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Digital Practice and Pedagogy at UCLDH: Reflections on Collaboration across Boundaries

This talk critically explores the digitisation practices and pedagogy of the UCL Digitisation Suite, and reflects on its role in bridging academic research and the operational demands of the cultural heritage sector. While the Suite exemplifies how interdisciplinary spaces can integrate hands-on training with research and foster collaboration across the boundaries of academia and industry, it also reveals challenges that question the sustainability and inclusivity of such models (Terras, 2012; Gibson *et al.*, 2022).

Drawing on case studies, including our collaborations with the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Natural History Museum, we investigate the tensions between the operational realities of maintaining a digitisation lab and the pedagogical goal of preparing students for careers in cultural heritage (Gao *et al.*, 2023, 2024). Issues such as the financial precarity of digitisation projects, staffing workloads and insecurity, ethical dilemmas of collection prioritisation (Prescott and Hughes, 2018), and limitations of current approaches to integrating sustainability into digitisation workflows are critically assessed (Pendergrass *et al.*, 2019). These challenges, alongside the socio-technical hurdles of embedding digital methods into humanities curricula (Coddington and Kanza, 2022), highlight the complexities of balancing academic and professional needs in collaborative and interdisciplinary settings.

This talk situates UCL's practices within a broader context to examine how digitisation efforts intersect with global discourses, including those in Chinese Digital Humanities (Mahony and Gao, 2018; Han *et al.*, 2024). By interrogating the assumptions behind digitisation as a solution for accessibility and preservation, we challenge the audience to consider how collaborative projects across disciplinary and institutional boundaries might reconfigure power dynamics, the privilege of certain collections over others, and reduce inequalities in access and representation (Correa, 2017). Rather than presenting a perfected model, this talk engages with the contradictions and limitations inherent in digitisation labs. It aims to provoke critical discussion on how the digital humanities can adopt more reflective and equitable approaches to collaboration that account for financial, ethical, and environmental constraints, and we aim to offer suggestions and start discussions for institutions navigating similar issues.

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