



DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

How to Enhance a Logical Partnership

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Introduction

Information technology has continued to change the way students and teachers acquire, process and share information and knowledge. As a result, a new type of academic library has emerged, focusing on digital scholarship and research (Bryson *et al*, 2011; Sula 2013). As digital scholarship becomes more closely tied to humanities disciplines, humanists have developed new research behaviors: a move towards interdisciplinary work, collaboration, use of scholarly materials in digital form, and use of new tools and methods (Rockenbach 2013). Academic libraries must evolve in order to support the needs of its users, and librarians must rethink the service model and partner with humanists to create services that best serve these scholars. (Vinopal 2011).

Humanities & Academic Libraries

The study of humanities is about the gathering, organizing, processing and documenting of the human experience in the world. It is comprised of research for and development of articles that are preserved in libraries. (Nowviskie 2013). Humanities scholarship and academic libraries aspire to increase creative output, provide access to both primary and secondary research materials and preserve knowledge. (Rockenbach 2013). In the same sense that the natural research location for science scholars is the laboratory, the traditional laboratory for humanities scholars is the academic library. (Borgman 2009).

What is Digital Humanities?

Among the myriad ways that information technology has altered the landscape of information-seeking behavior and knowledge management, the application of digital resources to humanities scholarship, while growing steadily, “remains a backwater in much of the humanities.” (Borgman 2009). As Nancy Maron and Sarah Pickle [observed in 2014](#) “the often vague definitions that plague the phrase *digital humanities* do not help.” In its most basic form, digital humanities is the application of digital methods and digital resources to humanities scholarship (Deegan 2014). It brings the resources of information technology to traditional

humanities research. Humanists who used to rely solely on traditional research and writing skills have adopted information technology skills and the infrastructure that supports those skills. (Bryson *et al* 2011). Increasingly, humanist scholars are working not with print but with knowledge that is born digital and lives in digital contexts. (Presner 2010). As Micah Vandegrift and Stewart Varner [observed in 2013](#), the meshing of humanities research with information technology has had an invigorating effect on scholarly research and has made humanities more engaging and accessible. The advent of digital humanities means that print is no longer the only method for the creation and sharing of knowledge. Print has been absorbed into new, multi-media configurations with other digital tools, techniques and media. (Presner 2010).

Why Digital Humanities Should Happen in or with Academic Libraries

As the nature of humanities research and inquiry shifts from print to digital, academic libraries should also shift to continue to partner with humanities scholars in the discovery, interpretation and use of scholarly content. (Borgman 2009).

In their 2013 article, Vandegrift and Varner described the goals of digital humanities as:

- providing wide access to cultural information;
- enabling manipulation of data;
- transforming scholarly communication;
- enhancing teaching and learning; and
- making a public impact.

The academic library is well-positioned to meet those goals. Academic librarians possess core competencies in information resources as well as access to information, knowledge organization and data management, and preservation techniques. (Sula 2013). Digital humanities is very database driven, and as Tom Scheinfeldt wrote in 2012, an empty database is useless. Librarians are skilled not only at finding primary sources and but also at accessing

“born-digital manuscripts and electronic literature.” (Scheinfeldt 2012). Academic librarians have subject matter expertise, deep collections, and collaborative mindsets, and they understand the technological and consultative model of digital humanities. (Maron and Pickle 2014). As Bethany Nowvskie [noted in 2012](#): “Libraries provide the crucial social and technological infrastructure for digital humanities research, and – as the long-established commons and shared laboratory for the humanities – are primary sites in which DH community is enacted and its discoveries are made.”

Challenges

Despite the many reasons why academic libraries should be central to digital humanities scholarship, many problems exist. In a [frequently cited 2013 article](#), Miriam Posner discusses several complications that have resulted in library-based digital humanities that is done in a piecemeal fashion. Posner’s list of issues includes:

- *Lack of training opportunities*, resulting in improvised staff support and overburdened librarians trying to support projects that require customization;
- *Lack of funding* for new hires who are trained in digital humanities;
- *Lack of support* for librarian-conceived initiatives when digital humanities projects do not align with an articulated need;
- *No ability to gather the needed skill sets*; projects often require many different resources from different areas of the university, and a librarian may not have the authority to harness them;
- *An inflexible infrastructure* which makes collaboration between faculty and library staff complex and forces librarians to obtain permission from a supervisor, or a member of the legal or technology departments within the university, before commencing a digital humanities project;
- *Lack of incentive* for librarians who do not receive support or recognition for the role they play in creating digital humanities projects;

- *The traditional model of librarian as service provider is not sufficient*; new models of user engagement and collaboration are needed; and
- *Digital humanities involves experimentation and unstable content*; traditional library models are accustomed to stable platforms with a focus on preservation.

Responses to Challenges

To respond effectively to these challenges, academic librarians must use their strengths in collection development, support, preservation and research services for the benefit of the digital humanities community (Bryson *et al* 2011). Strategies to accomplish this include:

- *Become a Partner, not a Service Provider*: The basis for successful integration of the library into digital humanities is collaboration, not service. Librarians must engage in a more open and collaborative way with the researcher and expand beyond collection building to partner with scholars in the act of creation. (Rockenbach 2013; Vandegrift 2012). Librarians need to move away from a service model and engage with faculty as partners, in peer to peer relationships (Nowwiskie 2013). Librarians must also foster partnerships with IT departments and digital research labs on campus.
- *Physical Space*: Science scholars are placing less demand on the physical library, which frees up space to benefit the needs of humanists. Libraries must create space that combines physical and digital resources and is either part of the library or separate from but connected to the library (Borgman 2009). Librarians must have administrative and library leader support for librarian participation in this space, and they must create communication channels back to existing library services and activities (Munoz 2012).
 - The University of Maryland has created a separate space for digital humanities called *The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH)*. The leaders of MITH have:
 - created a charter with the University of Maryland libraries that describes specific and reciprocal activities between MITH and the libraries;

- developed a fellowship program to introduce faculty, staff and librarians to digital humanities; and
 - designed a place for experimentation and future collaborations with librarians. (Munoz 2012).
- **Staffing:** To create a digital humanities team, libraries should start with current staff who have relevant knowledge and skill sets and who can develop digital humanities services. Additional staff should be added as needed, and strategic hires should be made where funding permits. In this way, libraries can “invest in people who are successful at creating and managing digital projects, rationalizing support to manage expectations and to build and preserve the projects deemed worth saving, without overtaxing support units.” (Maron and Pickle 2014).
 - The *Scholars Commons* at the University of Virginia has adopted a tiered model of service described by Vinopal and McCormick in 2013 that establishes an incremental approach to staffing and services.
 - *Tier 1* offers academic tools that meet the basic computing needs of the majority of students and faculty, such as wikis, video streaming, learning management systems, file storage and virtual computer labs. There is no customization for individual projects.
 - *Tier 2* supports research and scholarship at a broad-base level.
 - *Tier 3* provides enhanced research services for select scholars, offering staff support for sustained consultation and customization.
 - *Tier 4* brings applied research and development tools to select projects and is more experimental. Work at this level is staff intensive and must be supported by grant funding.
- **Scalability and Sustainability:** Library services must be scalable and sustainable to promote the development of reusable tools, platforms and methods and to facilitate the creation of reusable scholarly content that can be preserved. Libraries must invest in scale solutions without limiting the creativity and research aims of project leaders. “Scholarly content – whether text, imagine, or AV-based – must be treated as data that

can be identified and stored independent of the container through which it is delivered to a web-based audience.” (Maron and Pickle 2014)

- *Support and Incentives*: There must be support from senior administrators and funding to experiment, as well as training, incentives and professional credit to librarians who take risks (Posner 2013).

Conclusion

All research libraries already support digital humanities at some level, and many of the necessary pieces are already in place for librarians to engage in digital humanities in a more meaningful way. Librarians must “reframe the library as a productive place, a creative place engaged in producing and creating something – whether that be digital scholarly work or something else entirely – that will open the door to allow the library into the life of the user.” (Vandergrift and Varner 2013). Digital humanities can bring scholars into more substantive collaboration with librarians (Scheinfeldt 2013). Librarians must become partners in what is an ongoing and unpredictable scholarly process so that, as Bethany Nowviskie wrote in 2012, the library can become a laboratory and a maker-space for the humanities.

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