who teaches us?
  - An environment within which we teach ourselves?

- Have we opened up "avenues we have not expected the existence of"? If so, in what disciplines? How has this been done?

- What form might the poetry-writing project take that would allow us to explore human creative powers? (Cf. Masterman and Wood 1970)
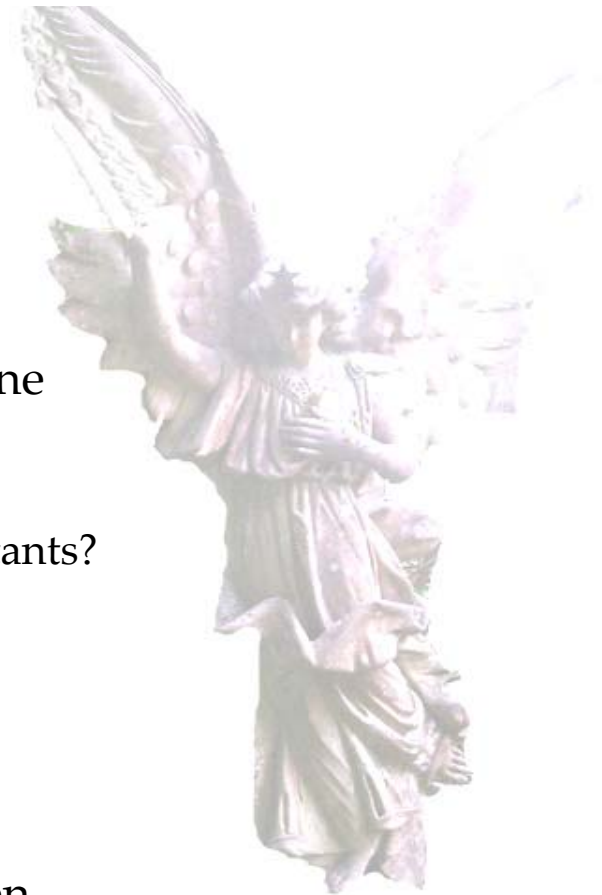
Assertive recommendations

- Questioning "evidence of value" is best done in its historical context. Our problem is that we are caught up in an endless round of forgetting what has been thought and said. The wheel we are perpetually reinventing is the asking of this question and the critical enquiry which has acompanied every asking of it.

- But for this particular asking, we need to identify our current audiences, clarify the claims we now think we can justify, strengthen the arguments which support them and commit to gathering the facts and shaping them into evidence.

- Making fine objects is not enough. Their value must be communicated in words, by the makers, in publications which the audiences in question will read.

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