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# The Master Builders: LAIRAH Research on Good Practice in the Construction of Digital Humanities Projects

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## Abstract:

This paper describes the results of research carried out during the LAIRAH (Log analysis of Internet Resources in the Arts and Humanities) project (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/circah/lairah/>) which is based at UCL's School of Library Archive and Information Studies. It was a fifteen month study (reporting in October 2006) to discover what influences the long-term sustainability and use of digital resources in the humanities through the analysis and evaluation of real-time use.

At Digital Humanities 2006 we reported on the early stages of the project, in which we carried out deep log analysis of the AHDS and Humbul portals to determine the level of use of digital resources. (Warwick et al. 2006) This proposal will discuss the results of the final phase of the research in which we examined digital resources from the point of view of those who designed and built them. We aimed to discover whether

there were common characteristics and elements of good practice linking resources that are well-used.

Numerous studies have been carried out into the information needs and information seeking practices of humanities scholars (Barrett, (2005) Talja and Maula (2003), Herman (2001) and British Academy, (2005)). However, our research is original because it surveys the practices of those who produce digital humanities resources. We also based the selection of our projects on deep log analysis: a quantitative technique which has not previously been applied to digital humanities resources to ascertain real usage levels of online digital resources.

## Method:

We selected a sample of twenty one publicly funded projects with varying levels of use, covering different subject disciplines, to be studied in greater depth. We classified projects as well-used if the server log data from the Arts and Humanities Data Service (AHDS) and Humbul portals showed that they had been repeatedly and frequently accessed by a variety of users. We also mounted a questionnaire on these sites and asked which digital resources respondents found most useful. Although most nominated information resources, such as libraries, archives and reference collections for example the eDNB, three UK publicly funded research resources were mentioned, and thus we added them to the study. We also asked representatives of each AHDS centre to specify which resources in their collections they believed were most used. In the case of Sheffield University the logs showed that a large number of digital projects accessed were based at the Humanities Research Institute. We therefore conducted interviews about the HRI and its role in fostering the creation of digital humanities resources.

The selected projects were studied in detail, including any documentation and reports that could be found on the project's website. We also interviewed a representative of the project, either the principal investigator or a research assistant.

## Results:

### Institutional context:

The majority of projects that we interviewed had been well supported in technical terms, and this had undoubtedly aided the success of the project, especially where it was associated with a centre of digital humanities excellence such as the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at Kings College London or the HRI at Sheffield. Critical mass aided the spread of good practice in the construction and use of digital resources in the humanities. Where a university valued such activities highly

they tended to proliferate. More junior members of staff were inspired to undertake digital humanities research by the success of senior colleagues and early adopters respected for their traditional and digital research. Unfortunately such critical mass is relatively rare in UK universities and some PIs reported that their digital resource was not understood or valued by their departments, and thus their success had not lead to further digital research.

### **Staffing:**

PIs also stressed how vital it had been to recruit the ideal RAs. These were however relatively difficult to find, as they had to have both disciplinary research expertise and good knowledge of digital techniques. Most RAs therefore required training, which many PIs often found lacking or of poor quality. A further frustration was the difficulty of finding funding to continue research, this meant that an expert RA might leave, necessitating further training of a new employee if the project was granted future funding.

### **Dissemination:**

The strongest correlation between well-used projects and a specific activity was in the area of dissemination. In all the projects studied, staff had made determined efforts to disseminate information as widely as possible. This was a new challenge for many humanities academics, who were more used to writing books, marketed by their publishers. This might include giving papers at seminars and conferences both within the subject community and the digital humanities domain; sending out printed material; running workshops, and in the most unusual instance, the production of a tea-towel!

### **User contact:**

Very few projects maintained contact with their users or undertook any organised user testing, and many did not have a clear idea how popular the resource was or what users were doing with it. However, one of the few projects that had been obliged to undertake user surveys by its funders was very well-used, and its PI had been delighted at the unexpected amount and range of its use. Another project came to the belated realisation that if it had consulted users the process of designing the resource would have been simpler and less demanding.

### **Documentation:**

Few of the projects kept organised documentation, with the exception of those in archaeology, linguistics and archival studies, where such a practice is the norm in all research. Most projects had kept only fragmentary, internal documents, many of which would not be comprehensible to someone from outside.

Documentation could also be difficult to access, with only a small minority of projects making this information available from its website. This is an important omission since documentation aids reuse of resources, and also provides vital contextual information about its contents and the rationale for its construction that users need to reassure them about the quality of the resource for academic research.

### **Sustainability:**

Another area of concern was the issue of sustainability. Although the resources were offered for deposit with the AHDS, few PIs were aware that to remain usable, both the web interface and the contents of the resource would require regular updating and maintenance, since users tend to distrust a web page that looks outdated. Yet in most cases no resources were available to perform such maintenance, and we learnt of one ten year old resource whose functionality had already been significantly degraded as a result.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

**W**ell-used projects do therefore share common features that predispose them to success. The effect of institutional and disciplinary culture in the construction of digital humanities projects was significant. We found that critical mass was vital, as was prestige within a university or the acceptance of digital methods in a subject. The importance of good project staff and the availability of technical support also proved vital. If a project as to be well-used it was also essential that information about it should be disseminated as widely as possible.

Even amongst well-used projects, however we found areas that might be improved, these included organised user testing, the provision of and easy access to documentation and the lack of updating and maintenance of many resources.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **Documentation:**

- Projects should keep documentation and make it available from the project web site, making clear the extent, provenance and selection methods of materials for the resource.
- Funding bodies might consider making documentation a compulsory deliverable of a funded project.
- Discussions could be held between relevant stakeholders and the funding bodies, with the aim of producing an agreed

documentation template. This should specify what should be documented and to what level of detail.

### **Users:**

- Projects should have a clear idea of whom the expected users might be; consult them as soon as possible and maintain contact through the project via a dedicated email list, website feedback or other appropriate method
- They should carry out formal user surveys, software and interface tests and integrate the results into project design.
- Applicants for funding should show that they have consulted documentation of other relevant projects and discuss what they have learnt from it in their case for support. The results of such contact could then be included in the final report as a condition of satisfactory progress.

### **Management:**

- Projects should have access to good technical support, ideally from a centre of excellence in digital humanities.
- Projects should recruit staff who have both subject expertise and knowledge of digital humanities techniques, then train them in other specialist techniques as necessary.
- Funding bodies might consider requiring universities to offer more training for graduate students and RAs in digital humanities techniques.

### **Sustainability:**

- Ideally projects should maintain and actively update the interface, content and functionality of the resource, and not simply archive it with a data archive such as the AHDS. However this is dependent on a funding model which makes this possible.

### **Dissemination:**

- Disseminate information about itself widely, both within its own subject domain and in digital humanities.
- Information should be disseminated widely about the reasons for user testing and its benefits, for example via AHRC/AHDS workshops. Projects should be encouraged to collaborate with experts on user behaviour.

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