

Digital scholarship and writing sprints: an academic author perspective

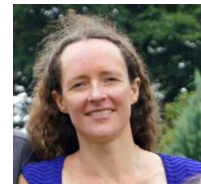
During Academic Book Week (9–13 November 2015) academics within the University of Liverpool, in conjunction with Liverpool University Press, held a writing sprint focused around modern languages (ML), one of the major research areas within the University and one of the key areas of publishing within the Press. The writing sprint brought together experts around some fundamental questions in ML research, and resulted in a collaborative-authored piece at the end of the week. This article explores the inspirations behind the sprint, describes the methodology and research questions, and finally discusses the advantages and challenges of undertaking such an activity.

Inspiration

Three inspirations were behind the writing sprint. The first was my own research area, as a researcher in Latin American culture specializing in digital culture. My background, and my original training as a doctoral student, was in the analysis of conventional print-based texts, but the direction in which my research has taken me means that I have been exploring what happens when the print medium meets digital technologies. If my research, and that of my colleagues, has led us to think about the changes in textual practice in the contemporary era, so, too, the writing sprint as a format invites us to rethink our textual practice as researchers.

The second inspiration was the realization that the authors and artists that we research publish in very much more varied and innovative forms than we ourselves do. For instance, in my research I have analysed Twitter poetry, hypertext novels, net art, blog short stories and quite a number of other varied genres. There are many examples that I could give here, such as *Radikal Karaoke*¹ by the Argentine author Belén Gache, which is classified by the author as a 'collection of poetry' but whose interface is that of a karaoke machine, and which includes sound, moving image and colour effects as much as text. This collection of poetry involves significant input from the reader, who actually becomes the co-author and the co-voicer of the work. Or, the hypertext novels by Colombian author Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez, such as *Gabriella infinita*² and *Golpe de gracia*,³ both of which subvert the conventions of the print text and include multiple pathways through the story, as well as including multimedia formats such as audio, still images and moving images, text and video game interaction. Or, yet another example could be Argentine author and artist Marina Zerbarini's *Eveline: fragmentos de una respuesta*,⁴ which is a hypertext short story with a deliberately complex interface that refuses to follow the linear format which would conventionally underpin the short story. In all of these cases, and many more, the objects of study that I have considered do not actually 'look like' a book; they are not bound into a volume, they do not appear on a printed page, they do not have a linear structure, they do not respect the conventional delineation between author and reader, and so forth. All of these objects of study raise fundamental questions about text, authorship, the role of the reader and related issues that have been analysed in depth by the likes of Janet H Murray,⁵ N Katherine Hayles⁶ and many others. Thus the question arises that, if these are the objects of study, why do we continue to use the static format of print books or journal articles when we analyse them?

Finally, the third inspiration behind the writing sprint was the recent venture by Liverpool University Press (LUP) into open access (OA) publishing with its Modern Languages Open (MLO) initiative, launched in 2014. MLO is a peer-reviewed online platform for the OA



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27 publication of research within modern languages (ML) to a global audience. Since MLO has the aim of facilitating interdisciplinarity, as well as promoting open access, I and other colleagues at the University of Liverpool were keen to explore how this platform might help enable a more collaborative, multi-authored piece of work.

Aims

In undertaking this writing sprint we had five main aims: facilitating collaboration; encouraging new ways of thinking about academic writing; engaging in reflective practice; rethinking peer review; and using our emerging digital scholarship to transform our writing practice.

Firstly, we were aiming to achieve collaboration in the writing process. We wanted to try to create an academic piece that would no longer be a single-authored piece, but instead we wanted to enable real collaboration throughout the entire writing process. Secondly, we wanted to encourage new ways of thinking about academic writing, in terms of its style and 'voice,' something which was enabled by the blog format (about which more below). The third aim was to be able to reflect on the practice as much as the content. With the traditional form of academic writing, the accepted process is for an author to submit his/her article or book when it is finished, and then it is subsequently published. What we wanted to do in the writing sprint was actually see the writing process itself as it happened, and make that writing process part of the research question, as much as the finished product. Fourthly, we also envisaged the writing sprint as an interesting way of rethinking the peer-review process, because contributors would be writing in a highly visible way (in real time, on a blog), with the various respondents who were nuancing and shaping the thoughts also doing so in a visible format that was open to public view. This entailed a rethinking of the conventional mode of peer review which is still, in the main, an anonymous process. Finally, we wanted to make use of digital transformations in our writing process, exploring how digital tools (such as the blog platform) can help us rethink our practice as we are in the actual process of writing.

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Developing a methodology

Thus inspired, I collaborated with a colleague in Liverpool, Niamh Thornton, who is Reader in Latin American Studies, to put together a writing sprint that would take place over the course of a week to coincide with Academic Book Week. We focused the sprint around ML as a discipline, and specifically on how it engages with the digital in multiple ways. We commissioned several pieces of 500 words each from experts in their field, and we appointed a broader group of respondents who were invited to dialogue with each piece, nuance it and shape the debate. All the participants then responded to the main question and, by the end of the week, a final piece would emerge for publication on LUP's MLO platform.

'We focused ... on how modern languages engages with the digital in multiple ways'

Digital as theme

The main theme for the writing sprint was 'Modern Languages and the Digital: the Shape of the Discipline'. Within this theme, we asked contributors to consider how digital technologies are changing the shape of ML research and publishing, and how the conceptual, methodological and practical bases of ML research are having to adapt to the challenges of the digital. We also asked how our encounter with the digital transforms our work as modern linguists, both in terms of our practice and in terms of our understanding of what ML is. Finally, we also asked contributors to think about how the digital might be central to the (re)conceptualization of ML as a trans-disciplinary enterprise, and how modern languages have a transformative effect at the cutting edge of digital humanities.

Exploring digital scholarship in modern languages

Six additional questions fed into the main theme over the course of the sprint. The first – '(Big?) Data and ML' – focused on how the ever-increasing volumes of data that are available to us as researchers are changing the way in which we engage in ML research. We asked contributors to explore which data tools and concepts are helpful to us, not just in an instrumental sense of how we undertake our research, but also in a more conceptual sense of how we understand what ML is. We also asked how tools such as crowdsourcing might help generate audience engagement in, and increase the public understanding of, ML.

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The second question – 'ML and Digital Archives' – started from the premise that technology has allowed us to gather material and share it with a wider community. We asked what technologies can be used to make archiving possible and lasting, and asked contributors to consider whether, if we work online and create spaces, we become archivists. If so, we asked what the ethical issues arising from this might be, and whether the digital archive is an act of recovery or curation.

The third question – 'ML: The Digital as Object of Study' – looked at how digital technologies have caused us to rethink existing literary and cultural formats, and how new platforms have transformed our understanding of what a 'text' is. We asked contributors to share their experiences of new cultural forms that are being developed at the interface between literary-cultural expression and new media technologies. We also asked contributors to explore what existing rich cultural, literary and artistic heritage (going well beyond the Anglophone) such works build on. And we invited them to think how these new forms might force us to rethink the (implicit) nation-state assumptions that conventionally underpin ML practice.

'the interface between literary-cultural expression and new media technologies'

Question four – 'ML and Digital Ethnography' – explored how ML has changed its methodological approach when analysing digital practices online. This question asked contributors to consider how ML research into the digital might be as much about *practices* as about *texts*. We also asked contributors to consider what we learn from ethnography, and what the boundaries are between digital ethnography and textual analysis.

Question five focused on the issue of 'Users and Interfaces,' and started from the premise that digital writing and publishing not only has to take into account readers as end users, but also has to recognize their potential in an open and dynamic dialogue. We asked how we should tap into the potential for readers to respond, improve upon, and change the process of publishing and editing as interfaces and platforms develop. We also asked what platforms we need to make reader engagement possible.

Finally, question six looked at 'ML as Research and Process.' Traditional academia discourages sharing of process and encourages researchers to share a final finessed piece. Digital spaces, by contrast, allow us to reveal, share and upend this by showing the tools, materials and infrastructure of our study. We asked contributors to consider in what ways this has changed how we think about the end result of our research, and what the benefits and pitfalls of this laying bare might be. We asked contributors to consider whether this fundamentally changes our research in itself.

The sprint process as it happened

Over the course of the week of the book sprint, ten contributors wrote and published 24 individual blog posts, containing their reflections and responses to the questions. The length of each individual entry varied, with most main entries comprising around 500 words, and some shorter reflections arising spontaneously as the week went along. At the end of the week, these entries made up a collaborative piece totalling just under 13,000 words.

The response to the questions, and the subsequent reflections and dialogues that arose, provided some illuminating perspectives on the key issues pertaining to ML and its negotiation with the digital. From the arguments developed by Kirsty Hooper on the necessity for modern linguists to engage with what may at first glance be an unfamiliar scenario of big data, through to Tori Holme's thought-provoking musings on how an engagement with digital culture must entail both an understanding of the origins and principles of ethnography, as well as an awareness of how ethnography itself is being changed and challenged by digital technologies, all the contributions encouraged us to think beyond our conventional disciplinary boundaries and to evaluate our practice. To view these and all the other rich contributions, see our writing sprint blog⁷ and the MLO platform where the sprint will then be published in spring 2016.⁸

'some illuminating perspectives on the key issues'

Challenges

The challenges we encountered concerned the visibility of the writing process, establishing an authorial voice, working under significant time pressure, adapting a technical solution and working collaboratively. How best to reassure contributors, who might have been potentially daunted by the total visibility of the writing process, presented one challenge. We attempted to address this by setting out clear guidelines, as well as trying to generate a collaborative spirit amongst the contributors. The challenge of establishing the authorial voice also required a new approach: as the process unfolded, we realized that each contributor wrote in his/her own voice, employing differing tones and styles. We concluded that, instead of aiming to achieve a consistent authorial voice (as one would do with a single-authored piece, or even a conventional joint-authored article, say), we had to allow for multiple authorial voices and styles to emerge.

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Writing within a five-day time period to coincide with Academic Book Week was also a challenge. The timescale was certainly different from that experienced by most academics when writing an academic piece, so it was important to engage forward planning and prompting in order to ensure it all ran to time.

Our technical challenge was to adapt the WordPress blogging platform to the needs of the writing sprint, and to try to create an interface which looked as dynamic as possible, and where the dialogues between contributors were as visible as possible. We were not, perhaps, able to make the dynamism of the exercise quite as visible on WordPress as we would have liked, given the limitations of the platform, and this is an area for further development when we next engage in such an activity. What might be thought to be a challenge, however – the collaborative aspect – was in fact very positive, and getting authors to work together turned out to be a smooth process.

Conclusion

The sprint proved effective in bringing academics out of their silos and working collaboratively across geographical distance by virtually connecting colleagues at various institutions in the UK and worldwide, and across different academic disciplines and departments. The sprint also provided opportunities for reflection as part of the process, since it was an iterative practice that developed over the course of the week, allowing all contributors to reflect as the piece took shape. We were able to record the process as much as the end result, something that almost never happens with a traditional book chapter or article. At the end of the week, we had not only the finished piece, but also the record of how we had got there, which was enlightening in itself.

And finally, we achieved a much richer output than a single-authored piece at the end, since the input from experts in different but related fields meant that new perspectives were shed upon some of the key concerns we are all grappling with. It is almost certain that a single-authored piece would not have achieved this same richness, since no one person combines

30 all the different skills and expertise that our writing sprint participants brought collectively: in this way, by working collaboratively, we were able to come up with a much more rounded, much more profound piece of work than had each one of us written our own individual piece.

In conclusion, the writing sprint proved a valuable and productive process, allowing us to explore responses to the key questions established, and to address our main aims. Although the notion of the writing sprint implies spontaneity, from our experience, whilst the sprint itself was productive and spontaneous during the week of writing itself, planning in advance of the week was necessary. Provided that advance planning is undertaken, and that contributors are selected and briefed in plenty of time, a writing sprint can be an exciting way to enable collaboration and to encourage authors to think about new ways of presenting their research.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* 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 author has declared no competing interests.

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