THE LOCAL DIGITAL HUMANITIES LANDSCAPE: UNDERSTANDING AND BUILDING COMMUNITY, CAPACITY, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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When the ARL SPEC Kit on Digital Humanities\(^1\) came out in 2011, I hoped it might serve as a roadmap on the path to a digital humanities program at my library. At that time, we were attempting to build a new user community with our freshly minted Humanities in a Digital Age initiative, dabbling in various low-resource projects, and had eagerness to spare, but we needed direction and a destination – we needed a plan. The SPEC Kit, with its focus on the staffing models and infrastructure of existing centers and services, helped us imagine where we might want to go and what to think about when we get there; however, the examples covered were far removed from the decentralized, grassroots efforts with which we were experimenting. Most institutions, including my own, have no DH center (with no plans for one in the foreseeable future) and limited or no central infrastructure to support digital humanities work. The question remained, then, how do libraries such as these move beyond grassroots in their efforts to encourage and support new modes of digital scholarship? We thought it best to start such an endeavor with a clear understanding of the current local landscape related to digital scholarship. We wanted to know: Which DH tools or methods are researchers on campus using? How much interest is there in these new forms of scholarship? Where do researchers currently go for help? What community, capacity, or infrastructures already exist that can help support a digital humanities program? Answering these questions would help us set priorities, connect disparate communities and services to create a support network, and plan for immediate and future services.

Of course libraries, like the digital humanities, are collaborative concerns (no, really, they are), sharing experiences and resources and learning from one another. Thus, we wanted to look beyond our institutions to see how our landscapes and

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communities compared with others, how other libraries approached next steps and determined priorities. By looking at this middle space, we might highlight the distinct contours of DH at our own institutions, as well as uncover foundational steps or common themes that we might share more broadly.

**THE STUDY**

The scope of the study encompasses faculty, graduate students, and other scholars in humanities and social science disciplines. We have also included select undergraduate populations; for example, at my institution we are surveying undergraduate students in the Honors College and undergraduates that self-select by either attending DH programming and training, or by consulting with a librarian on digital humanities projects or tools. We are conducting the study at both Penn State and Oregon State Universities and have since identified two other institutions that would like to participate. The study comprises several methods of data gathering: a variable question survey, in-person interviews, and focus groups, as well as an environmental scan to get a better sense of what capacities or infrastructures are currently in place within the library and the larger academic community.

**The Survey**

The survey is the primary method for gathering data on the interest and use of digital humanities tools and methods in our local communities. The number of questions varies depending on the respondents experience and interest in incorporating the digital into their research or teaching. The main questions are arranged around four digital tool/method-based categories: (1) digital collections, (2) digital editions and publishing, (3) geo-spatial analysis and mapping, and (4) text/data analysis and visualization. For each of the categories, participants indicate whether or not they have created, contributed to, or made use of projects in the course of their research and teaching, or whether they have an interest in doing so.

This section is followed by queries about existing or needed support and training for digital scholarship. These include questions about which tools and methods participants are most interested in learning; what types of support they would consider useful for digital scholarship; if they receive support for digital scholarship from a department, scholarly society, or other organization; and where they currently go for help with digital tools and methods. Finally, the survey ends with general questions on demographics and an opportunity to participate in individual interviews or focus groups.

**Interviews**

The interviews provide an opportunity to gather more detailed information about digital humanities tools and methods in research or teaching. The interview prompts focus on: perceived successes, usefulness, or impact of digital methods; the roles of dh in their research, discipline, and in scholarship in general; key
challenges to using or adopting dh tools and methods; where users learn (about) new tools and methods; which services, tools, or programs might best help them meet their goals; and how they feel about current issues, practices, or trends in digital scholarship. We are also using the interviews to get a sense of what researchers value most in a digital project: sustainability, reproducibility, immediacy, or the opportunity to learn something new.

Focus groups

In the focus groups, we are directing the conversation to “big picture” topics that have implications for change and for the future. The focus group prompts ask participants: Why do we engage in digital scholarship and what are our goals/values? Which are the most important skills, methods, and services to meet the needs of researchers doing digital scholarship right now and to build on for future scholarship? What are possible training/skilling up scenarios and what are the most effective ways to learn new methods and technologies? Finally, what are the implications of digital scholarship on graduate education and training and on undergraduate education? What do graduate students need to succeed in the job market and what, if any, changes to the graduate curriculum are warranted?

Environmental scan

In addition to surveying the needs and interests of researchers at our institutions, we needed to find out more about the existing resources that we might leverage to build community, capacity, and infrastructure in support of digital humanities programming. The scan is being sent out to relevant units and potential collaborators within the Libraries and throughout the larger institution, as well as to individuals from other units who have expressed an interest in digital humanities. Units that we have identified thus far include library and university IT, Information Science and Computer Science departments, institutes with an emphasis on data collection and analysis, and interest groups on campus such as the HackingScience group at Penn State. The goal of the scan is to determine what services we might already have in place that we can leverage, and which of these resources can be repurposed or extended?

What we’ve learned (so far)

Surveys and interviews

Initial results from the survey and interviews indicate that most of the interest is in digital pedagogy or projects for the classroom. Faculty indicated that they like the idea of students engaging with texts, history, and culture in novel ways and appreciate the value of learning other skills in the process. There is also more of a demand for geospatial projects, especially in the classroom context, and many graduate students are integrating network analysis in their research or would like to. Graduate students also seem to be interested in integrating data (network analysis, visualization, text mining) into their research more than faculty, while faculty are more interested in encoding texts and giving context to works by
creating digital editions or collections.

We’ve also found that scholars are interested in learning new technological skills to work on their own projects, but this isn’t always a high priority considering their other commitments. Some participants expressed an interest in partnering with other scholars or technologists, but may not be thinking in truly collaborative terms – their responses indicate they are perhaps looking more for support and relationships with new colleagues having a shared interest in order to discuss and work out problems rather than approaching research with a shared vision. Those researchers with a clear interest in exploring digital scholarship valued solving an immediate research problem over all else, while putting the possibility of learning something new over sustainability.

Still, many faculty are curious about digital humanities, but unsure of its usefulness and impact on scholarship. They want more examples of these methods used in rigorous research and want to see just how this might shed new light on their own research questions. While not expressing an interest in digital humanities for themselves at this stage, most find it useful (and even important) for their graduate students and see the value of integrating digital methods and methodologies into graduate training. They recognize the shift in job requirements and expectations and want their graduates to be successful and experiment with new forms of scholarship – as long as they are able to maintain the expected levels of rigor in the discipline.

Environmental scan

Initial reports from the environmental scan revealed existing services, communities, and infrastructures with which we can begin to collaborate. There are a number of graduate students and faculty in other disciplines with expertise in data analysis and mapping technologies that are eager to work with humanities scholars. There is also an R User’s Group on campus and the GeoVista Lab, both of which have reached out to us to work on projects and training initiatives as a result of the scan. There are also groups forming around digital tools and methods in other disciplinary areas: for example, the HackingScience group and the Academic Computing Fellows. Some of these groups offer training and support for specific tools or approaches and are interested in broadening their scope to include humanities research. The scan has also resulted in new partnerships with both library IT units and the central university IT departments. From a virtual server sandbox to database creation and hosting services, they are beginning to explore new service models in support of digital scholarship.

WHAT WE’RE DOING...

…to build Community

Based in part on the feedback we’ve received thus far and on discussions with colleagues at peer institutions, we have taken some initial steps to build a digital humanities community at my institution. Since many scholars expressed a need
for supportive relationships and more examples of DH in action to feel out new technologies, the DH Interest Group was created. A loosely formed community of faculty, students, and librarians, the Interest Group meets once a month for discussion and an “Open Mic.” During the Open Mic, attendees share their projects, ideas, and problems related to digital scholarship and provide feedback and encouragement. The group has started its own listserv to communicate upcoming events and relevant news and to ask questions of the community. The next step will be to create an online community, using Commons in a Box or a similar tool, to showcase projects, facilitate discussion, and provide a forum for new tool or methods-based user groups. We have also reached out to other campus groups, such as the R user group and HackingScience, to plan “themed” Interest Group meetings around a particular topic or to offer hands-on training sessions.

...to build Capacity

Steps toward building capacity are happening more slowly than with community building, but we have a few initiatives underway. Some librarians are exploring new tools and methods and even working on their own projects to learn new skills that they might share with others. There has also been an increase in librarian participation and support for attendance at DH related conferences, conference programming, and training opportunities. Based on community feedback, many of these efforts have focused on mapping technologies and network analysis to meet the immediate user needs. In addition to librarian efforts to build up expertise, the Libraries and College of Liberal Arts have partnered to hire a new DH Research Designer, someone who will guide researchers through digital projects and help develop services and infrastructure in support of DH. We would also like to begin bringing in outside experts to lead workshops or to speak about their work in a public forum.

...to build Infrastructure

Talking with faculty about their projects has shed light on some of the challenges in supporting researcher led digital scholarship. Experimental space where faculty and students create and learn with digital tools is hard to come by in academic libraries and university IT units, but is necessary if scholars are to progress beyond the one-size-fits-all tools. To address this, we are partnering with researchers, administrators, and technologist to develop low-barrier, user-centered infrastructure. We’ve begun providing server space and support for scholars wanting to host their own projects or to “tinker” behind the scenes with Omeka, Wordpress, and other platforms and web technologies. We are also exploring services we might offer in support of digital scholarship, from database hosting to digitization and OCR services for faculty projects. Other possibilities that we have discussed include investigating new uses cases for our institutional repository and supporting dynamic, open web publishing alternatives for scholarship in a variety of digital formats.
ON BALANCING PRIORITIES

Some of the greatest challenges to supporting digital humanities arise from the seemingly conflicting priorities of traditional library and academic culture and the “maker” mentality of digital humanities. Of the issues and questions encountered along the way, we’ve distilled these into three dichotomous pairs: Sustainability vs. Experimentation, Scalability vs. Use-specific, and Scholarship vs. “screwmeneutics.”

Granted, much of this is changing, but we find ourselves more often than not needing to challenge the emphasis on sustainability and scalability in favor of more experimental or explicit approaches when planning infrastructure and services. If we are to foster digital scholarship in libraries, we must avail ourselves of the opportunities to leverage and expand existing technical infrastructure, while simultaneously working at the periphery to lay new ground. Similarly, while the commitment to scholarly rigor is central to digital humanities work, we must allow for and prioritize play and make room for serendipitous discovery. These pairs are not true dichotomies, rather priorities between which we must balance our immediate and future needs.

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