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## Developing the digital humanities at the Open University

### **Executive summary**

This report looks at the recent intensification of the development of digital humanities in the Open University's (OU) Faculty of Arts. The development of digital humanities in the faculty has involved a process of highlighting and developing the potential of the existing digital humanities activities, including projects which were first established in the 1990s, as well as the introduction of new initiatives. A crucial aim for the further recent development of digital humanities at the OU has been to stimulate critical discussion on the role of digital technologies in research.

Internal partnerships and discussions between members of the Faculty of Arts with other faculties and departments, particularly the Institute of Educational Technology (IET), the Knowledge Media Institute (KMi), and the Library, have helped to shape the development of digital humanities at the OU. A series of seminars has been held in the arts faculty, supported by 'research theme' funding from the Faculty Research Committee. OU Research School has also supported an arts-led university-wide Digital Communities Workshop, and a planned Digital Humanities Colloquium with guest speakers from across the world: all of these events have been instrumental in promoting discussion. In June 2011, Senate approved the establishment of 'Digital Humanities' as one of the first two Thematic Research Networks (TRN) at the OU with the aim of scaling up research capabilities and addressing critical research challenges through the development of intellectually driven, cross disciplinary collaborations. This TRN will enable the OU to build on the early digital humanities activities initiated by the arts faculty.

Partnerships beyond the OU have also been, and still are, part of digital humanities work in the faculty. As well as technology-enabled research project collaborations, the arts faculty has been involved in the US-led Project Bamboo, a multi-institutional, interdisciplinary, and inter-organizational effort that focused on the potential for advancing arts and humanities research through the development of shared technology services. Further developing links with one of the Project Bamboo members, the OU also worked with the University of Cambridge's Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies (CARET), on a JISC-funded study of early career researchers.

The digital humanities team has also carried out planned empirical research to further knowledge of the role of technologies in research. The critical evaluation project examined six technology-enabled arts research projects, drawing out common issues for consideration. The scholarly networking project took an action research approach to studying how academics might make use of social media in their work, carrying out interviews with participants before and after a series of training workshops.

The digital humanities focus has highlighted several key issues. Digitisation has been shown to be about more than simply 'duplication', with new techniques such as data mining, clustering trials, digital mapping and correspondence analysis providing new ways to 'chart the seas', for example. Also, it has been found that the availability of new material in new formats (or 'old' material in new formats) can stimulate new research methods and enable researchers to ask new questions, and to ask old questions in new ways, although this stage was thought to be only just beginning to emerge and needs to be further understood. Technical boundaries were found to still need identifying and pushing, with the potential for using systems such as linked data being worth exploring. The difficulty of sustaining created digital resources has also been identified as a key issue.

Finally, what has also been clearly shown by the development of digital humanities at the OU is that it has been and will continue to be, important for humanities scholars to engage with this new paradigm, although with a critical outlook, rather than an unquestioning welcome.

## **Introduction**

According to the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO), digital humanities 'encompasses the practice of humanities research in and through information technology, and the exploration of how the humanities may evolve through their engagement with technology, media, and computational methods' (The Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, 2010). Borgman (2009) stresses that digital humanities activities can be traced back to the early 1970s, with interest growing steadily during the past decades, while Svensson (2010), in his exploration of the multi-faceted landscape of digital humanities, argues that the field of digital humanities is being negotiated at the same time as expanding, and that this is an exciting and challenging time in its development.

The development of digital humanities in the Open University's (OU) Faculty of Arts has involved a process of highlighting and developing the potential of the existing digital humanities activities, including projects which were first established in the 1990s, as well as the introduction of new initiatives. The report will review the ways in which digital humanities-related discussion has been intensified in the arts faculty since mid 2009, as a way of consolidating and extending critical thinking around this theme. A crucial aim for the further recent development of digital humanities at the OU has been to stimulate critical discussion on the role of digital technologies in research. Two empirical investigations under the digital humanities umbrella have also been carried out and have helped to shape thinking. Key issues and questions which have been raised at the OU by this enhanced focus on digital humanities will be highlighted in this report and a future agenda will be set out.

In June 2011, Senate approved the establishment of 'Digital Humanities' as one of the first two Thematic Research Networks at the OU. The aim of these thematic research networks is to scale-up research capabilities through the development of intellectually driven, cross disciplinary collaborations that enable the critical research challenges of the day to be addressed. This decision will further boost the establishment of a digital humanities paradigm at the OU, and give particular support to the integration of arts faculty digital activities with those of other faculties.

## **Environmental conditions**

A range of environmental conditions have helped to facilitate the digital humanities development process at the OU. Institutional as well as external prompts have provided impetus as well as support along the way. Institutional prompts have included the ethos of the research environment, as well as the continuing value

attached within the university to the role of digital technologies in education. The willingness of OU senior management at both institutional and faculty level to encourage and seed-fund experimentation in the development of digital technologies has also been key.

External prompts at national level have included the recognition of the faculty's research excellence (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009), the government promotion of the advantages of a digital environment (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2010) and JISC's acknowledgement that digital technologies are changing the ways in which researchers work (JISC, 2010). The release by innovators of new tools and technologies which can facilitate and support new research activities and cross-institutional collaborations has also been an important impetus. The research councils' willingness and enthusiasm for supporting new technologically-enabled research paradigms has played a part in shaping the faculty's strategic focus in its bidding for research funding.

Monitoring of the academic literature has formed a backdrop to the critical evaluation of the development of digital humanities at the OU. Borgman (2009) suggests that the digital humanities are at a pivotal moment in the transition from an 'emergent' to an 'established' field with common methods, sources and infrastructure. In an interesting online discussion, reproduced as a journal article, between eight academics on 'the promise of digital history', the importance of focusing on the digital medium as a means of widening the scope and recognising the breadth that digital history can encompass is stressed (Cohen et al., 2008). Borgman (2007) highlights the dilemma of the interesting possibilities raised through digitisation for analysing cultural records and artefacts, whilst pointing out that the separation of the digital object from its origins can cause problems to the humanist in the maintenance of context. She also compares digital to physical objects, reminding us of the practical and technical issues involved in converting items to digital texts. Greengrass and Hughes (2008) also touch on this point, as well as suggesting that the philosophical questions of representing the past digitally also need to be considered alongside the methodological and technical issues.

Focusing on the internal conditions, steps had already been taken by pioneering OU arts faculty members as far back as the 1990s to develop projects which utilised digital technologies, thus indicating an openness to this mode of research. Other projects with a digital focus have also been introduced over recent years, indicating an openness to the use of technology in arts research. More recently, the Open

University's Research Strategy has encouraged further development of digital humanities in the Faculty of Arts by the inclusion of a commitment to leveraging the possibilities and capabilities of digital technologies to develop, deliver and disseminate OU research. The systemic embedding and threading of digital technologies and e-knowledge tools into the methods and practices of the OU's research communities is noted within the strategy as a key feature of the research landscape. The importance of thematic cross-faculty and cross-nation research clusters, facilitated by virtual networks and through innovative communication technologies, is also highlighted in the strategy. The OU is also keen that research and teaching should support and develop each other, with digital technologies being seen as providing a bridging facility, something which is being actively considered. .

Alongside these strategies, internal partnerships and discussions between members of the Faculty of Arts with other faculties and departments, particularly the Institute of Educational Technology (IET), the Knowledge Media Institute (KMi), and the Library, have also helped to shape the development of digital humanities at the OU.

Colleagues within these and other departments were keen to share ideas and skills, as well as to discover ways of working together for mutual benefit. Growing interest in the use of social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, to promote inter-faculty communication have also facilitated the sharing of ideas. A one-day cross-faculty Digital Research Communities workshop in October 2010 also helped to facilitate the sharing of ideas about the ways forward for the application of digital technologies within research, as well as the integration of digital research technologies with teaching and learning. An accompanying wiki encouraged members of staff to share relevant biographical and project details. The importance of being allowed 'time to play' with new tools, as well as the importance of using these new tools and capabilities to promote openness were particularly stressed. A Digital Humanities Colloquium is planned for July 2011 to further raise the digital humanities profile, with guest speakers from the USA, the Netherlands and leading UK universities, as well as speakers from within the OU.

The research environment within the arts faculty has also been conducive to the focus on digital humanities. In order to give strategic coherence to the rich variety of research being carried out, the Arts Faculty Committee (AFC) agreed to develop broad research themes to link together activity across faculty disciplines. Such themes aim to enhance the potential to raise the profile Arts research both internally and externally, to tap into new funding possibilities, and to recruit and support

research students. The research themes are also intended to enhance the faculty's research environment and encourage a rich exchange of ideas/expertise), as well as aiming to provide encouragement and ideas to colleagues who are seeking to enhance their own research performance. Funding is provided by the Faculty Research Sub-Committee (FRSC) to enable the 'champions' of these themes to organise a programme of seminars and other events. Networking with groups with similar interests both within and outside the OU is strongly encouraged, with opportunities being given to host appropriate activities at the main OU campus or in the OU's UK regions and nations. John Wolffe, Professor of Religious Studies, and Lorna Hardwick, Professor of Classical Studies, took the opportunity to gain approval from the FRSC for a digital humanities research theme. Professor Wolffe and Professor Hardwick explained in their bid that they saw considerable potential for building on existing digital-enabled arts research projects in a field likely to have strong potential for external funding and for developing research projects with other university departments. They saw scope not only for developing the use of digital resources as research tools, but also for the exploration of associated methodological and theoretical issues.

Straddling these internal OU strategies, as well as capitalising on the new external feature of the availability of innovative online platforms, has been the OU's recent seizing of the opportunity to use online technologies to extend its commitment to the promotion of open access to research and teaching materials (Wilks and Pearce, 2011). The OU has, right from its inception, been committed to openness, with the university's mission being still, in 2010, as it has been since the start, forty years ago, to be 'open to people, places, methods and ideas' (The Open University, 2010c). The OU has also, right from the start, been committed to the use of the latest technologies (The Open University, 2005 [1969]), using television in its infancy as a publicly available broadcasting medium to deliver teaching materials. More recently, the OU has developed a presence on new media such as YouTube and iTunesU as well as developing its own open access online learning space, OpenLearn (The Open University, 2010b). The Faculty of Arts has been a major contributor of materials to these online learning and dissemination media environments, with many of the resources being expressly designed for open-access dissemination to users.

### **Building partnerships beyond the OU**

Inspiration for the exploration of digital humanities at the OU has also come from collaborations with other universities within the UK and beyond. Professor Wolffe led the active involvement of the OU in Project Bamboo, a multi-institutional, interdisciplinary, and inter-organizational effort that brings together researchers in arts and humanities, computer scientists, information scientists, librarians, and campus information technologists to tackle the question: 'How can we advance arts and humanities research through the development of shared technology services?' (Project Bamboo, 2010). This US-led consortium includes amongst its members major US universities, including the joint leaders the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Chicago, several UK universities and organisations, including the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and JISC, and several mainland European universities, including Université Paris IV, Sorbonne and Freiburg University. The planning process for Project Bamboo was built around a series of six workshops where the institutional and organizational teams entered into a dialogue around the issues, trends, opportunities, and challenges that the creation of a model for shared infrastructure and resources poses to the digital humanities community. At least one representative from the OU attended four of the workshops, with virtual participation in the other two. The OU is particularly interested in making a contribution under the scholarly networking strand of the discussions and contributed a piece of original research to the community by carrying out a critical investigation into the use of new social media to enable the scholarly networking taking place at the time in the OU (Wilks, 2009). Project Bamboo was, in 2010, awarded funding by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to undertake two initial infrastructure projects. The first involves the development of a set of scholarly web services on a shared services platform; the second concentrates on the adoption and dissemination of interoperability standards and services. Links are being maintained with Bamboo in this technology phase. Elton Barker and his Google Ancient Places (GAP) Co-Investigator, Eric Kansa from UC Berkeley, are working with Bamboo to build the 'Places-Text' feature demonstrator which is part of the Bamboo services platform.

The OU has also developed digital humanities-related partnerships with other interested universities. Interactions on Project Bamboo led to a partnership with fellow Bamboo member, the University of Cambridge's Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies (CARET), on a JISC-funded study of early career researchers (James et al., 2009). The OU has also taken note of the digital humanities activities of other universities through attendance at external conferences and seminars. Internally, a 'Digital Humanities in Practice' seminar series held at the

OU has given OU staff the chance to hear from colleagues about the ground-breaking work they are undertaking,. The programme has included speakers from Kings College London (KCL) and The University of Sheffield, among others, with their presentations being used as starting points for engagement in critical discussion. The seminars were webcast to encourage participation by OU colleagues from a wide geographical area. Online video recordings were also made available after the event. A digital humanities blog also encourages debate and contributions from across academia and beyond.

Members of the arts faculty have also presented at conferences across the world. Dr. Elton Barker, a member of the Digital Humanities Steering Group, has been invited to give several presentations relating to his high profile 'Project HESTIA: the Herodotus Encoded Space-Text-Imaging Archive' (The Open University, 2011), for example, as well as organising a specific 2010 conference which brought together academics from across the world involved in classics-related digital activities.

The development of specific training and research opportunities for graduate students has also been seen as key to the development of the OU's digital humanities profile. Finding out more about the ways in which universities such as Kings College London and University College London (UCL) have been developing their digital humanities profiles through their badging of masters degrees and PhDs as well as through research clusters, has proved interesting. The OU has just recruited its first digital humanities PhD student within the Faculty of Arts, an appointment which may stimulate a new interdisciplinary paradigm for research.

### **Establishing a digital humanities research theme**

This array of external and internal environmental conditions was therefore the setting for the OU Faculty of Arts to intensify its exploration of the field of digital humanities and examine the development opportunities it offers. Having sown the seeds of interest and gained support at Pro-Vice Chancellor and Deanery levels, Professor Wolffe and Professor Hardwick set up a digital humanities steering group, recruiting a Research Associate and two seconded members of faculty, Dr. Elton Barker and Professor Timothy Chappell, as part-time members. Considerable attention has been given to scoping the potential of digital humanities to enhance existing research and to develop new projects. The group has also worked to identify colleagues and existing activities that can be gathered into a digital humanities cluster. Plans for empirical research were also made, with the early findings of these being reported below.

As the earlier definition highlights, digital humanities encompasses a wide range of activities, although its essence can be identified as the interplay between the disciplines of the humanities and the role of information technology. The process of designing the content of the faculty's digital humanities website revealed the extent of the existing faculty activities which could be gathered into this research cluster and badged as digital humanities. Fourteen arts-based research projects and datasets which make active use of digital technologies for their operation and dissemination were identified and are included on the digital humanities section of the Faculty of Arts website (The Open University, 2010a). These include the long-standing Classical Receptions Project, which documents and analyses the theatrical and literary surge of interest in Greek texts, drama and poetry; the Reading Experience Database (RED), which documents the history of reading in Britain from 1450 to 1945; and Project HESTIA: the Herodotus Encoded Space-Text-Imaging Archive, mentioned above, which develops visual tools to examine the ways in which space is represented in Herodotus' History. The HESTIA project has also led to two related externally funded projects: Google Ancient Places, funded by the Google awards program for Digital Humanities Research and Pelagios (Pelagios: Enable Linked Ancient Geodata In Open Systems), funded by JISC (Geospatial strand), which connects the OU to other world leading digital humanities initiatives. HESTIA researchers, including Elton Barker, have also been invited to contribute to two important 'state of the field' publications: 'Digital Research and the Study of Classical Antiquity', published by the Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies and 'Research Communities and Research Infrastructures in the Humanities', a report collated by the strategy-leading European Science Foundation Standing Committee for the Humanities. Elton Barker has been awarded a Humboldt Fellowship for Experienced Researchers in order to collaborate with TOPOI (<http://www.topoi.org/>), a large, multidisciplinary initiative based in Berlin funded by the German government

Each of these projects, as well as the other eleven presented on the faculty's digital humanities project pages, follows the OU's ethos of openness through their use of digital technologies to disseminate their research outputs freely within and beyond academia. Most of the projects have involved partners from other universities, or in the case of the Open Arts Archive, from museums and galleries, and have gained external research grants.

### **The critical evaluation project**

In addition to these processes, the digital humanities steering group has carried out empirical research, as mentioned above, which has enabled the examination of current digital humanities-related activities. The first of these was a focused evaluation of six of the faculty-based digital humanities projects with the aim of exploring the role of digital technologies within these projects. This evaluation was accomplished through semi-structured interviews with key project personnel, as well as the review of project-related documents and websites. Several strategic issues have been identified for further consideration as a result of this study.

First, it was found that the management of the 'technology' part of the projects needs to be carefully considered at the initial planning stage. Projects which had assumed at set-up stage that the researchers would be able to cope with the technical elements as well as being subject specialists reported struggling. The HESTIA project found it to be more efficient to build in resource for IT specialists from the start, however, rather than for a researcher who did not have these skills to try to learn them. This was taken a step further on HESTIA when it was thought more efficient, again for skills reasons and also thus to manage costs effectively, to outsource part of the IT work to a particular software specialist, rather than to use the usual IT specialist. Similarly, the Open Arts Archive (OAA) has commissioned an IT specialist (from the OU's KMi) to work on the innovative website design. Building effective relationships with the OU's central IT services was found to have been a key consideration for the project teams, with detailed discussions being necessary due to the innovative nature of digital humanities. Negotiations with central IT are continuing on the best way forward to ensure that support for ongoing projects is ensured from central IT, as well as the best way of ensuring that new projects build in suitable and sustainable IT support from the start.

A second key finding was that sustainability of the created online resources beyond the project set-up is seen as an important issue for all the projects, although fraught with problems for some. It has been found that research council funding does not allow bids to cover the cost of maintaining a resource after the grant for its establishment expires, yet the research councils do want to know how a resource will continue to be supported. At the OU solutions are beginning to be found: the longest established digital resource, the Classical Receptions project, has recently been accepted for digital archiving by the OU Library. At the same time, a JISC award to a KMi / Arts / Library partnership for the prototyping linked data project 'LUCERO'

includes work to expose and connect educational and research content from the Classical Receptions databases, as well as from a selection of the other digital humanities databases within Arts (Knowledge Media Institute, 2010). The future of the AHRC-sponsored knowledge-transfer project 'Building on History', another of the evaluated DH projects, looks bright, as Lambeth Palace Library have undertaken to look after the website indefinitely after the formal end of the AHRC project and funding.

Regarding sustainability, the demise of the Arts and Humanities Database Service has been lamented, as earlier projects were designed with this in mind as an archiving solution, as a requirement of external funding grant awards. Hopes for the establishment of a replacement national repository are being expressed. It was also identified as important to consider the interim storage and archiving of the individual components of the databases, for example by the OAA staff. Interruption of funding during the course of a project was also identified as a potential issue. The impending winding up of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the funder for the OAA, due to government cuts, will cause sustainability problems for that project, for example. Sustainability was therefore identified as a key strategic issue needing further consideration, with the vulnerability of digital projects when compared with printed research outputs being identified as a cause for serious concern..

Third, the importance of the human role was still valued by the projects. It was found by HESTIA researchers, for example, that digital technology cannot be naively deployed but always has to go hand in hand with careful textual analysis and sound academic knowledge. Furthermore, despite working on a technologically-enabled project, with team members spread across the country, the leader of the Online Encyclopaedia of Global Commodities (OEGC) project asserted that 'nothing beats face-to-face' when decisions on the ways forward need making.

Also relating to the human factor, the importance of a user focus for online open access resources was identified by the OEGC team. One of the key benefits of the resource will be its empowerment of the user through the inclusion of hyperlinks which enables them to follow up their particular interests. The research team found that when putting together the encyclopaedia they needed to put themselves into the perspective of the potential user rather than to think like academic researchers. Similarly, for the Making Britain project, it was felt desirable to make it more interactive and more geared towards serving the general public, although an open access database was not an initial aim of the project. Since deciding to go down the

route of an open access database, this has allowed for different, more visual and interactive ways of retrieving data as opposed to the linear trawl through archives. The worldwide exposure of the project to the general public was seen as a major advantage by the Making Britain team. The Building on History project has identified the web as the ideal medium for disseminating to the interested members of the public, as well as to academics, its research outputs relating to London church and social history. The original plans for a hard copy resource were changed during the course of the project as the fast-changing opportunities for a digital resource became apparent.

Fourth, the research suggests that vital considerations which are of relevance to all online environments and projects need to be included on digital humanities development agendas. Rights management has always been an important concern of the Open Arts Archive (OAA), whose staff work closely with the OU rights management department to ensure legality. Also vital has been to pay attention to issues such as accessibility and usability of the websites, and the identification of an appropriate software platform. The Building on History project ensured that any links to outside resources were to stabilised URLs which were unlikely to change, rather than to ephemeral web material, again an important basic consideration.

Marketing, (in the sense of disseminating awareness and encouraging uptake) of the available resources was also identified as an important consideration. For the OAA, for example, the integration of new social media marketing opportunities, such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as offering automated updates through RSS feeds, were seen as major marketing opportunities. For the Building on History project, the various academic and non-academic partners in the project help to market the website to a wide variety of people. Local historical societies have also been involved and alerted to the website's existence, whilst the contacts from the project's launch event have been added to the mailing list for future marketing.

Fifth, collaboration was found to be important to all of the projects, with most involving partners from outside the OU. The OAA also facilitated the cross-fertilisation of ideas between academia and publicly funded arts institutions. Also clearly demonstrating the value of the researcher role in relation to academic credibility is the OAA whose project leader, Professor Gill Perry, is a key figurehead in building trust from collaborators.

### **The scholarly networking project**

Early in the development of digital humanities in the OU's Faculty of Arts, an online questionnaire aimed to gain insight into the opinions and digital skills of academic members of faculty. One of the discoveries was that people were interested in finding out more about some of the new ways of using social media to network online with academic colleagues. The digital humanities team therefore decided to set up an action research project which investigated in more detail the views of interested members of staff relating to the use of social media in an academic environment, as well as provided practical training.

The OU's Institute of Educational Technology was approached as they had designed learning materials for a similar project for Associate Lecturers a couple of years before. Researchers in IET are also looking at the specific role of Twitter in research too. These materials provided a guide to using the social bookmarking site Delicious; the micro-blogging service, Twitter; the social networking site, Facebook; and Google Reader as a place to gather blogs and other RSS feeds. It was decided that these learning materials could be re-used with some minor alterations to orientate them to Arts academics' use. The recently emerged networking website <http://academia.edu> was also added to the training programme.

An introductory seminar was held to encourage participation, and three workshops, each concentrating on one or two of the social media tools were arranged. Eleven participants were recruited and interviewed before the workshops about their views relating to using social media for scholarly networking. Around five months after attending the workshops, to give time for the participants to experiment with the tools in the course of their work, the participants were re-interviewed.

The early interviews revealed that the participants were keen to get involved and try out the tools. They did not think that these tools would be particularly difficult to use, although were aware that it might take time to build up networks and get used to integrating them into their working lives. The main worries were finding the time to experiment with them, as well as the fear that once they had started to use the tools this would take time away from what they saw as their core academic work of reading, thinking, writing and teaching. It was clear that people saw them as an add-on rather than as something which could be part of their work. This continued to have been the case when the participants were interviewed later on and most had not got into using Twitter, Delicious or Google Reader. Suggestions were made that the culture of the subject area could be a barrier to making use of some of the tools,

implying that work is needed to subvert out-of-date expectations. One Classics lecturer commented, for example: *“If I was to try and use Twitter at a Classics conference, I’d probably be ushered out of the room.”* Another commented that social media would only work if colleagues were also signed up and willing to engage, and many weren’t: a ‘catch-22’ situation. That some see it as early days for using social media for scholarly networking was confirmed by the comment:

*‘I think it will change behaviour and you will start networking in a different way, and there could be interesting collaboration results from it. But I suspect that that that will take some time to embed, actually.’*

One success story from the project, however, was the popularity of the academic networking site academia.edu, with several of the participants having been converted into avid fans who had also been enthusiastic enough to encourage their colleagues to sign up too. The participants had found it useful for uploading research outputs, including ‘grey material’, such as conference presentations (which they also found useful to refer to at the conferences), as well as for tracking what others were doing. Apart from academia.edu, one of the participants had been finding Google Reader useful for gathering together updates on journal articles for a course she was studying; while another, who is involved in a digital humanities project and is very interested in finding out more about the area, was making regular use of Twitter. However, there seemed to be little enthusiasm for immersing themselves in these new tools amongst most of the participants, with one commenting: *‘I won’t be Tweeting until there’s no alternative’*, and others seeing insufficient potential benefit to spend time integrating the tools into their everyday academic lives.

It seems therefore that some have found that the ability to keep up with the latest developments in their academic field, being able to disseminate research in an immediate and informal manner, as well as the effective building of academic profile are facilitated effectively by social media. However, academics need to be convinced of these benefits in order to be motivated to progress beyond a passing interest and into regular use of a tool. Perhaps in many subject areas these tools have also not yet reached a ‘tipping point’, after which it will be seen to be essential to participate.

### **Identifying key issues**

As a result of the various activities highlighted above, the Faculty of Arts has been able to identify key issues to add to a future agenda for consideration in relation to the development of digital humanities.

The various digital humanities projects which have been highlighted at the OU have demonstrated that digital delivery can bring together data and source material that was not available before to allow it to be searched, represented and used in ways that weren't possible before. Digitisation has been shown to be about more than simply 'duplication', with new techniques such as data mining, clustering trials, digital mapping and correspondence analysis providing new ways to 'chart the seas'. It has been acknowledged that the scholar's role is still important in evaluation and shaping the argument, however, as was highlighted in the critical evaluation project. It was also identified that the scholar's role in selecting and controlling the digitisation of source material should also be acknowledged and decisions, on what to digitise, for example, challenged by academic peers as well as by non-academic users where necessary. The methods by which this could be achieved need consideration.

The availability of new material in new formats (or 'old' material in new formats) can stimulate new research methods and enable researchers to ask new questions, and to ask old questions in new ways, although this stage is only just beginning to emerge and needs to be further understood. Researchers will need to be aware of the danger of distorting lines of enquiry by ignoring non-digital sources, as well as ensuring that creative research approaches which do not merely substitute digital for analogue/artefact are taken. Related to this is a need for digital humanists to be ready to explain and justify why and in what circumstances, digital technologies should be used in preference to 'old' methods of dissemination and research.

The scholarly networking project highlighted nicely that digital tools and outputs need to fit the research needs of the humanities community, with the value of a tool needing to be clearly apparent to its potential users before they commit to spending time getting accustomed to using it. As with the exploitation of digital research outputs for further research, it also seems to be early days for integrating social media into the lives of most humanities researchers. The digital humanities field continues to develop and push boundaries, however, and it has been seen as important for the OU to get involved in initiatives, such as developing linked data technologies, to make digital resources work effectively for academic and non-academic communities. So technical boundaries still need to be identified and pushed.

The current system of peer review of print-oriented academic publishing has been developed over many years. Technical and intellectual peer review is needed to ensure high quality digital resources are produced. The question of how digital

humanities should be assessed, including how its contribution to research assessment exercises can be measured, needs to be considered, and has been expressed as a worry, particularly by early career researchers. This issue needs to be urgently raised in debate, particularly as the next research assessment approaches.

The potential for collaboration across disciplines and subject areas to be facilitated by digital technologies is particularly evident, as has been seen in many of the OU projects, as well as in the successful take-up of academia.edu. The critical evaluation project demonstrated that digital humanities research teams need to look even further than to academics beyond their subject areas, ensuring that information technologists, archivists and librarians are included on an equal footing in their teams in order to achieve their aims. Making sure that this does happen is a concern for all involved professionals.

Usability has been found to be a vital consideration, as is accessibility. Digital resources need to be simple for all to use. Helping people to use digital resources well is key to getting them interested, although not the only barrier to overcome. Digital humanists need to be careful not to get carried away with their enthusiasm for new tools and ways found of taking account the many years of experience already gained by experts in usability and accessibility.

There is a need to foster digital literacy amongst students and academics: the question needs to be asked about who has the skills to teach them, as well as how to convince people to give them a try. Partnerships with librarians should also feature in this agenda item.

Sustainability of digital resources is a key issue, as was identified in the critical evaluation project. It costs money to put something on the web and to keep it alive technologically and intellectually as well as usable and accessible. Models of sustainability are needed to inspire others: these are few and far between at present and should be a key item on the agenda for digital humanities discussions.

### **The future development of digital humanities at the OU**

The development of digital humanities at the OU has been challenging but stimulating. The issues listed above are being actively considered within the faculty through partnerships and collaborations beyond the faculty and the university.

In the OU, academics have been encouraged, particularly since the establishment of

the digital humanities research theme, to take notice of colleagues' groundbreaking activities, as well as to ask and try to answer challenging questions about the future landscape of research. Empirical research conducted as part of the programme has shown that humanities scholars are still at an early stage in their adoption of digital research technologies, both in terms of skill development and scholarly understanding of the new opportunities these technologies offer to research as well as to the research-teaching interface. What has also been clearly shown by the development of digital humanities at the OU, however, is that it has been and will continue to be important for humanities scholars to engage with this new paradigm, although with a critical outlook, rather than an unquestioning welcome.

Work is continuing at the OU in exploring, questioning and developing digital humanities activities and cross-faculty activity will intensify with its support as a thematic research network. As well as the issues mentioned above, other areas which are likely to be pursued are investigations around constructions of knowledge; comparisons of the fluidity of analytic models that can be brought to bear on the same data; as well as the vulnerabilities of digital approaches to research, including issues of power and control. The study of how digital resources are being used is another planned focus, with the aim that the knowledge gained will help to feed back into the development of the resource.

An understanding of the opportunities, as well as the difficulties, of engaging with digital humanities will be important for knowledge transfer, collaboration and research development in the years to come. The Open University has been actively involved in this area for many years and will continue to develop activities and thinking in the field of digital humanities with a critical eye.

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