Collaborations in the Global Midwest: The Diffusion of DH Values in Research Collaborations in the Humanities Without Walls Consortium

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Introduction

The advent of new funding streams and initiatives within broader humanities scholarship indicate that the collaborative research approaches have diffused beyond digital humanities. This paper presents the findings of the "Humanities Collaboration and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest" project (HCRP), which examines the Humanities Without Walls initiative as a case study for how innovative, interdisciplinary humanities research draws upon models from digital humanities.

Background

The [Humanities Without Walls](#) (HWW) Global Midwest initiative supports collaborative research projects led by faculty from fifteen U.S. research universities in the Midwest. With its emphasis on multi-institutional, interdisciplinary collaboration and applied research, HWW Global Midwest presents rich research cases on the evolving nature of humanities research.

Literature

Studies of collaboration among digital humanities researchers and its impact on humanities scholarship have proliferated over the past decade (Siemens, 2009; Siemens, 2011; Deegan & McCarty, 2012; Given & Wilson, 2015). Focused studies of DH research practices also examine credit and authorship (Nowviskie, 2011; Nowviskie, 2012), infrastructure needs (ACLS, 2006, Edmond, 2015), and project management (Leon, 2011). Building upon this research, our study examines how the collaborative experimentations undertaken by HWW Global Midwest researchers influenced their research practices, data sharing, and final outputs.

Method

The project team conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 researchers funded by the first round of HWW Global Midwest awards. Participants were asked about project goals, collaboration development, tools used for project management, challenges, and research approaches.

The project team recorded and transcribed the interviews, and coded them in ATLAS.ti 7. Each transcription was coded multiple times for inter-coder reliability. This study applies a qualitative content analysis method that expands upon prior studies by Brockman et al. (2001), Palmer & Neumann (2002), and Palmer (2005), as well as a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings

Interviews with Global Midwest project awardees revealed a number of emerging practices and challenges common to the DH community and collaborative DH projects.

Project Workflows and Infrastructure

The interviewed participants identified many project challenges within the HWW program model. These included finding personnel and eligible collaborators, aligning IRB approvals, and funding coordination.

One participant summed up the sentiments of many on project management, saying "that was definitely a learning curve for all of us." But most deemed this learning curve worth undertaking.

Another key aspect of project workflows was the range of tools used by the HWW Global Midwest research groups (See Table 1). Tool selections ranged from cloud storage to unique platforms, including the software built for NINES and 18th Connect. But whether they used popular or specialized tools, one

respondent's declaration captures their prevailing ethos: "We're using an existing infrastructure and we're applying it in a quite different way."

This process of translating tools to different uses is similar to the software adaptations seen in digital humanities research, and as scholars explore new ways to translate their research, they turn to multiple sources of expertise.

File Sharing and Communication	Software
Box	Final Cut 10
Dropbox	YouTube
Google Drive	Omeka
Zotero	Project Websites
Email	Garage Band
Video and cameras	NINES Platform
Telephone/Skype	GIS and mapping software

Table 1: Tools for Research

Methods of Collaborative Analysis

Many research groups carefully developed methods of analysis in ways that resonate with cross-disciplinary approaches in digital humanities research. One respondent characterized a group's work as having "a lot of cross-fertilization of methodologies ... not so much about content." Another project planned to employ several methods of analysis, including a short film, a series of interviews, and a performance of dancers and scholars rolling around on the floor "because to resist was not going to happen." This type of collaborative process was described by one group as one that "unfolds in an uncertain and, in that sense, an egalitarian manner because no one knows yet what the thing will be…. You go on a hunch and you see where it takes you. That is typical of ethnography, but also, I think, of collaboration, as well." These dynamic and educational elements of collaboration proved to be key to partnerships.

Student Engagement

Several interviews related a need for research assistance and dedicated project management, and respondents repeatedly attested to the value of graduate assistants who shouldered the management burden of the projects, or the (unfulfilled) need for such students. Projects navigated the tension between relying on student labor and acknowledging the intellectual contributions of the students with varying degrees of success, with the most positive assessment citing student participation as the true catalyst for collaborative practice: "They're not just graduate students. They're fellow collaborators in the project at this point and they have tremendous resources of knowledge, you know. The multiplication is enormous. It's here that you really have the collaborating humanities."

Digital Dissemination and Curation

Respondents cited different formats for sharing their work, including performances, films, and websites as well as texts and presentations. Several respondents envisioned creating hybrid outputs, such as one respondent's plan "to create some kind of interactive map [and] ideally a repository of sounds." Another discussed the possibility of sharing interview data as a form of dissemination, noting that "we're still processing the data [and] deciding how to feature it… we're not tweeting the results or something like that." This response also highlights the complex characteristics of humanities data, and the multiplicity of factors that must be considered for data sharing and archiving.

Respondents also saw avenues for making broader impacts via use of different platforms. As one respondent explained, "I think we've contemplated scholarly output in the traditional platforms… whether they're online or in print, but we have contemplated getting research into the hands of stakeholders who are not scholars."

Collaboration and Credit

Many respondents were mindful of the importance of providing appropriate credit and recognition for project partners. One respondent noted that "for us, the notion of collaboration was built around the idea that both parties would be equally acknowledged." Negotiating appropriate credit, however, also can reveal moments of tension within projects. Another respondent observed that "there was a little bit of misunderstanding, and some disagreements […] had to do with who is being acknowledged for what."

Respondents differed on their views of co-authored publications. One respondent noted, "I didn't expect a lot of co-authoring, more of a co-design of the platform." Another viewed co-authorship as an important "end product collaboration." While discussion of evaluation for tenure and promotion were present within the interviews, they were not as prevalent as might be expected. Yet a key theme that

emerged in the responses was that culture shifts within humanities disciplines are essential to advancing the acceptance of research collaborations and co-authorship in peer evaluation criteria.

Discussion and Conclusion

To bring emergent humanities research collaborations into dialogue with the digital humanities, we propose a set of recommendations as a foundation for fostering rigorous interdisciplinary collaboration:

Build stronger connections between teaching and research through engaging students in research collaborations: Student participation in digital humanities projects has been essential to the growth of DH research, and humanities scholars can similarly bring collaborative research practice into the classroom in ways that acknowledge and recognize the students' labor.

Experiment with new forms of dissemination that more accurately convey the full breadth of collaborative work: HWW Global Midwest researchers frequently sought new ways for disseminating interdisciplinary research findings: In the same way that digital humanities researchers employ new formats for publishing research data and findings, humanities scholars can experiment with new forms that reflect interdisciplinary approaches. Scholars should also consider protocols for establishing credit and co-authorship, such as a negotiated project charter that establishes workflows for the collaboration, standards for co-authorship and a grievance process.

Encourage a culture of sharing data and interim findings: Administrators are in a key position to encourage shifts in humanities research practices by encouraging and explicitly ascribing value to related intellectual activities. Both leaders as well as researchers can encourage a culture of sharing data and interim phase research outputs that recognize the complexities of the communities and types of data in humanities research.

Strategically expand institutional investments in humanities research collaborations in order to ensure research sustainability: To ensure sustainable collaborations, administrators may need to make financial and structural investments, and key to these decisions is understanding the motivations and requirements of multiple stakeholder groups represented within a project. For example, some team members may require explicit funding to dedicate allocations of their time, while other team members may need support staff assistance to manage budgets and project documentation. Another avenue is to leverage the embedded collaborative power of regional, national, and international consortia in order to ensure research sustainability.

These recommendations drawn from our findings suggest that the expansion and sustainability of innovative research collaborations in the humanities has critical intersections with the evolving research practices of digital humanities research.

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