

Introduction: Understanding the *digital* humanities, and building *in medias res*

No talk on the larger elements of the digital humanities can be devoid of the sort of profitable, productive navel-gazing in which those in our community engage from time to time. One of the most profitable and most productive enterprises of this sort results from considering elements of the *digital* and those of the *humanities* as they come together, particularly as they do so in a frame provided by the notion of the humanities themselves. Such an approach often begins with a definition, one that rightly notes some key differences between the humanities and other disciplinary groups. Here, we often and rightly consider the humanities as a vibrant set of disciplines and sub-disciplines that has always had good currency and import over time, even though we may not have always called this grouping by the name of the Humanities as we do today—always changing, always reflecting, always looking at the nature of the human experience over time via the representation of that experience in its material manifestations. Here, further, we consider computation or the digital, itself, as a grouping of methods, approaches, technologies, and tools that are themselves dynamically and continually changing. When those outside the humanities and digital humanities typically talk about these two things, they readily accept that computation changes continually, but they often make the assumption that the humanities are staid and fixed, and have always been that way. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth: each enterprise is dynamic, evolving, and in positive flux. Considering how these two come together is important as well; each brings dynamic perspectives, approaches, methods, and content that are meaningful not only to us as specialists but to the society we serve.

It is the point of intersection of humanities and computation—itsself dynamic and changing like the elements it brings together—that provides the most valuable approach to an understanding of what the digital humanities are and where our ideas and our work together fit within the larger frames and contexts the digital humanities and the humanities more generally engage. Preaching to the choir, as they say, this is not a difficult case to make, but when we talk with those outside the humanities and digital humanities about our pursuits we not only need to define what the humanities are, in vibrant terms from whatever perspective(s) we best hold, and need to define what computing is, we also have to assert how the humanities *fit* in a digital age. An especially important context for such discussions is when well-meaning members of communities outside our own will approach us with offers like this: "We love the humanities. We respect what you're doing. Digital humanities is a growing, phenomenal enterprise. We will give you three positions for this ... but they will be in computer science. [or] But we will be drawing on work done in [say] particle physics." And so on. All wonderful things, to be sure, but what happens with the core and key elements of the *humanities* in the *digital humanities* in such situations?

A larger question here is: How do the humanities fit in a digital age, reflecting and engaging not only its own traditions but, further, those of other disciplines implicated in, drawn in, partnered with, and fully incorporated and embraced by the methods utilized by the digital humanities. Does it do so by situating itself outside the humanities, outside of the very context that makes digital *humanities* different from other computational enterprises? I'd think not; I'd think we'd ideally work to situate it well within the humanities.

In such a place, our process of self-definition takes on a new importance, and an approach beyond one of high-level summation. Here, we might best engage the process of defining the digital humanities much more loosely and generally, ultimately in the forward-looking, open, inclusive vision of what has been termed the *Big Tent*, following the theme of the ADHO gathering at Stanford U, Digital Humanities 2011. In this situation, we talk about building on a tradition that began with textual enumerative and word-counting roots of a previous generation, continued in excellent and sterling work today across all media types and a whole host of approaches that bridge and link the past with the present and look into the future. Here, we talk about

remediating old worlds and extant material artefacts, we talk about working with new ones that are created with the technologies we use, and we talk about embracing enlarging scope, privileging diversity within that embrace, and privileging public outreach and engagement. Here, we talk also about founding inclusive networks, bringing us together, encouraging us to collaborate, building method-centered communities of many kinds, and organizing at various levels to achieve common goals. And beyond. The many, many strengths of our community are, I believe, revealed by what this process raises.

Valuable and positively revealing as this process is, following this train of engagement has its challenges too, mostly relating to the specificity and detail excited by the process of definition itself, one that can be fraught even if for all the best reasons. As an exercise in this direction, try defining the scope of digital humanities. Try defining the digital humanities fully. Try defining it accurately, comprehensively. Try defining it in a way that two or three people will agree; then, a group of five or six hundred people. Try defining it in a way where you can situate your own program of research or that of your group in the context of others with whom you share, or are perceived to compete with for, resources; indeed, try talking with your department chair about this. Try defining it enough to be able to situate a group across a department or departments in a faculty, or across faculties. Perhaps most importantly: try defining it in a way that is ultimately actionable, in a way that you can do something tangible with. There are strategies to do so, to be sure, but they can be fraught. When we do try to define in a way that can lead to action, especially at a local level within an institutional structure, we tend to arrive at institutional- or discipline- specific definitions; these do have some sort of gain in that you can frame digital humanities in the terms of extant structures, but ultimately there's a loss via disciplinarity's constraint in light of current and future growth, narrowing potential collaborative opportunities and limiting the vision of what the intersection points between the humanities and digital could lead to. Conversely, we can choose to ignore disciplinary and institutional structures, adopting the revolutionary approach we find reflected in the several excellent manifestos existing in the area—an approach picked up on in a lot of what some might call the *marketing* of our field—but, in ignoring those structures, we run the risk of losing access to their benefits.

Given this, I ask how can one begin to define all that the digital humanities are in a way that can lead to positive action now, in a way that does not constrain possibility of positive action in future? Truth be told, I am not sure this can be done to the degree of anyone's satisfaction, positive perfectionists that we in our community are, but even so I have had the pleasure of trying to do so, several times, with some wonderful colleagues. One was in the 2004 publication of the *Companion to digital humanities*, which I was very pleased to edit with Susan Schreibman and John Unsworth. We felt at the time to be relatively un-revolutionarily in our approach to the volume, working within the field as it then existed to provide an evolving, working definition of the digital humanities across many different types of approaches and focal points, arguing at a very high level from discipline and traditional disciplinary pursuits, to principles, practices, applications, and pragmatics of various kinds. We tried again in 2007, this time myself and Susan Schreibman in the *Companion to digital literary studies*, arguing within the context of literary studies from sub-disciplinary traditions to issues of content and method modeling. This more generalized, multi-perspectived approach worked well. Even though such projects did not lead to a full, accurate, and comprehensive definition of the digital humanities toward action, I believe they led to a not-wholly-disappointing sense that such definition was going to be elusive ... something best captured as an aside comment by my former dean and administrative sponsor of our Digital Humanities Summer Institute, Andrew Rippin, when he addressed our group in one of its nascent years, noting that something like Wikipedia was an apt and wonderful home for the expanding, changing, in-flux definition of digital humanities, a natural receptor for this confluence of two constantly changing points as they intersect.

Even though a full, accurate, comprehensive, and *fixed* definition of the digital humanities may be elusive, we need at least enough of an understanding of what the digital humanities are to be able to move our initiatives forward, to build further the profitable directions of the digital humanities. Toward this type of understanding,

we have a several options; I'll note a few of them. One is that we can work with the basis of what we already do and call digital humanities—or humanities computing, or 'les humanités informatique'—but we are not going to be able to move beyond what we already do if we label precisely and definitively in current contexts. Another is that we can take revolutionary steps, but in doing so we run the risk then of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as they say, and in doing so disconnecting ourselves from a past and a set of institutional structures that are ultimately very valuable to us and, themselves, derive value from our endeavour. Another yet—my clear preference, and one that I see reflected in what many in our community readily do—is working with what we know and building positively towards a future that involves a reflection of the past, embracing the present, and continuing forward openly toward a number of possible futures.

For this approach, we need to switch our typical mode of thinking slightly, moving beyond a focus on *what* it is we do when we get together as digital humanists; we need to think more broadly about also *where*, *how*, and *with whom* it is we do what we do—ultimately considering *who* it is that we are.

Considering the community of practice and the methodological commons

In this context, and beyond, the notion of the community of practice is a helpful and useful way to think about our community, about *who* we are. My first encounter of that usage in the context of the digital humanities is in connection with the Text Encoding Initiative Consortium, where Julia Flanders and Daniel O'Donnell and a number of others were beginning to describe how the TEI community was evolving, and to situate the core principles of that evolution; conceptually, they were embracing work by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Those core principles were found in and among the set of practices on which the TEI community was based, who was engaged in these practices, where they were engaged in them, and why they engaged in them. As it did for TEI, the notion of the community of practice here offers us a framework to consider and understand *who* we are via *what* it is we do, *where* we do what we do, and *why* we do it in the way that we do it. What is most unique about this frame is how it focuses us on the set of practices we share, who we share the practices with and where, on what we apply them, and to what end we do so. If we are willing to view ourselves from this perspective, through those practices in our community that make us unique and bring us together in that way, we can readily begin a move toward taking action that is less problematic than larger strategies of definition—a move that clarifies our understanding of the sorts of initiatives we might engage in together, that might bring us together, and the shapes that those sorts of initiatives and endeavors might take.

Ultimately, and very happily, the logical end of this view is that, having identified with this community of practice, we find ourselves members of the international Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations via the constituent organizations that comprise ADHO—for me, that is the Canadian Society of Digital Humanities / Société canadienne des humanités numériques, though I've also had the pleasure of being active in the Association for Computers and the Humanities and other ADHO organisations, and my lab, the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab, is a member of CenterNet. In this context, ADHO itself serves the international structure of our community of practice, via its focus since inception on uniting our constituency as individuals in these larger organizational structures and ultimately providing the sorts of infrastructure and opportunities that bring us together to allow us to do the sorts of things that we all do—even as the communities in which we work at local, regional, national, and extra-national levels change, morph, evolve; even as the technologies change; even as our predilections about the work that we are doing changes; even as the disciplinary homes for many of us change. What sits at the core of any group like ADHO is the members of its community, what is most unique about those who are in the groups that make up ADHO is the set of practices that we all share as we identify with each other as digital humanists of various kinds.

The community of practice, at least in my experience in the digital humanities, has never been divorced from another notion key to what makes us digital humanists: the methodological commons. If what brings us

together as a community is our practices, the notion of the methodological commons helps us understand key elements of the work we have done, our work now, and our work as we imagine it in the future—whatever the future might be. The methodological commons has been described, discussed, and envisioned for some time in our community by Harold Short, Willard McCarty, and others, and given good, iterative graphical representation over time; the most used images are "A rough intellectual map for humanities computing," which I include here from online sources: a report entitled "Mapping the field to ALLC" (2002), and a later iteration reflecting further engagement by our community distributed via the *Humanist* discussion group (2006).

Figure 1: A rough intellectual map for humanities computing (Willard McCarty and Harold Short, in "Mapping the field: A report to the ALLC". 2002. Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing).

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Figure 2: An intellectual and disciplinary map of humanities computing (Willard McCarty and Harold Short, via the HUMANIST discussion group. 2006. Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations).

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In these depictions, we see the methodological commons imagined as a detailed series of convergence points between many disciplinary groups and ways/clouds of knowing, meeting in and among those things central to the practices of our community: data and data structures modeling core materials, and tools modeling formal methods. Largely, the methodological commons focuses on disciplinary and extra-disciplinary interaction around modeled data derived from analog and other sources, and modeled process which we prototype in tools that enact our analytical and other methods on that data. Further, in addition to our content and process modeling, we also work within extant structures to communicate about our work. Using the lens of the methodological commons, we can identify with some accuracy past trends of the activities that brought our community together in the past, that we encounter now, and can imagine being prominent in future.

Engaging core trends, in content and process modeling

In the areas of data and process modeling, the trends we tend to anticipate readily and expectedly are increased data in digital format and increased access to large data in more standard and widely usable formats, as well as an increased familiarity with our tools generally amongst our colleagues and those beyond the expert communities in which we work and growth in tools that are used across disciplines and amalgamated extra-disciplinary data sets—allowing us to do more than we have ever done before, to explore and test ideas in ways we have never been able to do before. Aligned with this, further, our possibilities for communication are increasing, both in and among those working in our community and communities that exist around the data, and also broadening beyond those specialist communities, broadening beyond disciplinary scope, and extending much further in some cases. These trends, taken together, are in most ways for our community very positive and, at the same time, have potential to challenge us in the best ways possible. For example, in future the pace and scale of our increase in actual data is anticipated to rise at a rate far in excess of past growth, in part via our own incorporation of new methods of data generation, including socially-based or crowd methods, and others beyond. At the same time, this significantly increased amount of data can be expected to be met by next-generation tools, themselves iteratively-improving, modeling our academic processes—tools that increase the speed of our work across more and larger data sets, tools that are more readily accessible to those outside specialized disciplinary and sub-disciplinary groups, tools that (as we have seen trending in the past, in exemplary instances) are embraced up by members in society at large and

put to very good use in contexts beyond those which spawned them. Add to that accelerated communicative patterns of various kinds, like the kind that we enjoy so well in the digital humanities community on Twitter not only with other experts in our community but also experts in other academic communities and, further, into the society at large that we serve.

Taken together, these anticipatable trends point in directions that are potentially very positive, particularly so if we see them as part of our working together towards a better ability to pose new types of questions, with better means of pursuing them, and better ability in our pursuit to reflect our results to experts and to those in the larger society we serve.

Our community will want to be prepared for this. The exact nature of those changes is hard to predict, of course, but if we are flexible in our understanding of what it is we do, how we do it, where we do it, and with whom we do it, we are ready for the positive challenges aligned with these trends that the future holds for us. Foreseeable changes to our data, our tools, and our communication strategies and patterns will alter the way humanities scholarship is done in the next generation at least as much as it has in the past generation, particularly so if these changes put us in considerably closer proximity to, and in contact with, the general public. Some very real and important differences could be realized through these changes in the near future.

Put another way, we might ask: how does our community of practice respond to these sorts of trends? One way is simply to be open about what it is we do, to speak openly about what we do, and to engage in processes that ultimately are productive but may not lead to any sure, fixed answer beyond providing a framework that allows us to take action as we anticipate what comes next—like the way in which we might most productively consider defining the digital humanities.

This is a pivotal moment, not only for the humanities and their connection to society at large but for the role of the digital humanist therein. It is no surprise to us and most of our humanities colleagues that the humanities are becoming increasingly more digital, of course, but what might be less well known outside of our close group is that those who practice the digital humanities are best poised to move us forward in this direction. The question is, how do we begin that movement?

Training and curriculum development, in context

If we accept that we as digital humanists are a community of practice, defined in large part by that which is manifest in the methodological commons, then increased investment by us (and even those we serve) in our practice seems a logical way forward. Certainly this was a conclusion a number of our community reached several years ago, and worked then toward preparing a typology of digital humanities training for *Digital Humanities 2010* at King's College London. In this work, we began by considering the least formal types of training, then working from the grassroots, bottom-up, to the most formal types. Among the many informal types of training we looked at, we included things like collegial discussions where one would have a question, know that a colleague down the hall had expertise to answer, and perhaps walk down the hall, knock on the door, and say, "I need your help. Can you show me how to do this?" And that person would quite likely say, in the generous spirit of the digital humanities generally, words like this: "Sure. Watch this. Just do what I do" (indeed, there is a whole training initiative and protocol based on that type of approach). It is hard to count the number of those types of essential interactions, but they happen all the time and form a foundation for us and how we work together; we see it online too. Formalise this sort of approach slightly, and we found we could point to similar types of exchanges, and beyond, in sessions of various kinds where people simply get together and talk on a regular basis over lunch or a drink about the sort of work that they are engaged in. Here, as we continued our work, we very quickly moved from these sorts of exchanges to those involving increasingly more formal consultations, and training events like regional, national, and international skills-based workshops. We then reversed our approach and, looking from the perspective of the

most formal types of training, we saw a very different view. We began with more formal curriculum of an accredited kind, initially with dedicated PhD programs, then Masters and Undergraduate programs, DH "inflicted" programs, and occasional curriculum. This done, we consulted with members of our community and asked them about what factors were most important to them in and among what was emerging in our results. Our colleagues suggested that we look at things like institutional and field legitimacy, enrollment numbers, cost of delivery, formality of offering, ease of establishment and implementation, and beyond that toward, also, things like curricular agility with respect to developments in the field—indeed, for a field moving as quickly as ours is, agility is something that is very important to have in any sort of training structures we have.

We ultimately came up with what's best represented in the adjacent figure (presented at DH 2010), where on the left you see the more formal types of training represented closer to the top, the more informal represented closer the bottom, and you find the factors that we associated with these types listed on the right in a legend at the top. In this typology, a dedicated PhD program is reflected as being much higher in terms of institutional legitimacy and formality, and also not surprisingly higher in terms of per-person costs; collegial discussion and online networking, by way of further example, are much higher in terms of the approximate numbers that one can train, ease of implementation, and responsive agility.

Figure 3: A rough, factored typology of digital humanities training.

A rough, factored typology of digital humanities training.

Further work focused on identifying positive patterns, ideally those working towards points of most positive intervention, suggesting where we should best consider investment of time and resources. In this, we increasingly came back to a sweet spot, a greatest point of potential impact, that we noted sat somewhere between occasional, inflected curriculum and regional, national skills-based workshops. This was revelatory to us 4–5 years ago. We had not expected the results of our research to point in this direction. What we had expected, then, were results supporting a "trickle-down" approach, where investment in developing more formal and more legitimised types of training—more PhD programs, more Masters programs—would have the greatest impact and lead to other types of training-related interactions in adjacent ways. What our work suggested instead to us was that a focus on those things in the sweet spot would have the greatest impact, directly and adjacently.

Taking local action in the international DH context (DHSI and beyond)

Given our conclusions, the Digital Humanities Summer Institute—the initiative for which the Zampolli Prize is offered—became one of several intervention points. We took these findings back to members of the DHSI advisory group, constituted in a very informal way about 14 years ago (we enter our 15th year in 2015), and we asked ourselves a number of the same questions related to this investigation. The result was that we decided that we would work with the community to invest more heavily in DHSI and like enterprises. Our discussions, at least initially, focused on the way in which we were operating in relation to other training types in that model our research suggested, focused on issues related to ease of agility and implementation, focused also on the number of members of our community we could work with at any one given time, and also began to explore what we were doing locally at the University of Victoria as it related to the world represented in our community of practice by the constituent organizations of ADHO as well as ADHO itself.

A key strategic response among those at my institution who support DHSI was, further, to agree in principle that we would work the sweet spot upwards, in that we imagined additional investment in DHSI would also

be the most ready way to begin development toward a formally-accredited curriculum, MA and PhD programs. This manifest as an additional concern relating to the possibility of blending formally-directed and participant-driven curriculum in an accredited framework. Members of our community may know that at DHSI we offer training in basic digital scholarly pragmatics and essential skills, and then we layer offerings requiring additional expertise from that, and, just as importantly, that each year we put out a call for proposals for those who would like to teach the sort of work that they are engaged in and expert in at DHSI. This is how we have, over time, ensured that our community drives the curriculum we offer, and every year we offer as many of those courses as we possibly can—subject to local processes and infrastructure availability. At the same time as continuing development and growth along those lines, we also began looking for ways to work with others, to bring others consciously into our community, to bring them to us locally and to bring us to them locally, to bring them more broadly into the sort of training that we were doing and into our community of practice. In these efforts, we have been very, very lucky in working not only with a number of exemplary members of our community to advise, organize, and offer DHSI each year, but also with a number of generous partners and sponsors—all of whom and which ensure that we continue to operate in this very positive way.

At the same time as our group decided to work with the community to extend DHSI in ways the community felt was appropriate, and pursue in addition a slowly-and-steadily developing accreditation model, we also began working together with other groups who were making similar investments in training toward what was, before 2012, an informal and collegial network of digital humanities institutes. This network was ADHO-proximate, and soon (after a meeting at the DH conference in Hamburg in 2012) started moving toward articulating itself as an international training network, one in which members of this group began considering what is it we do, how we could work together, how we could share our foundational courses, how we could together sustain training at the expert and intermediate levels of our offerings, and how we could ensure that our efforts were distributed temporally and geographically to members of our constituencies who were most engaged in what it is we do. Further points of collaboration and cooperation emerged, having us engaged in many positive ways with each other: working within and among members of the DHSI partner network and well beyond; working not only with institutions and, say, faculties and departments within institutions, but also with research centers within and across institutions; working with large research programs; working with large agencies beyond ADHO, including constituent organizations like the Canadian DH group and also ACH, but also having a pleasure of working with groups like HASTAC, the Modern Language Association, the highly interdisciplinary Canadian Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences, and with our funding agency, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Such mutual benefit in working together also yielded, as we pushed locally for accredited curriculum, the ability for us to articulate that curriculum in a graduate certificate program that draws on the best of what it is we do across *all* the training institutes in our informal network (with possibility of those beyond) by allowing those enrolled in this program to take two of a total of five courses needed to complete the program at institutions outside of Victoria; specifically, we look forward to further partnership here.

Next steps in this vein have been to work toward a more formal ADHO network for digital humanities training which, after several years of formal and informal consultation in this vein, was recognized by ADHO at the 2014 conference in Lausanne. As identified by a questionnaire circulated widely to members of our community as we were engaging in consultation about this, elements of our mandate are already taking shape; these include: coordinating international partnerships; coordinating curriculum across institutes; discussing curricular models; sharing publicity; having a formal summit on DH training; engaging in temporal and geographic coordination so that offerings in the area are available more broadly; and offering advice and peer support—all in a context that I think represents the diversity and many strengths of our community at the CO level and also through SIGs like GO::DH. We hope to initiate this in the coming year.

Conclusion: A foundation for digital self-determination in the humanities

That's a pretty strong foundation, we feel—one laid by members of our digital humanities community, and one that presents an appropriate response to those concerned with the digital future for the humanities. If we are wondering if the *digital* future for the humanities is something that others suggest to us and perhaps even build for us, this foundation presents a clear response that we're quite readily determining our future for ourselves. Such initiatives result from working with those around us, understanding together what a healthy and open view of the digital humanities can be in the context of the history and interdisciplinarity that it embraces and engages in many ways, ultimately working toward suggesting further points of intervention and action in areas that further define who we are, what we are, what we do, and what brings us together in the places that we do these things.

Through such initiatives, we welcome new members to our community, sharing our community's digital practices within the models pertinent to our field, and at the same time bringing us all closer together in and through those practices even as they evolve, encouraging us to imagine and work toward a future that *we* ultimately shape.

Initiatives such as this provide the methodological foundations for humanities' digital self-determination. In doing so, we "grow our own" and learn to "do our own stunts" (as they say in my part of the world); most importantly, in doing so we ensure that we hold the keys to our own future and the future of the disciplines that we represent in the humanities, determining for ourselves the humanities' digital destiny from an appropriate position of community-shared experience, knowledge, and methodological practice.

Postscript:

On behalf of all those involved in and associated with DHSI, I would like to thank everyone in the ADHO community for the honour of the Zampolli Prize and its acknowledgement of the work we all do together. The honorarium associated with the Zampolli Prize has been donated to the DHSI tuition scholarship program for 2015, where it has been matched by several in our partner group—in the ongoing service to our community. Because *Digital Studies / Le champ numérique* is an open access journal, funds set aside for the open access publication of this lecture have been donated also to the DHSI tuition scholarship program for 2015.

