UCLDH: Big Tent Digital Humanities in Practice

Warwick, Claire King's College London, United Kingdom

Mahony, Simon UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, United Kingdom

Nyhan, Julianne Centre for Digital Humanities, United Kingdom

Ross, Claire entre for Digital Humanities, United Kingdom

Terras, Melissa UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, United Kingdom

Tiedau, Ulrich UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, United Kingdom

Welsh, Anne UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, United Kingdom

There has been a great deal of concern recently about questions of how we should define Digital Humanities. John Unsworth (2010) in his plenary lecture at DHSI asked how we might define the boundaries of our discipline. UCL's own Melissa Terras, (2010) in her widely reported plenary at DH2010, warned us that we must not only understand our discipline ourselves, but be able to communicate it succinctly to others. Others, including one of the authors of this proposal, tend to the view of 'more hack less yack'. (Meloni, 2010) Yet questions remain, and the theme of DH2011 clearly prompts us toward such considerations. As a result we present a proposal below for a poster about the establishment of the new UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, (UCLDH) (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh/) one of whose founding principles is that of inclusivity, interdisciplinary and the broadest sense of definition, in which we demonstrate ways in which the big tent attitude to digital humanities is put into practice. Our tent includes not only other disciplines within academia, but also libraries, museums, archives, cultural heritage practice and commercial information

providers. In the following proposal we discuss how this has come about and justify our belief in broadly defined Digital Humanities (DH).

UCLDH does not think of itself as a DH centre in the conventional form, where anyone working on DH must come and work in one central facility. Instead, it is built on a hypertextual metaphor: it is the hub of a network, bringing together work being done in different departments and research centres within UCL and beyond. This is one of the reasons for our inclusive philosophy. We do not believe it is for us to tell people whether they are doing DH, as we conceive of it. If they would like to become part of our network, then we welcome their involvement, since we believe that exciting new research can be created from synergies in such a network, and by unexpected collaborations between disciplines. To this end we run various different networking events such as Digital Excursions. These visits to different parts of UCL and other cultural heritage institutions such as the British Library allow participants to find out about research and digital facilities they might never previously have been aware of, and to meet and talk to others whom they might never have come across. Connections created by these meetings may take DH forward in ways we cannot predict, let alone define.

UCL has unique assets as a basis for Digital Humanities research in the form of Museums and Collections and Library Special Collections, and digital art work being produced at the Slade School of Art. We are also fortunate that our location in central London means that we are close to many of the world's greatest Libraries, Museums and galleries. As a result one of the main directions in which UCLDH has sought to extend the definition of what DH might be is in working with cultural heritage and memory institutions. For example we are working with the British Museum, the Museum of London, the Victoria and Albert Museum on a project that will help us better to understand the needs and behaviours of users of digital museum objects. We have doctoral students undertaking research at various institutions, including: the British Library, to look at the use of their mass digitisation projects; The London Metropolitan Archive, where image processing will be used to try and decipher the Grand Parchment which is too damaged and deteriorated to read; The Science Museum, where the use of 3D scans of museum objects will be evaluated by the general public; and the British Museum, where work will be done on curatorial documentation of 3D

scans to investigate standards and protocols for 3D capture of artefacts.

UCL has world leading research in both humanities, computer science and engineering, and we believe that as a result it is vital to engage all parts of the university's research base equally in the DH endeavour. We aim to create new knowledge both in computer science and engineering and in the humanities, as part of the same research projects. We think of computer scientists as equal research partners in our work. Computing is not conceived of as existing to provide a service to facilitate humanities research. Thus DH research takes place in the Department of Computer Science as often as in the faculty of Arts and Humanities. One project led by one of UCLDH's associate directors, aims to develop algorithms to reconstruct the Minoan wall paintings of ancient Thera. This will lead to advances in computational methods, but it also aims to redefine the existing conservation and assembly process, helping archaeologists to create reconstructions of the frescoes, and to study them in ways that would previously have been impossible.

We also believe in engaging with the users of digital resources, whether they are in academia, cultural heritage, or the broader interested public. This is the biggest possible tent that we might pitch for DH. We are highly engaged with social media in our own work, as evidenced by the UCLDH blog, and out Twitter presence (#UCLDH). However, beyond this, several of our research projects involve social networking or crowd sourcing, and aim to engage the public well beyond academia with their heritage. Transcribe Bentham (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/transcribe- bentham/) allows users to access digital copies of Jeremy Betham's original letters, to learn about the intricacies of transcribing primary sources, and then to contribute transcribed text back to the digital collection. The QRator project will use QR codes to allow museum visitors to contribute their interpretation of objects to digital interactive labels using a smart phone app. This means that crowd sourced understanding of museum objects can complement the once monolithic curatorial interpretation of what visitors ought to be seeing.

Stretching the tent even more widely, UCLDH has also caught the imagination of the wider DH and cultural heritage community internationally with its successful discussion group. Decoding Digital Humanities (DDH) This is an informal

discussion group about DH established and organised by research students and staff from UCLDH. It meets monthly and is attended by students, researchers and cultural heritage practitioners from London and the south of England as well as those from UCL. It also has five

new international chapters: two in Australia, and in the USA, Belgium and Portugal.

Our definition of the big, interdisciplinary tent also includes teaching and learning. Our new Masters (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh/courses/mamsc) will be a highly innovative interdisciplinary programme: the first in the world to have a dual designation of MA and MSc, reflecting once again our sense of the dual balance of our field. Its diverse choice of options from a wide range of disciplines responds to the complex nature of DH, including modules from engineering, computer science, geography, archaeology, anthropology, architectural studies, psychology and information studies as well as pure humanities. It also reflects the needs of the students, the skills required for a new generation of scholars as well as those wishing to pursue a career outside academia. We will also release a substantial amount of the core materials as open access digital learning objects as part of the JISC Open Educational Resources programme: further evidence of a commitment to openness and broad public engagement in teaching as well as research.

The guiding principles of our approach to DH are predicated on welcoming the sense of a field that is growing and in flux. We do not want to put up fences, and create definitions of arcane knowledge which initiates must possess to be part of our exclusive club. We wish to open wide the doors of this amazingly diverse discipline to any and all of those who would like to take part. We believe that DH should create new knowledge in both parts of the equation, of digital technologies and humanities scholarship. We believe that DH should embrace memory institutions and cultural heritage. We believe that DH should involve those who use digital resources, allowing them to contribute their ideas and content to resources, as well as being consulted about their design. But ultimately, to be true to our principles, we believe that is it not our task to define DH at UCLDH. In the spirit of social media, we propose that the definition of the field should be allowed to develop organically, taking into account the views and input of those who participate in it, within and beyond the academy. Our view of

DH is crowd sourced, inclusive and ever growing: big tent Digital Humanities in practice.

References

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