NITLE

DIVIDED AND CONQUERED: HOW MULTIVARIOUS ISOLATION IS SUPPRESSING DIGITAL HUMANITIES SCHOLARSHIP

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The "lone digital humanist" invariably finds himself struggling without help to make the case for digital humanities scholarship within his department or institution. The rich on-line community that has sprung up around digital humanities may be able to provide advice and moral support, but has practically no influence in such departmental matters as promotion and tenure.

Many of the issues hobbling the digital humanities involve isolation. Digital humanities centers at a number of large research institutions play a key role in reducing it by providing technology, expertise, information about tools, standards and ongoing projects, and introductions to prominent figures in the digital humanities community. But while the impact of isolation is magnified for the scholar working at an institution without a digital humanities center, such organizations are hardly a panacea. As Diane Zorich explains, "The silo-like nature of centers also results in overlapping agendas and activities, particularly in areas of training, digitization of collections, and metadata development."[1]

Since Spring 2010, the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) has been interviewing faculty, technologists, and librarians at liberal arts institutions about the state of digital humanities on their campuses. In these interviews, isolation has emerged as a particularly vexing issue affecting individuals, their work, and projects in general. These findings are supported and expanded upon by Bamboo Planning Project workshop discussions in 2008-2010, which sought to shed light on scholarly practice in the humanities by bringing together scholars, librarians, and IT professionals from a wide range of institutions to discuss addressing unmet needs through shared technology services.[2] While there are many possible approaches for resolving problems caused by isolation, an elucidation of its scope and impact can provide useful context for efforts at remediation.

[1] Diane Zorich, *A Survey Of Digital Humanities Centers In the United States* (Washington D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2008), 42.

[2] Quinn Dombrowski, "Digital Humanities," http://www.quinndombrowski.com/dh (accessed March 31, 2011).

Isolation of people

Faculty

The "lone digital humanist" invariably finds himself struggling without help to make the case for digital humanities scholarship within his department or institution. The rich on-line community that has sprung up around digital humanities may be able to provide advice and moral support, but has practically no influence in such departmental matters as promotion and tenure.

Multiple other factors contribute to the uncertainty around promotion and tenure for digital humanists. Departments are unsure how to conduct peer review for digital tools and projects; while the Modern Language Association (MLA) has published some guidelines in this area, they have been criticized for being too general.[3] Obvious possibilities for evaluating digital materials—examining the extent to which relevant scholarly communities use and build upon them, for example—require cyberinfrastructure that likely is not available on the lone digital humanist's campus. Even such crude metrics as hits for a project's website are impossible to measure when the scholar lacks the resources to make his work "legible" through a web presence.

The impact of isolation on students can drive them away from the humanities altogether.

Librarians and IT professionals

When there is no single organization that can speak for digital humanists on a given campus, librarians and IT professionals are required by default to try to provide technical and other support for digital humanities with incomplete information about how many faculty are interested, what unmet needs could be easily met through creative applications of available tools, and what faculty might be willing to sacrifice in exchange for new resources. Even when librarians and IT professionals can successfully meet individual requests, they remain isolated from other faculty they could be supporting through larger-scale initiatives and programs that could address shared needs.

Students

The impact of isolation on students can drive them away from the humanities altogether. Humanities faculty have noted that tech-savvy students with an interest in the humanities often defect to computer science when they fail to find institutional support for digital humanities methodologies. Even when there are digital humanist faculty on campus, students may not have the opportunity to take a course with them before deciding on their major.

Even if digital humanities methodologies are not common at an institution, partnerships with other schools where students can spend a summer working on a major digital humanities project would send a message that there is a place in the humanities for new kinds of analyses and approaches. But such cooperative arrangements are rare.

[3] "Guidelines For Evaluating Work With Digital Media In the Modern Languages," Modern Language Association, http://www.mla.org/guidelines_evaluation_digital, (accessed March 31, 2011).

Isolation of tools and expertise

Awareness of tools and resources

A scholar at an institution without a digital humanities center is unlikely to know the full extent of available local resources, in part because pockets of expertise—individuals in the library, divisional support centers, educational technology centers, and central IT—are scattered across campus, possibly unaware of each other's efforts. Furthermore, without a mandate to support digital humanities scholarship, knowledgeable support staff may have to prioritize tasks directly related to their jobs over faculty requests for digital humanities consultation.

A thorough knowledge of past, current, and developing efforts in the larger digital humanities community is essential for avoiding duplication and properly contextualizing new efforts in grant applications.

The disconnect between scholars' needs and available resources is complicated by the fact that many scholars whose needs overlap with solutions commonly used in digital humanities scholarship (data organization and analysis, visualization, etc.) may not see themselves as "digital humanists" or even be aware that such a group exists.[4] The misperception that taking advantage of tools used by digital humanists requires joining a digital humanities "club" is another contributing factor.

Even for scholars at institutions with a digital humanities center, keeping up with community-developed and commercial products that can facilitate their scholarship is a daunting task. While these products can in certain cases fill in for resources and services that an institution cannot build or support locally, it can be challenging to identify those which are both reliable and well-suited to a scholar's needs. Furthermore, a product, tool or resource may become "mainstream" in one field while remaining virtually unknown in a closely related field, as the boundaries between fields can prove impermeable—particularly at institutions where interdisciplinary work is rare.

Awareness of projects and standards

Well-established projects and those that have received a substantial amount of grant support easily capture the community's attention. But the majority of digital humanities projects provide valuable contributions without attracting notice. In these latter cases, the extent of public visibility depends upon resources dedicated to "marketing" the project—developing an attractive web presence, mentioning it on relevant listservs and forums, presenting at conferences, etc.

Scholars who work on projects need to make them visible in order to obtain recognition, and the community benefits from learning about them. A thorough knowledge of past, current, and developing efforts in the larger digital humanities community is essential for avoiding duplication and properly contextualizing new efforts in grant applications. Yet despite this mutual need for exchanging project news, there is still no single, reliable source of up-to-date information to which project managers and the community can turn.

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[4] Oya Rieger, "Framing Digital Humanities: The Role Of New Media In Humanities Scholarship," *First Monday* 15.10 (2010), n. p. esp. "4. Technological frames: Perspectives and opinions on information and communication technologies," http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/3198/2628. (accessed October 21, 2010).

Awareness of tutorials and training

For a scholar to make use of and build upon tools, resources and projects, it is rarely sufficient simply to know of their existence. Seeing these materials in context greatly increases the likelihood of their usefulness. While the Digital Research Tools (DiRT) wiki aggregates a list of tools and includes some reviews, scholars need concrete examples.[5] Reviews or tutorials written by and for faculty that go "under the hood" of projects, enumerating what tools were used and how, can effectively communicate this information. Similarly, example syllabi can inspire faculty to integrate technology into their own classrooms.

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The increasing adoption of technology by humanists who are not themselves programmers has led to an increased focus on building tools that provide intuitive user interfaces. Nonetheless, any sufficiently complex software requires some training before the user can leverage its full feature set. Faculty may not have time for a complete training course on a piece of software targeted towards a general audience. Training and tutorials that emphasize software features most applicable to scholarship are more relevant, but scholars may not know where to look for them beyond blindly searching Google—assuming such materials are even available publicly on the web. The growth of DHAnswers[6] as a forum for digital humanists has been valuable, but it presupposes a basic level of knowledge that scholars new to or unaware of the digital humanities are unlikely to have.

Awareness of failure

There are many potential points of failure for a digital humanities project—as early as failing to secure a grant and as late as failing to reach a point of sustainability. Successful projects are quick to share how they succeeded by publishing their grant proposals, giving conference talks, and writing papers. Unsuccessful projects simply disappear. Yet for people starting new projects, the lessons learned from failed ones are at least as valuable as the success stories.

Isolation of projects

Collaboration

The frequent disconnect between digital humanities projects and individuals interested in contributing to them is a source of frustration for both sides. Smaller projects that have difficulty advertising their completion may also have trouble connecting with potential contributors, particularly if volunteer effort is needed due to limited funding. Students and scholars who are not well-connected to the larger digital humanities community may want to contribute to an existing project as a way of gaining experience with digital humanities tools and methodologies, meeting other digital humanists, and/or exploring opportunities for starting projects of their own. Without a reliable place to look for "help wanted" ads, potential contributors come to rely on serendipity—conversations at conference receptions, a referral from a friend of a friend, etc.

[5] https://digitalresearchtools.pbworks.com/w/page/17801672/FrontPage.

[6] http://digitalhumanities.org/answers/.

Projects of all sizes face staffing challenges when specialists are required. Even well-funded centers do not have staff with expert knowledge of every programming language or software that digital humanists might need. Hiring a full-time employee or re-training an existing one each time a new need arises is impractical, and part-time or contract positions are unlikely to attract the best candidates, leaving a project to pay consultant rates or rely on people with sub-optimal skills. In many cases, however, there are individuals with the desired skills at other institutions who would benefit from the opportunity to work on a collaborative digital humanities project. There is currently no formal infrastructure to enable these inter-campus connections, which consequently happen in an ad-hoc manner—if they happen at all.

Silos

Building tools and content collections in strict accordance with standards can have positive implications for interoperability and durability, but it can require developers to implement features in ways not optimized for the specific task at hand. Even when development proceeds with an eye towards "standards and interoperability," there are difficult choices to make about precisely which other tools and content the project should be compatible with, and how. General statements about standards in a given project (e.g., "We used TEI") provide insufficient information for meaningful interoperability. Short of in-depth discussions with project developers or poster presentations that focus on technical specifics, there is currently no way to obtain the kind of detailed standards information necessary for making informed choices about compatibility.

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Sustainability

Funding for digital humanities projects focuses on start-up support or grants to fundamentally rework or add significant new features to well-established tools. Once the initial funding has been spent, a project must find a way to keep servers running, software updated, and support questions answered. At institutions without digital humanities centers, faculty often turn to the library for long-term support, but projects that do not align with the library's resources and/or direction risk being abandoned. A greater degree of openness and exchange of ideas about approaches to sustainability would benefit all projects, particularly those at under-resourced institutions. A number of early digital humanities projects are still thriving after fifteen or twenty years, and some have taken creative measures to ensure their sustainability. While organizers of some of these projects are bringing this information to the community through conference presentations, such ephemeral and limited venues reach only a small subset of the potential audience.

Summary and conclusion

Isolation inhibits everyone in the digital humanities. When a digital humanist is not surrounded by a community of colleagues, she must struggle to demonstrate the value of her work. Without an understanding of the full scope of digital humanities interest on campus, librarians and IT professionals are at a disadvantage when planning their support strategy. When isolated from faculty who engage with—or at least support—digital humanities methodologies, tech-savvy students interested in the humanities are more likely to choose a different major.

A greater degree of openness and exchange of ideas about approaches to sustainability would benefit all projects, particularly those at under-resourced institutions.

While not all institutions can provide complex technical infrastructure for digital projects or expert training in relevant tools, even scholars at those that can are often unaware of the resources available locally and of the commercial and community-developed products that can augment these local offerings. Scholars need to know about others' projects almost as much as project directors need to raise awareness about their work, but there are no reliable ways to connect all these interested parties. The same situation obtains when projects need collaborators and scholars and students are looking for projects.

While members of the digital humanities community who have managed or worked on projects have a great deal of valuable information to share, they have few organized means for doing so. From failed efforts at implementation of standards and approaches to sustainability, this knowledge spreads in an ad-hoc, limited way.

The growth of large-scale collaborative efforts like centerNet, an international network of digital humanities centers, or Project Bamboo, a cyberinfrastructure project that addresses shared technical needs in the digital humanities community, is a promising indicator of a shift towards greater collaboration between different institutions and projects.[7] Nonetheless, there remains a dire need for similar effort at exchanging information and facilitating collaboration, in order to mitigate the stultifying impact of isolation.

[7] http://digitalhumanities.org/centernet/ and http://www.projectbamboo.org/.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rebecca Frost Davis is the program officer for the humanities at the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education. She researches, writes, and speaks about the effective use of technology for teaching, learning, and inquiry in the context of liberal education. Her current research interests include an exploration of how the digital humanities are integrated into small liberal arts colleges, especially the undergraduate curriculum. Dr. Davis earned her Ph.D. in Classical Studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1998. She is a contributing editor to blogs.nitle.org/techne and tweets at @frostdavis.

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