

# the next generation

STUDENTS LOOK AT THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION COMMUNITY

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## Defining Digital Humanities

by **Marian** Davies  
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Defining digital humanities is not a simple task. Aristotle, in his work to formalize the process by which definitions are formed, posited the use of example and induction to illustrate how we can extract meaning through context.<sup>1</sup> Those working in the field know what constitutes the digital humanities. Humanities, as referred in this essay, are defined in the New Oxford American Dictionary as the arts: liberal arts, literature, history, philosophy, classical studies, and classical literature. Alan Galey, a professor who specializes in digital humanities and book history at the University of Toronto, claims a central tenet in approaching digital humanities is the importance of “thinking through making.”<sup>2</sup> Galey asserts the notion of learning through the creation of tools or devices, not only in order to facilitate the transfer from one format to another, but also to reflect on the implications and consequences of how these changes shape knowledge.

However, even within digital humanities circles there is a wide range of opinion as to what digital humanities mean.<sup>3</sup> Humanism is already a multidisciplinary field, and so it is throughout the various approaches, the degrees of detail, the itemizing of what’s important and what’s not, that there remains an undeniable consistency, a basic and common objective: these projects revitalize the essence of text. The recasting of text through digitization serves to increase access. All of these projects, regardless of size or scope, require a rigorous review and assessment of text. It is more than an application of computer code to correctly convert a resource within the constraints of technology. The aim, in effect, is to reestablish relevancy, not so much with the intent to reinterpret, but rather in order to create new structures or models that facilitate learning and understanding.

One essential characteristic of projects in the digital humanities is collaboration. As an already multi-disciplinary field, it is inevitable that humanists from a variety of disciplines would work in partnership on projects employing digital tools and emerging technologies. The creation

and implementation of applications can't and shouldn't be done alone. Humanists can collaborate with programming-savvy colleagues, IT departments, and computer scientists to create new and exciting textual representations and information resources. The collaborative relationship between humanities scholars and programmers is imperative too because, without the other, there is something lost in the end result. Each party learns from the other in the process of creating.

An example of creating and collaborating was demonstrated in the poster session of this year's 5th annual TRY (Toronto, Ryerson, York) Library Staff Conference in May 2009.<sup>4</sup> Of the handful of fantastic posters presented, ours was entitled "Re:evolution\_of\_the\_text,"<sup>5</sup> and promoted the digital humanities in library contexts. The poster outlined how librarians can take leadership of digital humanities projects, enhancing library collections and services. Collaboratively, librarians, archivists, IT personnel, students, and faculty can create useful tools and applications that allow for greater analysis, usability, and visibility of digital textual sources and library resources.

The main goal is to complete a project and make it a success, but one of the problems in digital humanities projects is the sense of never ending, a sense that something can always be improved or added. These temptations often torment and thwart the completion of a project. This is where the importance of planning becomes evident. Each summer the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI), held at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, provides several advanced courses. A course on Project Management taught by Lynne Siemens, a UVic faculty member, provides an excellent starting point in this area. Siemens summarizes the importance of planning: "4/5ths of the time is spent on planning the project, and 1/5th on actually doing the work."<sup>6</sup>

The growing attention to digital humanities projects promises rich and exciting future prospects. Works in progress can be found at INKE: Implementing New Knowledge Environments<sup>7</sup> and the UW-Stratford Initiative,<sup>8</sup> where digital tools and research are evolving the way we use digital texts. Through collaboration and "thinking through making" practices, the revolution of text is changing how we

access, interpret, and use literary and research materials. Defining digital humanities may always be elusive, contradictory, and fraught with difficulty, but digital humanities increase the potential of possibilities for our lives and our relationships with ideas, language, and each other.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Charles, "Aristotelianism," in *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Galey, lecture for the course, Introduction to Digital Humanities, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, January 6, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, "The Digital Humanities and Humanities Computing: An Introduction," in *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), xxiii-xxvii.

<sup>4</sup> TRY Library Staff Conference, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, May 5, 2009, [library.utoronto.ca/event/staffconference](http://library.utoronto.ca/event/staffconference).

<sup>5</sup> Allison Callahan, Marian Davies, and Zachary Osborne, "Re:evolution\_of\_the\_text: How Libraries Can Support the Digital Humanities," poster presentation at the TRY Library Staff Conference, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, May 5, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Lynne Siemens, lecture for the course Issues in Large Project Planning and Management, Digital Humanities Summer Institute, University of Victoria, British Columbia, June 9, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> INKE: Implementing New Knowledge Environments, [inke.ca](http://inke.ca).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Shypula, "Stratford Declaration: A Digital Nation," *Stratford Beacon Herald*, June 10, 2009; "Digital 'Declaration' on Its Way to Ottawa," *Daily Bulletin*, University of Waterloo, June 12, 2009, [bulletin.uwaterloo.ca/2009/jun/12fr.html](http://bulletin.uwaterloo.ca/2009/jun/12fr.html).

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