

Is there anybody out there? Discovering new DH practitioners in other countries

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1. Introduction

Digital Humanities (DH) has been described as an 'emerging' field for some time now but many (Borgman 2009; Friedlander 2009; Presner 2009) agree that this is a crucial moment for the discipline. The DH community now has established research methods, scholarly conferences and journals (Borgman 2009), DH centres and labs (Svensson 2010; van den Heuvel et al. 2010) and MA studies (Clement 2010). However, it could be argued that an important area for further development is the true internalization of the DH community. Up to now much of the discussion has centered on DH projects in a handful of mainly English speaking countries (Terras 2006). In order to consolidate as a discipline, an important challenge for the DH community is to extend its international reach and incorporate work from a broader range of academic institutions and languages.

One of the main issues of course, is attempting to integrate with groups of scholars that have not necessarily identified themselves yet as a community or do not even know that DH exists. Our project has four main objectives a) raise awareness about DH; b) identify key scholars and projects; c) investigate key local issues in the development of DH projects; d) consolidate a community and find ways of linking with the international DH community. The aim of this paper is to present our initial experience with two workshops as a methodological approach to investigating DH work in an unknown landscape and present a preliminary report on the DH situation in Mexico in particular.

To our knowledge this type of work has not been done before, in particular for Latin America. The fact that there has been little participation of Latin American scholars does not necessarily imply that no DH work is being done in this region but could be rather a lack of connection with the DH community. Japan for example, reports that despite having a long tradition in DH projects, one problem has been cooperating with similar projects overseas (Muller 2010).

2. Methodology

It is well documented that finding digital humanities resources (Dunning 2006; Pappa et al. 2006, Warwick et al 2006) and DH tools (Juola 2008) can be a difficult task and charting an unknown territory poses further challenges. We decided that workshops would allow us to both raise awareness of DH as well as serving as exploratory method to identify key scholars, projects and

local issues. Additionally time and financial constraints were a major factor. At a later date we hope to use more quantitative methods such as a national survey.

Two workshops were carried out at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). As there is no record of DH activity in Mexico it was difficult to define where to start and so we relied heavily on personal experience and contacts to produce a list of possible participants. We contacted everybody we knew who had experience working on a DH project and asked them in turn to invite other participants in order to generate a snowball effect. The invitation included a very broad definition of DH projects. The workshops generated a large amount of interest and were well attended.

In order to provide a framework for the discussion we identified seven key topics from the literature: a) organizational context including institutional recognition and support (Siemens et al. 2010; Warwick 2008b); b) planning and development; c) intellectual property and copyright (Rehm 2007); human resources and training (Warwick 2009); d) dissemination and use (Warwick 2008a); e) completion and sustainability (Brown et al. 2009; Kretzschmar 2009; Sewell 2009) and f) digital humanist career (Siemens et al. 2010).

These topics were addressed as a series of questions which participants answered reflecting on their particular experience and the projects they had worked on.

3. Results and Discussion

The first workshop had fifteen participants and the second twelve. Table 1 shows a breakdown of participants by subject. Examples of the types of DH projects carried out by the participants were digital collections and libraries (modern short novels and poetry, XIX century manuscripts marked in TEI), linguistics (text mining, corpus building, corpus of Mexican Spanish), digital images (research in pre Hispanic mural paintings, visualization archeological sites) and Anthropology (sound files for linguistics research indigenous languages). Almost all participants were project leaders, with the exception of two programmers, one MA publishing student and one graphic designer.

Subject	Participants workshop 1	Participants workshop 2
Anthropology	1	0
Architecture	0	1
Art History and Aesthetics	3	3
Bibliography and Book studies	2	3
Engineering Linguistics	1	0
History	1	1
Philology and Literature	3	3
Philosophy	4	1

Of the people attending only a few were aware of the field of DH. Some had links with international projects (such as Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes) but in general most work was local and individual. Participants were pleased to discover “that there are other people like me”.

Almost all projects are personal and not institutional initiatives. Several scholars remarked that university authorities had a vague idea of the importance of registering and managing digital materials but that this institutional support in practice lacked coherent policies or structures for them to have any real impact. None of the projects for example, had any specific physical location assigned and many had to improvise working spaces in order to cope with human resources and equipment.

A few people remarked however that working marginally was actually a good thing. “Being ignored can also be an advantage. Being independent and invisible to the institution allows you to be dynamic and creative”.

Surprisingly, funding was not a problem for any of the projects. Most scholars applied and received funding from government or the UNAM. However, quantities were not particularly large (around 15,000 US dollars) and no project had permanent institutional funding. Participants did not mention a lack of access to computational technologies which had been suggested as a possible problem for DH projects in developing countries (Terras 2006).

Projects were rarely documented with the exception of Linguistics. This is similar to other DH projects worldwide (Warwick 2009). Due to one to three year funding periods many felt that they were in a race against time to complete and documentation was left out.

Finding, training and retaining human resources are also key issues. All participants agreed that it is difficult to find human resources with the necessary skills and training was required. Additionally participants themselves went through a steep learning process whilst developing their project and found little learning support. In terms of training in Mexico there are no DH centres or courses. However, a couple of MA DH related classes are in development. Sharing information and pooling resources was considered fundamental towards developing the field. Participants noted the urgent need to compile best practice and guidelines as there seemed to be duplication of efforts and no communication.

Long term sustainability of resources is a major issue. For example, many scholars had purchased their own server to host the project as there are no university guidelines for hosting projects. However, it is not clear what will happen once the servers have to be replaced, or if the researcher left the university. In other cases, projects were hosted at the Computing Services department but usually as a personal rather than a formal collaboration. Others have hosted their projects on external servers, sometimes even at their own personal expense. As one participant remarked “when does a project become a university service and therefore somebody else’s responsibility?” This is a common issue for DH (Brown et al. 2009; Kretzschmar 2009; Sewell 2009). We detected a

notable absence of the library community whose skills are essential to these issues. Participants were aware of preservation but had not addressed the issue at all.

Another major issue was evaluation and recognition of DH work. Many felt that their work, although funded, was later not taken into account for evaluation purposes. However, it was also noted that it is difficult for evaluation committees who have no experience or knowledge about these types of projects to assess them. Many had worked individually with their departmental boards but it was agreed that providing tools, acting as a consultative body and lobbying collectively would be a more effective approach.

4. Conclusions

Results from the workshop indicate that forming a DH community is possible as we found sufficient projects, scholars and interest to sustain a working group. All participants were enthusiastic about forming part of a local DH group. Workshops were by invitation only but have since resulted in other DH scholars coming forward and wanting to participate. Initial results indicate that issues and challenges regarding DH projects are similar to other countries and collaboration would be possible and fruitful. However, with some issues such as university and governmental recognition and support, guidelines and best practices and community awareness there appears to be a significant lag behind other countries. One main difference is the almost complete absence of the library community and this issue should be addressed. Main challenges are now: to discover and register more research and projects; develop best practices and guidelines in Spanish; incorporate the library community, build a directory of DH scholars; expand the group and develop mechanisms to increase national and international collaboration. In the next few months we will continue to work on more specific actions and report on them in due course.

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