

Digital Humanities

Scenario

Scholarship and pedagogy in the digital humanities are thriving in the Jocelyn B. Springer Center for Digital Scholarship at Melton University. The Springer Center anchors a wide range of activities across many schools, departments, and programs. The center is a community of researchers dedicated to collaboration and experimentation in the digital humanities and to improving methodologies and tools for digital research. Its activities include major research projects, fellowships, seminars and workshops, and course-based modeling, mapping, or data analysis explorations by students.

Located in the library and run by librarians and technologists, Springer provides considerable technological, logistical, and project management support. Financial support comes from the library, several departments, and private donations. Springer specializes in text and image analytics, data curation, digital preservation, linked data applications, and publishing. The library provides access to robust computational tools and related training in digital methodology and design thinking. The center also advocates for the digital humanities through lectures, symposia, websites, and blogs.

Research in the Springer Center is designed to advance knowledge in the digital humanities while also providing learning opportunities for students. Working with the university's Africana Studies department, for example, students use GIS to map the evolution of colonialism in Africa. Linguistics scholars and students are seeking to preserve several nearly extinct Native American dialects. English majors use GIS to spatially interpret the history, culture, and geography of New York City in the fiction of Henry James. 3D models of Mayan relief statues provide insights about world views in pre-Columbian society. Another project documents historical and cultural buildings worldwide that have been destroyed during war.

At its heart, Springer is about collaboration and creativity. On any given day, scholars and students from multiple disciplines can be found collaborating in the center. Springer's staff nurture and support work that is both academically rigorous and richly interdisciplinary. In these ways, Springer provides a framework for innovative scholarship at the intersection of technology and humanistic inquiry and extends the edges of digital knowledge, while also affording students the opportunity to create and critique new visualizations of cultural and historical evidence.

1 What is it?

The term “digital humanities” can refer to research and instruction that is *about* information technology or that *uses* IT. Although digital humanities often involves practitioners and data from the humanities, it also extends to fields such as social and information studies, media studies, communications, arts/architecture, and computer science. As defined by [Johanna Drucker and colleagues at UCLA](#), the digital humanities is “work at the intersection of digital technology and humanities disciplines.” An [EDUCAUSE/CNI working group](#) framed the digital humanities as “the application and/or development of digital tools and resources to enable researchers to address questions and perform new types of analyses in the humanities disciplines,” and the [NEH Office of Digital Humanities](#) says digital humanities “explore how to harness new technology for humanities research as well as those that study digital culture from a humanistic perspective.” Beyond blending the digital with the humanities, there is an intentionality about combining the two that defines it.

2 How does it work?

By applying technologies in new ways, **the tools and methodologies of digital humanities open new avenues of inquiry and scholarly production.** For example, digital humanities can include creating digital texts or data sets; cleaning, organizing, and tagging those data sets; applying computer-based methodologies to analyze them; and making claims and creating visualizations that explain new findings from those analyses. Scholars might reflect on how the digital form of the data is organized, how analysis is conducted/reproduced, and how claims visualized in digital form may embody assumptions or biases. Digital humanities can enrich pedagogy as well, such as when a student uses visualized data to study voter patterns or conducts data-driven analyses of works of literature. Digital humanities usually involves work by teams in collaborative spaces or centers. Team members might include researchers and faculty from multiple disciplines, graduate students, librarians, instructional technologists, data scientists and preservation experts, technologists with expertise in critical computing and computing methods, and undergraduates.

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3 Who's doing it?

Individuals from all parts of the higher education community are involved digital humanities. The work can also take place in museums and other community and cultural institutions. Digital humanities work often starts as a faculty or student project and expands to involve technical and data experts. Digital humanities can remain within specific departments or grow into a community of practice with a shared or sponsored lab, bringing participants together to pool resources and expertise. Student learning is enhanced through projects in the digital humanities like [Literary Text Mining](#) at Stanford University; [Twitter and Society](#) at St. Lawrence University; and [Hidden Patterns of the Civil War](#) from the University of Richmond. Scholarship in the digital humanities has given us rich investigations like [Histories of the National Mall](#), developed at George Mason University; the [Viral Texts Project](#); the [American Prison Writing Archive](#) at Hamilton College; and [Paris Past and Present](#) at UCLA. Courses like [Topics in Quantitative Literary Studies](#) at the University of Notre Dame show students how to conduct quantitative and computational literary analysis. Institutions that offer majors, minors, or certificates in the digital humanities include [Michigan State University](#), [UCLA](#), and [University College London](#).

4 Why is it significant?

Digital humanities applies computational capabilities to humanistic questions, offering new pathways for scholars to conduct research and to create and publish scholarship. **It enables scholars to examine new questions about the human experience at an unprecedented scale and scope.** Further, digital humanities brings humanistic attention and critique to digital data sets. Digital humanities foments richly interdisciplinary investigation, engaging teams from disciplines that traditionally have not interacted with humanities scholars, bringing visibility to the ways humanists think and work. Through visualization and online publication of scholarship, and by applying humanistic thinking to “real world” data sets, digital humanities increasingly connects scholarship with the public.

5 What are the downsides?

Even as digital humanities evolves, recognition for the value of the work lags. While some disciplinary associations, including the [Modern Language Association](#) and the [American Historical Association](#), have developed guidelines for evaluating digital projects, many institutions have yet to define how work in digital humanities fits into considerations for tenure and promotion. **Because large projects are often developed with external funding that is not readily replaced by institutional funds when the grant ends,**

sustainability is a concern. Doing digital humanities well requires access to expertise in methodologies and tools such as GIS, modeling, programming, and data visualization that can be expensive for a single institution to obtain. Resistance to learning new technologies can be another roadblock, as can the propensity of many humanists to resist working in teams. While some institutions have recognized the need for institutional infrastructure (computation and storage, equipment, software, and expertise), many have not yet incorporated such support into ongoing budgets.

6 Where is it going?

The application of computer-based methodologies to the humanities is expanding the platforms and possibilities for humanities scholarship and teaching, introducing new questions and new methodologies. This evolution will continue to expand opportunities for undergraduate involvement in research, providing students with workplace skills such as data management, visualization, coding, and modeling. Digital humanities provides new insights into policy-making in areas such as social media, demographics, and new means of engaging with popular culture and understanding past cultures. Evolution in this area will continue to build connections between the humanities and other disciplines, cross-pollinating research and education in areas like medicine and environmental studies. **Insights about digital humanities itself will drive innovation in pedagogy and expand our conceptualization of classrooms and labs.** As new technologies arise or existing ones evolve and become more accessible, new approaches to digital humanities projects will emerge, such as the incorporation of virtual or augmented reality, the use of embedded sensors, or the application of machine learning.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The use of digital resources can greatly enrich pedagogy in the humanities and humanities-related courses and can spark innovation in curriculum development. Further, **opportunities to create and curate digital humanities projects constitute rich learning experiences** in which students benefit not just from consuming knowledge but also from conducting scholarship in collaboration with peers and faculty. Such work often enables institutions to draw collaboratively on resources that are often siloed or overlooked, such as IT expertise and that of library professionals. Demonstrably expanding the scope of scholarship, digital humanities provides promising new channels for learners and will continue to influence the ways in which we think about and evolve technology toward better and more humanistic ends.