Why we need to find time for digital humanities: presenting a new partnership model at the University of Sussex

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Recognizing that academic libraries should develop and nurture strong, mutually beneficial relationships with researchers in digital humanities, the authors believe it is strategically important to invest time and resources exploring ideas and partnering with academic colleagues on projects. This approach can provide many unforeseen benefits to both the Library service and to the workforce. The article is based on our experience as Core Associates of the Sussex Humanities Lab at the University of Sussex. It outlines the impact this collaboration has had, including influencing working practices and culture within the Library, involvement in research bids, informing the development of new services, and addressing library questions using digital humanities methods. Most importantly, it exemplifies a new model of the librarian as equal partner in the research process.

Introduction

This study shows how we responded to Professor Hitchcock's impassioned plea to have us at the heart of the Sussex Humanities Lab (SHL), our digital humanities centre here at the University of Sussex.

Video clip: Tim Hitchcock, Professor Digital History (Co-Director of the Sussex Humanities Lab). Interview by Jane Harvell, January 2017. Available for download here: https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.377.s1

We propose that there are significant and tangible benefits for libraries in carving out strong relationships with digital humanities (and other departments involved in digital scholarship), and that these develop from our potential to collaborate and contribute to research, rather than purely to support it. At the University of Sussex, we have set as a strategic priority the engagement of Library staff with the work and research of digital humanities, and would fully endorse the finding of the recent RLUK report[1] that 'participating in such a programme opens up opportunities for academic libraries and their staff and increases the visibility of their work and collections'. We also argue that there are noticeable benefits for staff skills

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and expertise. This article presents the model of engagement that we have fostered at Sussex, and the impact on the Library and its staff.

The Sussex Humanities Lab and the Lab model

The RLUK report suggests that there is no single model for digital humanities within institutions. The SHL has been established as a Lab model described by Varner and Hsew[2] as having 'a specific focus, tied either to the mission of the campus or to the aims of their founders, which necessarily means that many do not take on responsibility for digital projects that fall outside of the scope'. The Lab is dedicated to developing and expanding research into how digital technologies are shaping our culture and society, and draws on expertise from a number of different disciplines to answer questions within arts and humanities.

> 'there is no single model for digital humanities within institutions'

Library staff as Core Associates

The Directors of the SHL have a long-standing relationship with a number of Library colleagues, and it felt very natural for us to be included within the funding bid to the University to establish the Sussex Humanities Lab in 2015. Several Library staff are named as Core Associates and the Lab finances a research fellow based in the Library who reports to our Head of Special Collections. Additionally, the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive (MOA)[3], one of our major Special Collections, support a research fellow based in the Lab who uses digital humanities techniques to work on the MOA. Embedding research activity within Special Collections is very different from the Library's more traditional support for research activity. As Core Associates we are equal partners in the development of the Lab, participating in awaydays and regular Lab meetings, and encouraged to attend and organize seminars. Involvement at this level brings us closer to our academic colleagues and so increases our confidence to input to research where we feel we can contribute. An example is the Digital Preservation for Social Sciences and Humanities Conference,[4] a joint SHL/Digital Repository of Ireland event, where the organizing committee included a member of Library staff. This brought the conference to the attention of a new audience, academic librarians, a number of whom attended an academic conference for the first time.

> 'we are equal partners in the development of the Lab'

Securing firm and enthusiastic support from senior Library management has been crucial to success, as it is vital to identify and advocate for the benefits of such a relationship across the University – this is key to the work and aims of the Lab. In addition to traditional areas of engagement (for example, metadata creation), our association with digital humanities here at Sussex has resulted in creative collaborations that require new ways of working (and thinking) not normally associated with libraries and their staff and more akin to the habits and behaviours of researchers. In libraries we design and deliver tightly managed projects and are accountable for their success. In contrast, within academia experimentation and failure are integral to the research process, and offer constructive ways of formulating questions and problem solving. Our involvement with this different approach brings us closer to researchers' working methods and provides the opportunity to transfer some of these practices into our Library work.

> 'firm and enthusiastic support from senior Library management has been crucial to success'

Library staff as collaborators

Library staff are also collaborators in research. Their skills and expertise are revealed and recognized through the close relationship with the SHL and they are now being named on research bids. Our Head of Special Collections, Fiona Courage (interviewed), has been included in a number of successful large bids to offer advice on appropriate archiving policy and practice and also in her capacity as curator of the MOA. We anticipate future opportunities for the Library to be included in research bids around digital preservation, research data management (RDM), metadata, data ethics and other areas where we have expertise and experience.

> 'Library staff are also collaborators in research'

Video clip: Fiona Courage, Head of Special Collections (Core Associate of the Sussex Humanities Lab). Interview by Jane Harvell, January 2017. Available for download here: https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.377.s2

Working on solutions to institutional problems

Working with digital humanities presents opportunities for new perspectives on long-standing Library problems. The University of Sussex, along with many other similar higher education institutions, is going through a period of intense growth, and this has put pressure on services and spaces across the campus, in particular the Library building. The information we have traditionally gathered on building usage has been based on a demographic breakdown in gate entries or rough headcounts. Recently, user experience (UX) approaches have begun to bring us better insights into how the building is being used. Working with the Lab we have piloted a project to use a digital humanities technique of big data analysis to our WiFi access points to track the devices of our users as they move around the building. This provides management information that can be used for the development of new services as well as to aid decision-making about building design.

> 'input from the SHL has enabled us to design a service that addresses the needs of humanities as well as sciences'

We have also benefited from SHL collaboration and expertise in the development of other services, such as RDM and digital preservation. The Library had previously struggled to engage humanities researchers with discussions on RDM, but input from the SHL has enabled us to design a service that addresses the needs of humanities as well as sciences. Research data and digital preservation are issues which are shared but where the Lab and the Library each lack some elements of understanding, expertise or practical application, and so there is potential in combining efforts.

The Library as a research subject

Libraries have traditionally focused on opening up digital collections to their researchers, and more recently have been exploring how they can support researchers in applying text and data mining techniques to these collections. But libraries, and not just their collections, have the opportunity to be research subjects. There is potential to open up the mass of

data that libraries capture and create as management information to make it available for use by the research community for student projects and in hackathons. At Sussex we are exploring how we can provide data sets with open licences through our web pages. These types of service have the potential to be extended to other disciplines, and we are now being approached by colleagues within anthropology about a research project to use UX methodologies to understand the use of our spaces.

Changing culture

Our collaboration has had an impact on the wider Library culture, as more of our staff participate in the research life of the Lab, for example, by attending and contributing to the SHL's This and THATCamp.[5] This is an opportunity not only for senior managers or subject librarians but for all Library colleagues to get involved. In addition, we have recently established a Library innovation group, comprised of staff at all levels and from all sections of the Library and including representation from the SHL. This is an example of our relationship with the Lab increasing our confidence in the entire research life cycle: supporting research is no longer limited to our Research Support team and we have an opportunity to expose more of our staff to the academic research life cycle. We have always provided training and advice to researchers, both as consumers of information, and, increasingly, as generators of information. However, our relationship with SHL has enabled us to make this a two-way process, giving us an opportunity to enhance the digital skills of our Library staff. We recently collaborated on a Library Carpentry[6] programme for our own staff and the wider community, giving attendees the skills to clean and manipulate their own data.

Open scholarship

As librarians, we are advocates of open access (OA) and have taken on responsibility for managing the University's OA funds and monitoring compliance with funder policies. However, our engagement with the Lab has enabled us to develop a broader understanding of the requirements for open scholarship. We are currently working with one of the Lab co-directors to develop a business case for a university press initiative for the creation of new types of open research outputs. This press would create capacity within the Library to collaborate on innovative digital projects across campus. Through our partnership with the SHL we are able to support the University's strategic ambitions to be an exemplar for open research.

'we are able to support the University's strategic ambitions to be an exemplar for open research'

Conclusion and new ways of working

Literature on libraries and the digital humanities has tended to focus on how libraries can support the digital humanities – an extended form of research support. We think that this is missing the point. Professor Caroline Bassett, Co-Director of the Sussex Humanities Lab (interviewed), proposes that what is exciting about our collaboration with the SHL is that it is a new model of partnership, embedding the work of the Lab within the Library and vice versa.

Video clip: Caroline Bassett, Professor of Media and Communications (Co-Director of the Sussex Humanities Lab). Interview by Jane Harvell, January 2017. Available for download here: https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.377.s3

Just as librarians can partner with academics on their research outputs to support them as consumers and producers of information, so can digital humanities researchers partner with us to address Library problems from a different perspective.

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**

Competing interests
The authors have declared no competing interests.

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