Building digital humanities and library partnerships at the University Southampton

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This autumn Southampton Digital Humanities celebrated one year since opening its doors to our staff and students. Reflecting back on its gestation and development, we believe that one of its great successes has been how it has proven to be a equal partnership between the Library and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

It all started at the end of 2019 with some exploratory conversations between the Head of the School of Humanities and the Director of the Library on how to collaborate in the Digital Humanities space. At that time, the Library was looking to deepen faculty engagement through the Digital Scholarship Team, and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities was looking to re-invigorate its Digital Humanities activities and approaches. Alignment was identified, and what began as a simple conversation about possible collaborations and advice on equipment transformed during 2020 and 2021 into a deeper partnership, with the Library offering the space it occupied on the Humanities campus to be transformed into a flexible learning facility (today the Digital Humanities Hub), and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities contributing with funding to support staffing, refurbishment of the space, and leading the joint AHRC Capability for Collection bid to further develop our infrastructure. A joint working group was then created with representatives from both Faculty and Library to start developing the space and identifying the requirements for a new Digital Humanities unit that would be fully embedded into the Faculty and University strategy.

Partnership Working

From this point forward, our partnership has been rooted in practicalities. Librarians at Southampton have joined recruitment panels for key Digital Humanities positions including technicians, academic staff, postdocs, even the Director role. In turn, Digital Humanities staff have contributed to Library recruitment, especially for aligned roles such as for specialists in 3d modelling. We have worked together on the procurement, delivery, setup, and documentation of equipment in the Digital Humanities Hub, with librarians instrumental to getting services up and running - for example, creating "how to" guides for our 360° immersive environment - during the initial phase of the Digital Humanities project. And we have co-designed systems and services for things like equipment security and maintenance.

More recently, as the Digital Humanities project has matured, library staff have remained embedded in our partnership through the design of shared office spaces that facilitate regular informal conversation and interaction. As new structures have emerged for Digital Humanities administration and delivery, librarians have continued to share their expertise through multiple points of intervention at meetings and fora, and have contributed to identifying where best to bring in external representation from the library sector. And throughout our journey from project to business-as-usual, the Library has provided strategic leadership as chair of our Digital Humanities Advisory Group, ensuring a bridge between an emergent activity and the structures and ways of a complex higher education institution.

Librarians as DH Researchers

This partnership developed at a topical time for libraries, when staff are reclaiming their involvement in projects as fully recognised researchers and in an equal partnership with scholars. It also builds upon the established work in Digital Humanities conducted by colleagues such as Melissa Terras and Thomas Padilla and by institutions such as the British Library (BL) Labs and Library of Congress (LC) Lab in the areas of data science, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and open innovation. Indeed, as the RLUK report published in 2017 by Christina Kamposiori demonstrates, libraries and librarians are already threaded through expanded Digital Humanities activities, especially in areas such as information science, university presses, and open scholarship.

Calls then for recognition of library staff as active players in supporting infrastructure, as enablers **and** investigators in expanding our collective Digital Humanities research capacity, should not come as a surprise. But they also recognise that some of the challenges faced by libraries (e.g. preservation, staff skills development) cannot be solved in isolation. At Southampton a series of jointly developed small scale pilots around visualisations of film data, natural language processing of heritage data from social media, and the use of the library postcard collection to create hidden narratives, have been instrumental to growing research confidence in library staff and cementing the Digital Humanities partnership into our day-to-day operation. Significantly this preliminary work culminated in Southampton's first library-led AHRC project, in which 3d scanning and printing are used to rethink approaches to the University Knitting Reference Library.

Growing and Sustaining

Building digital humanities and library partnerships requires attending to and reflecting on that partnership, and refreshing it as appropriate. As we look to the future, some key objectives emerge:

- To strengthen our partnership through aligned roles;
- To craft shared research directions around areas of aligned expertise such XR and collections research;
- To enhance our skills offer to students, the academic community, and to library staff, guided by both the Jisc Skills Strategy and the RLUK/AHRC report on 'The role of academic and research libraries as active participants and leaders in the production of scholarly research';
- To use DH as a infrastructure for developing and experimenting with service delivery - to imagine a future where printing a scanned model of a knitted shoe on a library printer is comparable to using paper printers to print copies of an article for a research purpose.

For more on our partnership, see the 2021-22 Southampton Digital Humanities Annual Report.

These views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.