Transforming Libraries: Digital Humanities

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Digital humanities is an evolving area of scholarship where computational methods are used in conjunction with materials from the various disciplines in the humanities. Digital humanities is not a discipline. It is a methodology that has transformed humanities scholarship by the creation of new modes of enquiry, experimentation, construction, expression, scholarship and dissemination. Typologies of digital humanities include but are not limited to the computing humanities (digitizing and delivery of content); networked scholarship (tools for communicating and collaborating); and multimodal scholarship (integrated, multi-functional tools for accessing, discovering, investigating, experimenting, collaborating, and creating visually, aurally and textually.)¹

The transformative capacity of digital humanities has been likened to the changes in how we understood, created and shared our world view – culture, society, ourselves – when we transferred from an oral to a primarily written culture.² We are now rapidly moving to a digital culture. Digital humanities provide the means by which the critical epistemological questions are investigated, debated and shared. Professor Gage Averill, Vice-Principal and Dean Academic, University of Toronto Mississauga indicates,

"Although the popular conception of a Humanities scholar might still be a professor in a side chair with a well-worn folio of Shakespeare in his or her lap, it is just as likely that today's Humanist is amassing and analyzing digitized images of WWII propaganda or participating in a globally-linked digital forum on deejay cyber-aesthetics. Our methods of research, analysis, information storage, publication, instruction, communication, and collaboration have all been radically transformed by the digital revolution. The challenge for Humanities scholars is to make sure that they are driving these transformations and not just reacting to them."
Examples of digital humanities include the TAPoR project at the University of Toronto lead by Professor Ian Lancashire. TAPoR or Text Analysis Portal for Research is a multi-institutional project that goes beyond statistically-based textual analysis, incorporating dynamic tools such as interactive concordancers, XML browsers, and usability software. Another interesting project is Vectors Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular at the University of Southern California which began in 2005 as a vehicle for multi-modal scholarship. The process towards publication in Vectors is emergent, immersive and non-linear where the research questions inform the product of research. Vectors does not accept works that could be published in print.

Digital Humanities Quarterly, published by the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, is an open access, peer-reviewed journal which serves as a forum for sharing work in all aspects of digital media.

The challenges with a rapidly burgeoning area of scholarship are the multiplicity of projects that are often not easily discovered, are unique to the specific research interest, creativity and passion of an individual scholar, and are not easily transferred to another field. Approaching digital humanities at an enterprise level could serve to address some of these challenges. A recent Mellon funded initiative between the UC Berkeley and the University of Chicago is Project Bamboo. Project Bamboo aims to understand the needs of humanities researchers, and in turn, develop shared technology services for the arts and humanities communities. Multi-disciplinary and inter-organizational, Project Bamboo brings together faculty, information technology leaders, librarians and technical specialists.

What is the role of the library in digital humanities? At its core, the research library has collected, organized, made accessible, stored and preserved collections for current and future generations of scholars. In the digital age, libraries, including the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL), have been involved in digital humanities including mass digitization projects such as the Internet Archive that provide print materials in digital form to increase accessibility and to provide the means for new modes of scholarship. To date, over 135,000 pre-1923 items have been digitized. Jonathan Bengtson, Associate Librarian for Scholarly Resources, UTL believes that “as we build a critical mass of digitized material, libraries need to work with faculty to build data analysis and archiving tools to exploit the full potential of this format.” The UTL also leads the Fine Arts Digital Imaging Service, recently re-named
the Federation of Applied Digital Image Service, a repository of over 67,200 digital images used for teaching and research.

Increasingly, as noted by Wendy Pradt Lougee, University Librarian and McKnight Professor at the University of Minnesota University Libraries, “the library has the potential to become more involved at all stages, and in all contexts, of knowledge creation, dissemination, and use. Rather than being defined by its collections or the services that support them, the library can become a diffuse agent within the scholarly community.” 5 Working from our solid base of collecting, organizing, making accessible, and preserving resources, librarians are increasingly involved in collaborative research with faculty that is part constructor – the creation of tools and services and making content available for multi-modal digital scholarship6 - and also as a contributor to knowledge creation because of our unique set of skills and knowledge. An example where librarians contributed to the creation of a digital humanities tool is Zotero, a citation management tool developed by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University.

The UTM Library has a highly skilled group of Liaison Librarians who collaborate with faculty in each of the disciplines, and who work cross-disciplinarily in providing support, expertise and assessment with learning technologies, critical to digital humanities scholarship. The Library will soon roll out a “Learning 2.0” program to guide faculty in an exploration of Web 2.0 applications for use in their teaching and research. The UTL and the Jackman Humanities Institute are discussing collaborative, tri-campus initiatives in digital humanities that will actively include the UTM Library and the UTM community of humanities scholars. We are excited by the new modes of scholarship possible with the digital humanities, and look forward to collaborating with faculty in furthering digital humanities scholarship at the UTM campus.

**Further reading:**


